



Journey Through Anxiety

by Amy Ruth Bartlett

I wake from a dream that my six-year-old son just swam into an underwater obstacle maze. I cannot see which way he went, and I'm helpless to get him safely to the surface. My heart is pounding, and I notice a tightness in my chest. I still see the underwater barrier, and I am not quick enough to keep him from passing. Again, my chest hurts. The sting of tears behind my eyes lets me know they could escape if I would let them.

I've just woken from an anxiety dream. It's 2020 and we're in a global pandemic. Anxiety, once a stranger to me, has been in my bed many nights over the last month. And I am certainly not his only bedfellow these days.

Most of us experience anxiety when encountering uncertain or unfamiliar situations. This type of anxiety acts like an indicator light on a car dashboard, telling us to pay attention to something under the hood. However, if the light doesn't go out after the problem is addressed, you may begin to distrust your dashboard's alarms. You may then struggle to know what the car needs to keep running well. While this situation is stressful when it's your car, if it's your body that's signaling distress, the long-term consequences can be profound: physical dis-ease, loss of self-confidence, feelings of self-betrayal, and emotional shut-down can result.



*For God gave us a spirit
not of fear but of power
and love and self-control.*

2 Timothy 1:7



If you've been a believer for very long, chances are good you've heard at least one sermon on Jesus' words in Matthew: "And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Matthew 6:27-29).

This passage reminds me that God is trustworthy even in life's most difficult seasons. When I contemplate the beauty of God's creation and the generosity with which He has clothed the flowers, I am soothed.

However, this passage has also been misused at times to shame those who struggle with anxiety and fear. **If you have been clobbered with the idea that your anxiety is a result of not having enough faith, I hope what you read here will be a healing balm for your soul.** When anxiety is taking a toll in your life or the life of a loved one, the discomfort is palpable enough without adding extra shame to the mix.

If you feel like your anxiety is the check-engine light that will never turn off, it may be enough to hear in these pages that you are not alone in your struggle. If, however, you hope for a different quality of life, I have provided exercises to help you make progress. When trying some of these activities, don't go it alone. Talk to someone: a spouse, friend, pastor, co-worker, counselor—even notes in your own journal can help to highlight what each exercise reveals.

Whether your anxiety is a recent experience or a more chronic companion that cripples parts of your everyday life, I invite you to explore with me the promise and power that God has invested in you beyond the pain. Just as the shepherds tending their flocks during Jesus' birth experienced fear at the exploding night sky, so for us, too, our fear is accompanied with an invitation to come closer to our Savior. Let's see if our anxieties may actually be signaling the way to the same true power, love, and self-control the shepherds discovered in the manger.

Exercise 1:

SPACE TO BREATHE

Find a pen, paper, and a beautiful place to be alone for 30 minutes. Then do this three-part exercise.

PART 1: Jot down every anxiety and fear you experience. Include the small ones along with the big ones in this stream-of-consciousness list. Once you've exhausted the flow of anxieties and captured each one on the list, slow the pace of your breathing. By capturing all your worries in one place, you can be certain you will not forget to attend to them later. Now give yourself permission to simply breathe for a few minutes.

PART 2: Set a 15-minute timer for your breathing, so you don't have to worry about how much time has passed while doing this exercise. Breathing in slowly through your nose, count to eight silently on the inhale and aloud on the exhale. Attempt to empty your lungs fully before beginning again. If counting to eight is uncomfortable for you, please establish a slow rhythm that feels good to you. If concerns come to mind that did not make the list, pause to record them and begin again. If you remember a worry already on the list, remind yourself that you will attend to your list when you are done. Then gently bring your mind back to counting the rhythm of your breath. Repeat this breathing exercise until you can make it through without stopping to record a new worry or concern.

PART 3: Record what you noticed in your body, mind, heart, and surroundings during the first two parts of this exercise. Note any takeaway observations you want to recall.

List of Worries

Observations

BODY—Physical Sensations

MIND—Recurring Thoughts

HEART—Feelings That Surfaced

ENVIRONMENT—Things You Noticed

How Many Minutes for Quiet

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In the Beginning



In the beginning, humanity was made to reflect God's image. Specifically, **we are made to RELATE and CREATE**. In the same way that God has deep communion among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are made to desire the relational intimacy of being fully known and loved—by God, by others, and by ourselves. Just as God spoke creation into being, we too are made with a desire to create: to work the land, build tall buildings or, in general, leave our mark and impact on the world.

The desires to be in intimate relationships and to creatively impact our surroundings were woven into us by God; they're part of our design. Thus these desires speak to our purpose in life. When our tanks are running low, our built-in design lets us know it's time to lean in for more love in our relationships or to express more creative agency in the world around us. In the Garden of Eden, these two desires functioned with a perfect harmony that freed us to move powerfully into the world and still remain connected relationally. Our creative actions carried perfect impact because they flowed from relationships of perfect love.

