PRACTICAL SELF-HELP GUIDE

Self-help for anxiety

Step-by-step techniques grounded in CBT



Anastasia Goeva

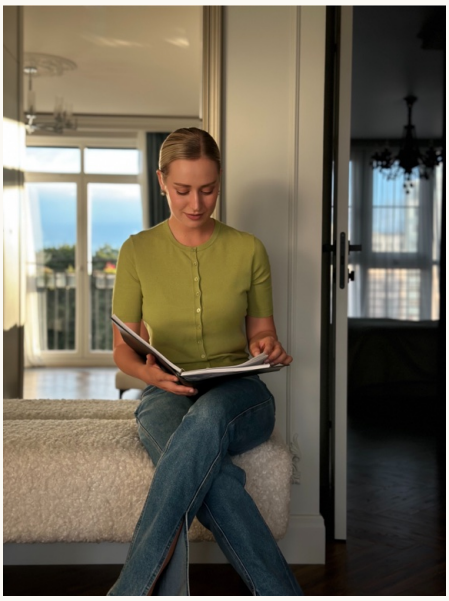
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About the author



Anastasia Goeva

Hi, I’m Anastasia, a clinical psychologist. I work with cognitive behavioural therapy, dialectical behaviour therapy and personality-oriented reconstructive psychotherapy (LORP). I know from experience what it’s like to live with anxiety, so I put together this guide to share practical, evidence-based tools.

Areas of focus

Anxiety and phobias, eating disorders, and difficult life transitions.

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AT A GLANCE

What is anxiety?

970 million

The WHO estimates that around 970 million people worldwide lived with a mental disorder in 2019. This figure includes all mental disorders.

Fear and anxiety

Fear	Anxiety
Often a response to an immediate threat.	Often a response to an anticipated or uncertain threat.
For example, being startled by a dog.	For example, worrying about an important meeting.

How anxiety can show up

Trouble sleeping or concentrating

Racing heart, shaking or shortness of breath

Difficulty managing emotions

Avoiding situations or trying to control everything

Perfectionism and high expectations of yourself

Persistent anxiety with no obvious cause

Why do we feel anxious or afraid?

When we sense a threat, our autonomic nervous system can kick in. The automatic responses are often called fight, flight and freeze.

FIGHT	FLIGHT	FREEZE
Fight	Flight	Freeze

Why anxiety can build

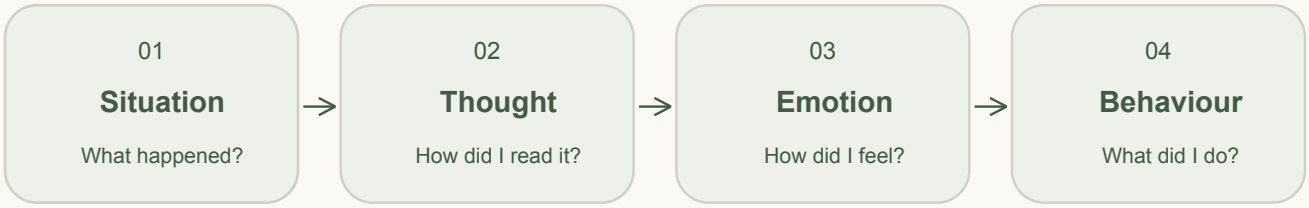
As anxiety rises, you may read a racing heart, breathlessness or dizziness as signs of danger. That can make you feel even more anxious and lead to panic.

These exercises can help you shift your attention and decide what to do next.

> If physical symptoms are new, suddenly worsen or concern you, seek medical advice.

The CBT model of anxiety

In CBT, thoughts, emotions and behaviour are connected. Changing how we interpret a situation can change how we respond.



Examples

Anxiety before a meeting

Situation: a call from work. Thought: “They’ll criticise me.” Emotion: anxiety (7/10). Behaviour: I put things off or avoid the call.

Social anxiety

Situation: a stranger looks at me on the train. Thought: “Something’s wrong with me.” Emotion: shame (8/10). Behaviour: I leave or avoid eye contact.

Health anxiety

Situation: my heart starts racing. Thought: “What if something’s wrong with my heart?” Emotion: fear (9/10). Behaviour: I search my symptoms and panic builds.

Anxiety and thoughts

When your thoughts tell you that you're less capable than others or that the world is unsafe, they can keep setting off anxiety.

What are automatic thoughts?

Automatic thoughts are quick interpretations that pop up in response to a situation. We often barely notice them, but they shape how we feel. When we're anxious, they can fall into familiar thinking traps.

Common thinking traps

Catastrophising: "This is definitely going to end badly."

Mind reading: "They think I'm incompetent."

Overgeneralising: "It always goes like this. It'll never work."

Predicting the future: "I know I'll fail."

Should statements: "I should be perfect."

How to work with your thoughts

01 What thought came up when I started to feel anxious?

02 How strongly do I believe it? (0–100%)

03 What evidence supports it? What evidence challenges it?

04 What would I say to a friend in the same situation?

05 What thought might help me feel less anxious?

EXERCISE 1

The ABC thought record

Notice an automatic thought and look for a more realistic way to understand the situation.

