

3

when anxiety is helpful

Anxiety can be mysterious, hitting us in ways that are hard to understand. Maybe you remember a time when anxiety and worry were not major issues for you. There were times when you felt anxious, or you worried about some upcoming event, but it was no big deal. You understood why you felt tense or nervous, and you dealt with it just like all the other negative emotions that ebb and flow throughout the day. Feeling anxious before making a presentation, meeting an important person for the first time, or awaiting the results of a medical test—we expect to feel anxious under these circumstances. In fact the anxiety we feel in these circumstances can actually help us perform better by focusing our attention on the importance of the event. But your experience of anxiety has changed, and it now dominates your day. You feel anxious and worried about things that never bothered you in the past—grocery shopping, medical appointments, your partner’s fidelity, going to a restaurant, or thinking about your future. You’ve noticed changes in your emotions and not for the better. You’ve become anxious and worried, and you don’t know why.

Or maybe you know why you’re so anxious and worried, but the things that make you severely anxious don’t always make sense. Have you noticed that you get anxious about daily activities that everyone faces, and yet you’re remarkably calm and level-headed about major problems with serious implications? Often anxiety is not triggered by the greatest threats to our physical safety or well-being. You might feel stress and frustration but no anxiety when driving in heavy traffic. And yet, you could feel nervous and hesitant to turn down an unreasonable request even from a total stranger. Clearly, the heavy traffic is more life-threatening than being assertive with the stranger. A client once reported feeling highly anxious about swallowing solid food but had no problem doing stand-up comedy. Most people would agree that the latter is especially terrifying given the high probability of flubbing. A pilot had severe anxiety when traveling as a commercial airline passenger but had no difficulty flying a small single-engine plane. A financially secure person worried about money but was less worried about his health despite having a recent heart attack. What makes us

most anxious can be a mystery; it's often the routine, mundane aspects of life rather than the most significant personal threats.

When anxiety threatens our emotional health, we naturally focus on the occasions when it's severe and seemingly out of control. It's easy to overlook all the times you dealt successfully with anxious feelings and didn't let them interfere with daily living. When anxiety symptoms are severe, they can be an unforgettable experience that grabs our attention and raises our level of insecurity and helplessness. We forget about all the times we tolerated our anxious feelings and considered them normal emotions. Do you have an anxiety bias? Have you become convinced you can't handle anxiety because you remember only the severe episodes? Most of the individuals we've treated with an anxiety problem have this bias. They've lost confidence in their ability to deal with anxiety and worry. Is it possible you're better at managing anxiety than you think?

We believe it's important to start your work on anxiety by rediscovering your natural strengths and abilities to deal with anxious feelings. This approach is entirely consistent with the recovery orientation to CBT introduced in Chapter 1. Is it possible that your way of thinking and behaving when adapting to anxiety might provide some insights on how to deal with anxiety when it becomes a problem?

This chapter is framed within the CT-R perspective on anxiety. The exercises and worksheets provide you the opportunity to discover your adaptive skills with low to moderate levels of anxiety. You'll learn why you're able to tolerate anxiety at this level and how you use anxious feelings to your advantage. You may be surprised to learn that you're emotionally stronger than you think and that you already possess skills you can use against your anxiety problems.

Alyssa: An Anxious Mother

Alyssa, age 44, is smart, resourceful, and disciplined and has always been determined to make the most of her life. All was going well until she and Daniel decided it was time to start their family. After several years of consultation with reproductive endocrinologists and a fertility clinic, Alyssa finally gave birth to Brianna. She thought of Brianna as her "miracle baby," but much to the couple's surprise, three years later Alyssa was pregnant again, giving birth to a baby boy they named Caleb. Alyssa felt truly blessed and set about creating the secure, loving family that she never had as a child.

Life was all she had dreamed except for one unexpected development. The birth of the children had brought with it fears, anxieties, and worries that were completely foreign to Alyssa. At first she thought her anxiety about harm, injury, and sickness affecting her children was typical of older first-time mothers. But the anxiety and worry grew over time. Alyssa was fearful the children might be abducted at school, be

injured on the playground or when playing sports, contract a serious disease, or that the parents of their children's friends would be lax when taking the kids on outings. Also, Alyssa worried the after-school caregiver was not paying enough attention to Brianna and Caleb. Whether she was the driver or a passenger, family driving was a nightmare because of Alyssa's fear they'd be involved in an accident. With Brianna at age 8 and Caleb 5, Alyssa had become an overly anxious, controlling, and protective mother. She realized this was unhealthy for the children and it was putting strain on her marriage, but she couldn't seem to stop herself.

Alyssa was at a loss to understand her anxiety. At one level she blamed the anxiety on the difficulty of pregnancy and the circumstances around the children's birth. But at another level the anxiety made no sense. She had had no anxiety issues before the children, and she could handle threats and challenges at work, about her health, and in family relationships with only minimal apprehension and nervousness. She realized that millions upon millions of women face the same degree of threats and dangers for their children with far less anxiety and worry. Furthermore, anxiety didn't really run in her family, and she was creating a far safer environment for her children than she had had as a child. It was a mystery why she could control her anxiety at work but when it came to the children Alyssa fell victim to her runaway anxious mind.