PART 1: The Landscape of Fear

Once Adam and Eve ate the fruit in the Garden of Eden, however, this perfect balance of relational intimacy and creative impact splintered. Genesis 3 tells the story:

"Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?' And he said, 'I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself' (Genesis 3:7-10).

This is the moment when fear, shame, and hiding enter our human story. It is the moment when Adam and Eve first question if they are truly loved, see themselves as vulnerable to harm, and realize that something is wrong. **Once humanity consumed the forbidden fruit, the relational intimacy and creative impact we were meant for were displaced—to some measure—by fear and shame.**



*For God gave us
a spirit not of fear
but of power and
love and self-control.*

2 Timothy 1:7

How did Adam and Eve behave in their new landscape of fear? They hid. First, they covered themselves with "clothes" they made from leaves. Then they attempted to hide from God in the garden.

To this day, when a relationship is broken or our creativity is thwarted—fear, anxiety, or shame ricochet through our hearts, reminding us that life as it is—is not the way it was supposed to be. Like Adam and Eve when they were exposed, we are afraid and ashamed, and we attempt to hide. By reading this booklet, you've already begun the journey out of hiding. **Though we will never experience the perfect intermingling of fearless relating and creating in this lifetime, God does provide for us in our fear.**

Because Jesus died on the cross to atone for our sins, the splintering of relationships and creativity will end when we are restored to a perfect communion with God and His saints in heaven. When we accept that fear is part of our earthly experience and exercise the self-control to slow down, we pay closer attention to the warning lights. We can then lean into more love and more power in ways that help us move through fear as opposed to being crippled by it. Let's first explore the landscape of fear that we experience. Then we can examine how we can develop more power, more love, and more self-control from God's Spirit.

In this booklet, we are exploring the spiritual and emotional aspects of anxiety. However, many people who struggle with excessive anxiety have also experienced some form of trauma. The long-term effects of trauma upon our physical health are painful and unpleasant, yet there are treatments that can help you heal, even long after you were first hurt. If you suspect your anxiety may be based on old trauma, I encourage you to reach out for professional help. Remember, anxiety is also a medical condition like heart disease or allergies. Therefore, as you would for any other medical ailment, please consult with a doctor.

WHAT ARE YOU FEELING?

A circular diagram illustrating 24 related words for the four basic emotions. The emotions are represented by the central colored segments: Anger (purple), Fear (red), Surprise (green), and Happy (yellow). The related words are arranged in the outer segments, color-coded to match their parent emotion.

Emotion	Related Words
Anger	MAD, AGGRESSIVE, FRUSTRATED, DISTANT, CRITICAL, DISAPPROVAL, DISAPPOINTED, AWFUL, AVOIDANCE, GUILTY, ABANDONED, DESPAIR, DEPRESSED, LONELY, BORED
Fear	DISGUST, SAD, HATEFUL, THREATENED, HURT, HUMILIATED, REJECTED, SUBMISSIVE, INSECURE, ANXIOUS, SCARED, STARTLED, CONFUSED, AMAZED
Surprise	EXCITED, JOYFUL, INTERESTED, PROUD, ACCEPTED, POWERFUL, PEACEFUL, INTIMATE, OPTIMISTIC
Happy	(The words for Happy are listed under Surprise in the diagram)

[illegible]

The Cliffs of Anxiety

Like standing on a cliff edge and peering into the abyss, anxiety is an incredibly physical experience. Anxiety invites us to care for our bodies as the instruments that measure and carry the sum of stress weighing upon our human nature. If you ask 100 people about their experience of anxiety, answers will vary from mild worries about the future to intense panic attacks, specific phobias, debilitating social fears, and everything in between. Despite the many symptoms that accompany anxiety, there are a handful of physical responses that commonly occur across the spectrum of anxiety disorders. They include:



- Feeling nervous, restless, or tense
- Having a sense of impending danger, panic, or doom
- Having an increased heart rate
- Breathing rapidly (hyperventilation)
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Feeling weak or tired
- Trouble concentrating or thinking about anything other than the present worry
- Having trouble sleeping
- Experiencing gastrointestinal (GI) problems
- Having difficulty controlling worry
- Having the urge to avoid things that trigger anxiety



Anxiety and fear are closely related emotions often used synonymously to express the sensations of physical arousal that accompany their presence. According to the American Psychiatric Association: “Fear is the emotional response to real or perceived threat, whereas anxiety is anticipation of future threat.”¹ Two subtle distinctions in this definition help us better understand the landscape of fear. The first is the difference between present and future threat. The second is our discernment between real and perceived threat. Let’s unpack these important differences.