Situation	Thought	Emotion (0–10)	Behaviour	Alternative

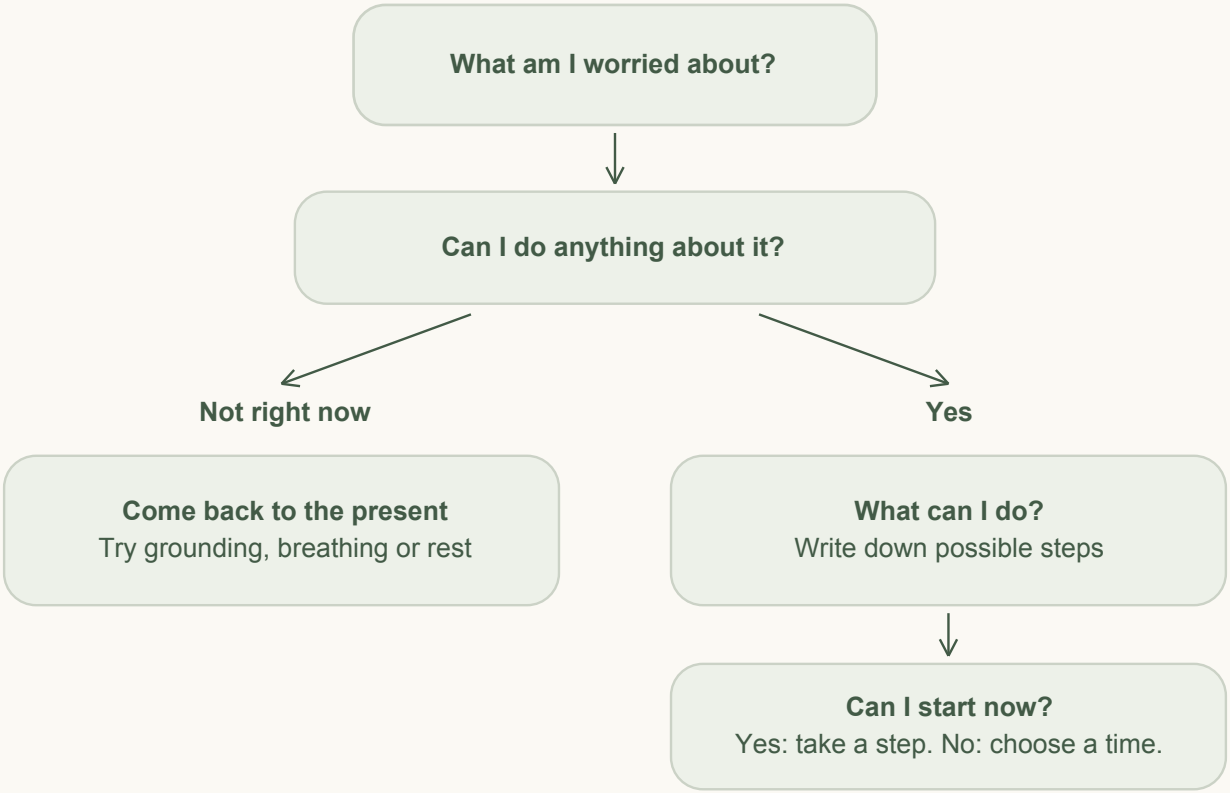
Example

I have an important meeting coming up. “I’m going to mess it up.” Anxiety: 7/10. I want to put off preparing. A more realistic thought: “I don’t know how it’ll go, but I can prepare two questions.”

EXERCISE 2

The worry tree

This exercise helps you separate what you can influence from what's currently outside your control. When you feel anxious, work through each step in order.



What am I worried about?

My first step or when I'll come back to this

EXERCISE 3

5-4-3-2-1 grounding

Use your five senses to shift your attention from anxious thoughts to what’s happening around you right now.

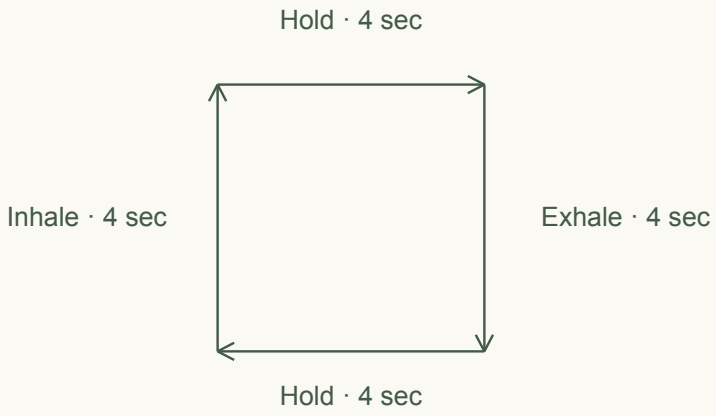
5	4	3	2	1
See	**Feel**	**Hear**	**Smell**	**Taste**
Things around me	Sensations of touch	Sounds	Scents	Flavour

Name what you notice right now. If you can’t pick up a smell or taste, skip that step or name one more sound or object.

EXERCISE 4

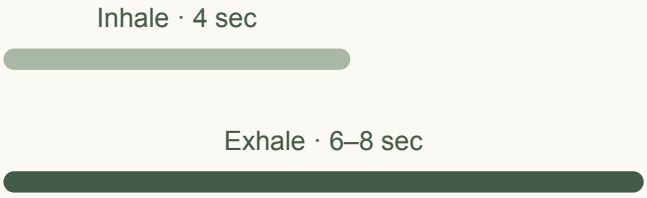
Breathing exercises

Box breathing (4-4-4-4)



Breathe in, hold, breathe out and hold again. Count to four at each step if that feels comfortable.

A longer exhale



Try breathing in for four seconds and out for six to eight. Breathe gently and return to your usual breathing if it feels uncomfortable.

Diaphragmatic breathing

Place a hand on your belly, just below your ribs. Breathe in gently through your nose and notice your belly move. Breathe out slowly through slightly pursed lips. Start with a few comfortable breaths.

Book a consultation

If anxiety has become a constant background noise and is affecting your work, relationships or sleep, you can explore it with a professional.

Message me on Telegram · @ogogoevaa

Sources

WHO · World Mental Health Report, 2019 estimate

NHS · Breathing exercises for stress

Dartford and Gravesham NHS Trust · 5-4-3-2-1 grounding