Understanding Your Anxiety Cycle

Anxiety can start in more than one place. Sometimes a thought pops into your head. Sometimes you notice something in your body. Neither one is the problem. What matters is where you go from there: what your mind decides it means. That interpretation is where anxiety gets its power, and it's where you have the most room to change it.

The cycle

START HERE
A thought pops in
"Did I send the wrong file?"

OR HERE
A sensation shows up
Tight chest, racing heart

Your mind decides what it means
"If I did, they'll think I'm careless."
"Something must be wrong with me."

Anxiety builds
The body's alarm rises, and more thoughts follow

Protective behavior
Worrying, overpreparing, checking, asking for reassurance, replaying, avoiding

Quick relief
You feel better, for now

The meaning goes untested
Your mind and body learn that the protective behavior is what kept you safe. So next time, the cycle starts sooner and runs stronger.

What your body is doing

Your body's alarm fires within seconds, before you've had time to think. Once it fires, it can take an hour or two to settle fully, even after the moment has passed.

The alarm can't tell a real threat from a remembered or imagined one. So each time you replay the worry, it can go off again.

That means a racing heart isn't proof that something is wrong. It's the alarm doing its job.

Why it keeps going

Anxiety is always weighing two things: how big the threat is, and how well you can handle it. Without a test, neither estimate gets updated, and you don't learn you could have handled it.

Many of these meanings were learned for good reasons, sometimes long ago.
The question now is whether they still fit your life today.

Map Your Cycle

Think of a recent moment when anxiety took hold, and trace it through the cycle. The more specific you can be, the more useful this becomes.

1 Where did it start?

A thought or a sensation? Name it, and where you felt it.

2 What did you decide it meant?

Finish the sentence: "This means..." The meaning is what your mind added.

3 What did you do to feel safer?

Worrying, overpreparing, checking, asking for reassurance, replaying, avoiding, or something else.

4 What did that keep you from learning?

What might you have found out if you had stayed with it?

5 Where will you step in this week?

Pick one point in the chain, not the whole cycle at once.

- ☐ **At the meaning:** write it down and ask how likely it really is.
- ☐ **At the body:** call it an alarm and let it peak and pass.
- ☐ **At the behavior:** delay it, or do a little less of it.

Notice your cycle this week. Where does it start for you?