Shadowy Crag of Future Threat

When we find ourselves in dangerous situations, our bodies respond automatically: we fight, freeze, flee, or tend and befriend. This is a good thing. I’ll never forget when my daughter was two years old. She darted into the road as a car was turning the corner in front of our church. Instantly, I reacted out of fear by screaming her name and lunging to grab her. My voice startled her, and she froze. In the split second she stopped moving, the car swerved around her. My heart rate quickens even now just remembering the scene. If fear did not bypass our higher-level thinking processes, we would lose valuable time weighing the pros and cons when we needed to simply react in order to survive.

If, however, I’m still reacting with the same level of intensity now, nine years later, each time she goes to cross the street, I can assure you there would be some functional impairment in our relationship! This is how fear—a biological hero in the right context—can become a villain that steals our functionality, relational intimacy, and physical health. **Fear that is an appropriate reaction to threat in the moment becomes problematic if it gets stored, generalized, and projected into the future as apprehension or anxiety.**

Because anxiety is fear projected into the future, moments of actual fear in the past or present are more likely to trigger anxiety as we go about daily life and look to the future. Like rocky crags jutting over mountain passes, past fears can cast shadows on the path ahead. To get a better idea where the triggers are in your internal landscape, spend some time reflecting on tangible experiences of fear in your own life.



FIRST FEARS

[illegible]

Fog of Perceived Threat



Early in our marriage, neither Jason nor I realized that he was struggling with anxiety. From my perspective, he was shutting down and ignoring my questions whenever we had conflict. It didn't make sense to me, because if you know Jason, you know he is anything but uncaring! However, his silence and refusal to share thoughts and feelings when we were in difficult conversations made me feel dismissed and alone.

It turned out that the root of his anxiety was the belief that I would leave him if he could not make me happy. Thus, he perceived all potentially upsetting conversations as threatening to the security of our relationship. In reality, we had to settle some disagreements in order to preserve our relationship and find solutions that worked for us as a couple. However, when I asked questions touching on uncomfortable topics, he

felt incredible pressure to perform. Then, convinced that he did not have what it took, and that I would bail if he shared the extent of his internal experience, every time I tried to draw him out, he just felt more pressure to be perfect. When we talk about it now, he acknowledges that I was attempting to connect with him emotionally because I loved him. Still, at the time, the more I tried, the more he saw my intentions as subtle threats to leave if he didn't come through. So he shut down to avoid the intense fear that flooded him.

When we have encountered a genuinely painful situation in childhood, it is easy to see other situations through the lens of that same experience. **But previous occurrences of pain and fear can limit our ability to distinguish what is truly threatening now. That's why we must find ways to accurately discern what is a real threat and what is not.** This holds true in relationships, academics, athletics, work, and anything else. When we are afraid of being hurt again, we see our current reality in a way that has less to do with the truth of our situation and much more to do with foggy beliefs based on old pain.

Reflecting on fears we have outgrown, even a childish fear of the dark, helps us find new hope for anxious situations today.



Exercise 4: FEARS CHANGED

In column 1, make a list of any childhood fears you remember. In column 2, note if they are more intense, the same, less intense, or completely resolved. In column 3, next to any fears that have changed in intensity, write what you believe made the difference. (Example: I was afraid of snipes; it's now completely resolved. I discovered that snipes were unreal creatures invented for fun childhood night hunts.)



Childhood Fear	Intensity	What Changed

Swamp of Shame and Self-Doubt

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve first mistrust others after being deceived by the serpent. They feel disoriented, as if there had been a shift in reality. They also encounter a great distrust and unfamiliarity with themselves. Only having known relational purity and creative freedom, they become aware that they are exposed in their nakedness. The conclusion they draw is that something is wrong with them and they must cover themselves, hide, and avoid.



According to Merriam Webster's dictionary, the medical definition of anxiety is "an abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by ... doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, **and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it.**" ²

Where fear is our response to real or perceived threat, and anxiety is our projection of that fear into the future, **shame is the self-doubt that goes beyond a reasonable understanding of our limits to a sense of permanent inadequacy.** Shame tells us no matter what we do, it will not be enough. Shame tells us there is something wrong with who we are and how we are made—not just what we have done. Shame makes it even harder to name and face the sources of our anxiety because we fear this exposure will confirm us as unloved and unlovable, incompetent and worthless—or, ultimately, inadequate to the challenges before us.

Self-doubt and shame fuel our anxiety and prevent us from facing the sources of our fears as we worry that we ourselves are the problem. As you attempt to discern truth, remember that you too are fearfully and wonderfully made.

Psalms 139:14-16 says, "I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are Your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in Your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."



Exercise 5:

LIES AND TRUTH

Identify and list five messages of shame that you have been tempted to believe throughout your life—statements that attack you as a person. If there are more than five, list as many as you can. Remember, shame messages go after who you are as opposed to what you've done, and they are never kind: "I'm so stupid" as opposed to "I made a mistake." Next to each shame message, write the truth of the situation instead. If you cannot identify how the message of shame is a lie, reach out to someone who can help you reframe your perspective. (Example: "I'm such a burden to others" gets reframed as "I am sad that others don't understand where I'm coming from." "I need a lot of care right now.")

Shame Messages	Truths
1. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
2. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
3. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____

4. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
5. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
6. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
7. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
8. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
9. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
10. _____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____

Valley of Avoidance

When my daughter was young, she had a vivid imagination—particularly when it came to wolves! My husband and I spent hours in conversation with her about the likelihood that a wolf could reach her in her bedroom ... on the second floor of our house ... in the middle of St. Louis City. Specifically, she feared that a wolf was hiding in her curtains. At times, she would imagine it so vividly that she was paralyzed with fear, managing only to pull the covers over her head.

Of course, this is a childhood fear, not the ongoing, complex, anxiety-provoking situations we face as adults. However, the simplicity of childhood can make it easier to see the patterns that hold true in adulthood:

1. Our bodies give us signs of distress.
2. We are uncertain what we're up against.
3. We're even less certain we have what it takes to deal with whatever monster might be lurking in the curtains.
4. We avoid what we fear in whatever way is available to us.

Therein lies the betrayal of anxiety; not only do our bodies signal high alert, but we are not certain we can trust those signals, nor are we certain we have what it takes to test reality and deal with it accordingly! This is an intensely painful experience that can lead to a dissociation of sorts. What I mean is that the discomfort surrounding the anxious experience is so intense that we begin to shut down in order to avoid the pain.

Avoidance is such a common response to anxiety that it is part of the DSM-V (the diagnostic manual used by counselors and psychologists) criteria for diagnosing anxiety disorders. **No one wants to feel afraid, uncertain, and incapable! So we pull the covers over our heads.**



There are as many ways to avoid as there are fears in this world. Classic avoidance is changing the subject when an uncomfortable topic comes up or taking a detour to work to avoid the street where an accident once happened. Some avoidance behaviors happen so automatically we may not even recognize them as avoidance. Shutting down emotionally when we are overwhelmed, swinging at someone who has insulted a loved one, or giggling when being inappropriately treated are all instinctive ways of avoiding the discomfort of a difficult situation.

Because most avoidance behaviors occur instinctively without conscious choice and may even feel like simple acts of survival, it's difficult to see how we could respond differently. In my daughter's situation, we opened the curtains for her each night until she outgrew her fear. As adults, our situations are more complex, and rarely can someone else investigate our fears for us. When we avoid the sources of our anxiety, this evasion almost always makes the problem worse. If we practice avoidance long enough, it can lead to functional, relational, financial, physical, and even spiritual impairment.

Exercise 6:

COSTLY AVOIDANCE

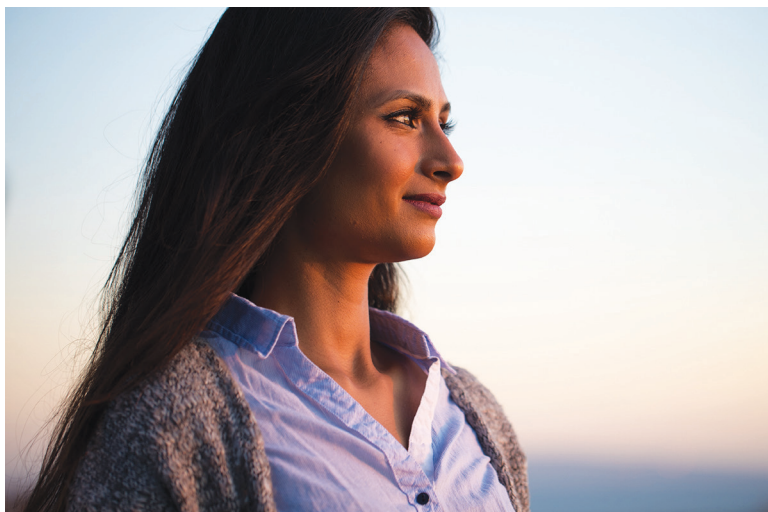
In column 1, make a list of the top things you are most likely to avoid, consciously or unconsciously. Be sure to include concrete things such as snakes and taxes as well as more abstract things like conflict, closeness, or conversations with certain people. In column 2, label your avoidance response as fight (verbally or physically); flee (get away); freeze (shut down); or tend and befriend (overcompensate). In column 3, name the emotion elicited by the item in column 1. In column 4, write the outcomes you've experienced from avoiding that uncomfortable emotion. Write each one as a sentence that clearly traces the progression of avoidance. For example: 1) taxes; 2) procrastination (get away); 3) makes me feel stupid; 4) stress, missed deadlines, more paperwork to file. "I avoid taxes by procrastinating because I feel stupid when I'm struggling with them. But procrastinating has caused me more stress, missed deadlines, and even more paperwork when I've had to file for extensions."



**I feel (column 3)
when I encounter (column 1).
So I try to avoid it by (column 2),
and that leads to (column 4).**

Things I Avoid	How I Avoid	Why I Avoid	What Happens When I Avoid

PART 2: Freedom to Flourish



For those who struggle with it, anxiety can feel like a dark, inescapable gauntlet. Around every corner unknown threats await, and personal interactions are weighted with a desperate desire to avoid pain. Almost any behavior can be justified when the threat feels large enough. So, we descend into habits that don't represent the person we want to become.

It's clear that we need new pathways! But how do we navigate the Cliffs of Anxiety differently? Are there any bridges over the Swamp of Shame and Self-Doubt? Are there tunnels that go through the mountains so we don't have to retreat via the Valley of Avoidance?

The field of neuroscience provides a wealth of insight about forming new neural pathways in the brain. But these will be new pathways we create—not simple attempts to get better at running the old dysfunctional pathways. We must use our God-given creativity to find pathways that work in accordance with the gifts we've been given.

As positive psychology expert Corey Keyes puts it: "... even if we could find a cure for mental illness tomorrow, it does not mean that most people would necessarily be flourishing in life. In other words, we cannot treat our way out of the problem of mental illness; we must also promote a life of balance in which people can achieve happiness and realize lives in which they can flourish." ³

Humans flourish when we walk in accordance with the way we were created. After being wounded in relationships and frustrated in our work, we think we'll avoid pain by shutting down our desires to relate and create. Those desires, however, were wonderfully woven into us by God, as the Source of our true flourishing. So, when we shut down our desire to relate and create, it's like we are hanging a blanket over the mirror of our souls and obstructing the view of God's glory that is vested in us.

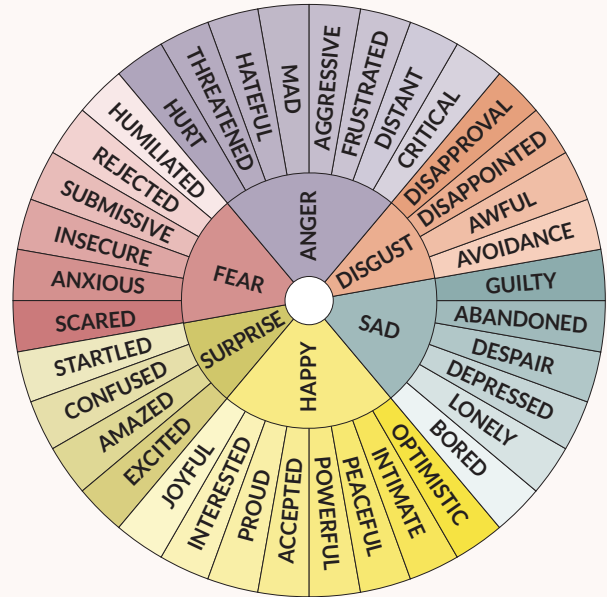
As you continue the hard work of creating new paths on this journey through anxiety, pay attention to your desires for relationship and creativity, intimacy and impact, or friendship and good honest work. So often counterfeits offer themselves as alternatives to the real deal. But only the true power, love, and self-control provided to us through God's Spirit will pave the way to a different quality of life. So, take time to slow down and pay attention.



Exercise 7:

SLOW DOWN AND PAY ATTENTION

Notice your feelings throughout the next seven days. Each time you experience anxiety, pause to observe and record as much as you can about the experience. Use the feeling wheel to help you find the nuanced word for your feeling. Record that word in column 1. In column 2, describe where you feel it in your body (stomach is in knots, etc.). Then finally in column 3, write one or two words that will jog your memory about the situation in which you noticed the feeling.



What Am I Feeling?	Where Am I Feeling It?	Briefly, What Caused It?



Slow Your Roll with Self-Control

Overcoming the impulse to avoid requires self-control. To break the cycle of anxiety, shame, and avoidance, we must give ourselves permission to stop and accept the reality of our fear without blaming others, shaming ourselves, or hiding from it altogether. When we accept that suffering, grief, and even fear itself is part of living in a fallen world, we slow our anxiety long enough to catch our breath. And that breath may just be the starting point to a new way of life.

But how do we learn acceptance? With the gift of self-control.

We live in a high-pressure society that values productivity above health and pushes us to be “rugged individuals” who can move forward regardless of circumstances or injury. In fact, our culture lumps many other emotions into the category of anxiety: helplessness, powerlessness, fear, uncertain hope, unpreparedness, lack of self-confidence, restlessness, and lack of control.



Regardless of how anxiety may manifest for you, what is important is to allow yourself time and space to reflect. **While counter-intuitive and counter-cultural, giving yourself permission to stop and breathe is the first step in developing self-control.** True self-control doesn't call us to knee-jerk action; instead, it provides space between an experience and our reaction to thoughtfully choose how we will respond. When practiced regularly in small things, self-control becomes a strong muscle that helps us to find calm in the midst of raging storms, so that we do not have to pull the covers over our heads and avoid those things that make us anxious.



One example of self-control in the small things can be found in a mosquito bite. When I have an itch, my first instinct is to scratch it. It makes sense, and it feels like I'm doing something to solve the problem. However, this also creates the expectation that I must relieve discomfort immediately and automatically, without patience or thoughtful effort. It also happens to make the problem worse, as scratching a mosquito bite only makes it itch more.

Practices that encourage observation over action help us calm ourselves in the midst of discomfort without thinking that problems must be instantly fixed. Once we acknowledge how things are (“I have an itch”) without demanding an immediate reaction (scratching the itch), we increase our curiosity and free up options for how to respond. Life presents many occasions where we will want to scratch the bite or swat the bug. While seemingly insignificant, *not* scratching an itch is a small practice that cultivates huge gifts of humility and self-control.

One tool to practice self-control when tempted to react with fear-based behavior comes from Dr. Narishkin in the field of cultural intelligence. She teaches individuals in cross-cultural communication to STOP when feeling anxious or threatened. The S.T.O.P. approach teaches:

- S** - Slow down.
- T** - Take three deep breaths.
- O** - Observe the safety of the situation, the feelings of others, your own feelings and reactions ... and then if everything is cool,
- P** - Proceed with curiosity and wonder! ⁴



In addition to the S.T.O.P. approach, there are many other tools that allow us space to breathe, reflect, and move forward. For example, prayer books teach us to observe our surroundings, be grateful, and seek God in all things. Mindfulness exercises from Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) help us exercise the muscle of self-control in everyday situations. Approaches like systematic desensitization break our fears into smaller increments that we can choose to enter and exit without being overwhelmed.

As our self-control grows and our knee-jerk reactions decrease, we're able to respond more creatively. This is in contrast to being stuck in fight, flee, freeze, or tend-and-befriend reactions. When we learn the self-control to not instantly “fix” what is wrong, we realize we may be more okay than we thought; we can become even more curious about what poses an actual threat as opposed to simply reacting to our discomfort.

Exercise 8:

S.T.O.P.

Identify two or three behaviors you would like to limit. Perhaps it's yelling at the kids to be quiet when they get too loud or pouring that glass of wine when you walk in the door from work; maybe it's responding with one-word answers when others ask you questions or biting your nails without realizing. We all have some behavior that we could change. Choose one behavior you would like to work on, and each time you realize you are doing it, S.T.O.P. Slow down, take three deep breaths, observe the situation ... and if everything is cool, proceed with curiosity and wonder. Record your observations and what you discover after proceeding.



Behavior I Want to S.T.O.P.

Observations

Discoveries

Love Covers a Multitude of Sin and Shame

Scripture tells us that God is intimately acquainted with our frail human condition. He does not despise us for it; instead, He joined us in our humanity. In Luke 22, Jesus' own experience of intense anxiety was mercifully recorded for us when He sweat drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane before His crucifixion. Jesus' human suffering poignantly shows God's love for us and how far He has gone to save us. He understands our suffering.

Hebrews 4:15-16 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

When we believe messages of shame, we struggle to draw near to God with confidence. Sadly, we retreat from other relationships, too. Shame prevents us from being vulnerable or exploring creatively with loved ones. It can also drive us into self-protection and isolation even when we're surrounded by others.

Fortunately, relating and creating is something we can all learn to do better. Find a trusted person you can speak to concerning your anxiety while pledging to become a trusted person to yourself. This means simply refusing to talk down to yourself in an unkindly manner. Think, "Would I say this to someone I care about?" If not, then find a truer, more forgiving way to think about yourself.

When I struggled to break out of my own shame cycles many years ago, my mentor, Pete Bondy, offered me this to think about: "When we refuse to appreciate even our clumsiest efforts to protect ourselves from intense pain, we are judging our need for protection too harshly." It was when he reminded me that kindness is a "fruit of the Spirit" (see Galatians 5:22-23) that I began taking the effort to heart. Kindness is not a show we put on for others to like us. It's a fruit of the Spirit that can be exercised with self-control. As I practiced being kind to others—and myself—the lies of shame held less power, thus opening up pathways that were previously closed.



In Genesis it wasn't the clothing Adam and Eve made out of fear and shame that covered the disgrace of their sin. God's all-knowing love came to them in the garden with the question: "Where are you?" Then He lovingly made garments for them, even as later He would cover mankind's sin with robes of righteousness, prepared through the atoning work of His Son, Jesus, on the cross. (See Genesis 3.)

God has made these robes of righteousness for you as well, and they are perfectly suited to cover your shame and anxiety. If you don't have trusted friends who are asking—and with whom you can answer honestly—the question: the question: "Where are you?" then seek a counselor, pastor, or support group to begin exercising the God-given desire to relate in a way that creates more health in your life.

Exercise 9:

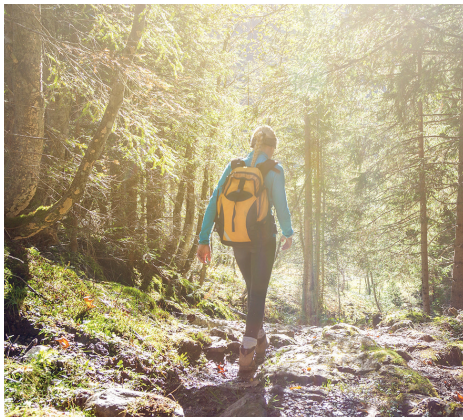
SELF-COMPASSION

For each behavior you listed in column 2 of exercise 2, write a compassionate sentence appreciating how that behavior has attempted to help you navigate anxious situations. Thank that part of yourself for doing its best to protect you. Then write a new skill or strategy you would like to learn and try out instead of that old behavior.

Behavior	Compassionate Sentence
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_____ behavior has been my best attempt to navigate the world when I feel _____. I am thankful for how _____ behavior has helped me at times, but now that I am growing in new ways, I would like to try _____ behavior instead when I am feeling _____.

Behavior	Compassionate Sentence
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The Power of Play: Creating New Pathways

Once you are armed with the freedom to slow down and the knowledge that you are really and truly loved, you are able to engage deeply and creatively with the struggles and joys of reality.

Have you ever enjoyed hiking a trail through the woods? If so, consider what it took to create that path. The first time through wouldn't have felt like walking a trail at all. Depending on how thick the forest is, forging a new path lies somewhere between discovering new vistas and whacking away at low branches and underbrush. Each time you travel the new trail, it becomes more visible, a bit wider, and less entangled. The same is true when developing new neural pathways in the brain.

Unfortunately, when anxiety increases, our higher-level thinking skills diminish, and we are less capable of creativity. Often we feel stuck in whatever rut we're in until we can find the exact right way to move forward. The reality, however, is that feelings of *stuckness* are just our anxiety talking.

For example, when a child learns to crawl, you'll notice a lot of rocking back and forth. Sometimes the baby moves backwards from one side of the room to the other. Sometimes the baby pulls one leg and one hand forward followed by the other. This trial and error of childhood carries a crucial lesson for us. To create new pathways to getting unstuck, we may need to change the task at times, giving ourselves permission to experiment, try, and yes, even fail.

It is necessary to address avoidance when treating anxiety, but we must acknowledge that we avoid for a reason, too. When certain things have caused us intolerable pain in the past, it's difficult to face our fears about those things in the present. What feels threatening to you today may not threaten me, and vice versa. What a skilled rock-climber would find exhilarating would freak me out, and rightfully so! Still, we can often learn skills to create safety in anxiety-provoking situations. Even better, we may find our fears were unnecessary.



For instance, when deeply anxious we may interpret a situation as threatening when it may not be menacing at all. We may not know what triggered the warning light, but we know we don't feel safe. Therefore, to see if the warning indicator is accurate, we should run some diagnostics. In other words, it's time to get under the hood. But if I don't have the skills to properly assess what's going on, looking can create more anxiety, and we can end up in a rapidly escalating downward spiral.



Both children and adults can feel overwhelmed when they face situations they don't know how to handle. The intense anxiety can be so unpleasant we avoid getting under the hood altogether. However, whatever lingering fear from situations we could not handle when we were younger does not take into account all the ways we have grown and developed new skills today!

How can you correctly evaluate threats when your anxiety is high? Journaling your fears to their worst possible conclusion, testing reality by checking in with others, or experimenting with lower-stakes situations can all help to confirm or disconfirm what you think you're seeing. Many skills are available for you to increase your confidence in dealing with the discomfort of high-stakes situations.

If you continually get stuck in your anxiety, a dialectic behavior therapy (DBT) skills group could be just the place to begin honing new skills. Behavioral Tech is a great place to begin searching. While DBT was originally developed by Marsha Linehan to help individuals struggling with borderline personality disorder, skills groups have helped people with anxiety, eating disorders, and other issues that require careful delineation of reality from unhelpful perceptions. For more information, go to www.behavioraltech.org/resources/find-a-therapist-app/ to find a DBT therapist who can help.



PLAY TIME

Activities I Enjoy or Want to Try

[illegible][illegible]



Conclusion

Fear or anxiety is one of our body's ways of pointing us in the direction we need to go. When we push past it without listening to the wisdom it offers us, we often get hurt. If, however, we attempt to avoid anxiety by shutting down, we do not explore the message our anxiety is sending. Consequently, we shut ourselves off to building new skills. In this way, anxiety serves as both a dashboard warning light and an invitation to creative learning.

In order to assess if the warning light is giving us accurate information, we must run some diagnostics, and that involves getting under the hood. Slow down. Breathe. Journal your thoughts and feelings. Reread what you wrote. Listen to the themes in your anxiety and try to make sense of them. Ask yourself, "What is my anxiety warning me about?" and "What skills would make me less anxious right now?" Follow your fear to its worst possible conclusion and see if it's as bad as your anxiety is telling you. Test reality by checking in with others. Experiment with lower-stakes situations and, of course, seek out a therapy group, counselor, or doctor to help in the places where you frequently get stuck.

There are many times when fear is left over from situations we could not handle in the past, but that fear is not accounting for all the ways we have grown, been strengthened by new relationships, and developed new skills already! Seek support to test for the emergence of these new skills, and don't be discouraged when you meet an unexpected anxiety. Let it simply tell you there is more work to be done; then continue to develop the gifts of self-control, love, and power!

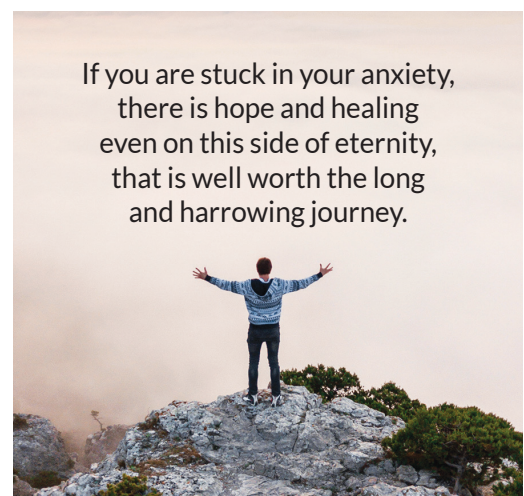
The journey through anxiety can certainly be harrowing, but a substantially different way of life is possible! Jason and I went from not even recognizing the patterns of anxiety in our marriage to naming them and now embracing them as a valuable source of information that helps us slow down and stay connected. We still miss more opportunities than we take, but even the small strides we have made have created a completely different quality to our lives and our marriage.

We have drawn on individual counseling, marriage counseling, mindfulness, DBT skills groups, friends, pastors, prayer, long walks, art, bike riding, and much more to help us chart a new course through the anxiety-provoking demands of our high-pressure world. Where once I thought we needed to claw our way out of the deep rut of anxiety that entrenched us, together we have found that the way out is *through*.

Psalm 84:5a, 6a says, "What joy for those whose strength comes from the Lord, who have set their minds on a pilgrimage ... When they walk through the Valley of Weeping, it will become a place of refreshing springs. ..." (NLT)

Long ago, the apostle Paul recognized the struggle of anxiety and urged us to focus on flourishing as a way to guard our hearts and minds with the peace of God:

Philippians 4:4-9 says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you."



¹ Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (Washington D.C., American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 189.

² "Anxiety," Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anxiety>.

³ Keyes, Corey, 2016 (as cited in Ackerman, Courtney, "Flourishing in Positive Psychology: Definition + 8 Practical Tips," online, 2021).

⁴ Narishkin, Amy, 2020 (as cited in "How to Connect with Your Kid About Tricky Topics," Empowering Partners, online, 2020).

AmyRuth Bartlett is a licensed professional counselor who roams the Missouri countryside with her husband and two kids in their recently purchased RV. Homeschooling their 11-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son, she revels in exploring the beauty of creation and making history come alive for them. She uses her spare moments to paint landscapes, write on biblical anthropology, and read about United States presidents.



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