Are you, like Alyssa, surprised by your anxiety? Is it triggered by a specific concern like child-rearing, health, job performance, travel, or relationships, while you're able to function practically anxiety-free in other areas of your life? Can you remember a time when anxiety was not a concern? To understand how you became anxious, start by considering your experience of mild anxiety. For Alyssa this meant looking at how she normalizes the anxiety and worry she experiences at work.

Fear and Anxiety: What's the Difference?

Fear is a basic emotion that's hardwired in our brain and is critical to survival. It's one of the earliest emotions to arise in our development as a species and is found widely throughout the animal kingdom. Without fear, we would soon perish from all the dangers we encounter in this world. We might call someone "fearless" who is thrill-seeking and takes unnecessary risks, but even that person knows what it's like to feel fear. If you had no fear, you'd be careless and indifferent, which could endanger you and those around you.

We don't have to remind ourselves to be afraid. Fear arises suddenly, often without warning. It's an automatic emotional response to any object, situation, or circumstance we recognize (perceive) as an imminent danger to our personal well-being.⁴ It is the perception of danger. For example, people with arachnophobia know they have

a fear of spiders. But this fear is activated only in situations where they think a spider might be present, such as when they see a spider web, enter an older house, or walk in the forest. Even seeing a picture of a spider might activate fear. Whenever outside, the spider-fearful person thinks, “I wonder if I will come across a spider,” “Spiders are dangerous because they can crawl into your mouth or ears and lay eggs,” or “If I see a spider, I’ll freak out.” The body kicks into high arousal when spider-phobic individuals see anything that reminds them of a spider. They might feel tense, on edge, a churning stomach, chest tightness, or a racing heart. And the fear could cause a change in behavior, such as avoiding any place that seems to pose the risk of exposure to spiders.

In CBT you work on reducing fear by changing how you think and act. Instead of thinking of the fear object (for example, a spider) as an imminent threat or danger, you’re taught to reevaluate the fear object as less threatening to your safety and well-being. Instead of avoiding or running from the fear, you’re encouraged to face the fear.

Fear and anxiety are interconnected. We feel anxious when we anticipate that a future situation, event, or circumstance may involve significant distress due to an uncertain and uncontrollable threat to our vital interests.⁴ You could think of anxiety as an early warning system of the possibility that some threat to your well-being could occur in the future. For example, we talk about a “fear of death,” but for most people not facing imminent death, it would be more accurate to call it “feeling anxious about death.” In our spider phobia example, you’d feel anxious about going to visit friends because they live in an older home that might have spiders or anxious about going to the movies because the film might contain a scene with spiders. You have a basic fear of encountering spiders, but you live in a state of persistent anxiousness about the possibility of being exposed to a spider.

When anxious we have a feeling of apprehension and physical arousal in which we believe we can’t predict, let alone control, potentially aversive future events. We feel nervous, on edge, and keyed up. We’re also thinking that something bad is about to happen. We don’t feel anxious or worried about the past. Instead anxiety is always about events in the future—a bad outcome or catastrophe we imagine “could happen.” The person with anxiety is dominated by “what if” thinking. Practically anything we encounter in life can trigger anxiety. Even anxiety itself can make us feel more anxious (“What if the anxiety never goes away?” or “What if the anxiety gets worse and I lose control?”). Other examples of imagined catastrophes are:

- “What if my mind goes blank during the exam?”
- “What if I don’t get all my work done?”
- “What if I have a panic attack in the supermarket?”
- “What if I become seriously ill due to contact with other people?”

- “What if I encounter someone who reminds me of the assailant who attacked me?”
- “What if I lose my job?”

What Prompts Mild Anxiety?

Rarely do our feelings occur without cause. There is usually a trigger that changes the way we feel, and anxiety is no different. We most often feel anxious because something has triggered a sense of threat. The trigger could be a situation or circumstance, an intrusive thought, image, or memory, an unexpected physical sensation, or some comment or action by another person. Being able to identify the most common triggers to your mild anxiety is an important part of learning how you handle anxiety in some situations but not others.

EVALUATION EXERCISE **Discover Your Triggers of Mild Anxiety**

This exercise will help you discover situations, thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors in your everyday life that may trigger feelings of anxiousness. Worksheet 3.1 is a selective list categorized under major aspects of living: work, finances, social relations, health, and family/intimate relationships.

How many situations caused you at least some anxiety (that is, the ones you checked as causing only a little anxiety)? Were most of these triggers associated with one category or another, such as work or intimate relationships? Were you surprised by the number of situations that make you feel anxious? The situations that triggered a lot of anxiety are the subject of the next chapter. For now we want to focus on the mildly anxiety-inducing situations so you can discover why you're able to tolerate anxiety in these situations but not others. Later we'll compare how you respond to situations that cause you severe anxiety with how you respond to the ones that cause mild anxiety. In the meantime, keep Worksheet 3.1 handy so you can refer to it while completing the chapter.

Anxiety Can Feel Normal

You probably don't notice how you shift from calm and relaxed to stressed and anxious throughout the day. You tolerate mild levels of apprehension, tension, and nervousness so they don't interfere in your daily living. Most of us would feel anxious

Anxiety Trigger Checklist

Instructions: Place an X in the column that represents the amount of anxiety you associate with each situation. In the blank spaces, write any additional triggers to your anxious feelings that are not listed in the relevant category.

Possible anxiety triggers	No anxiety	A little anxiety	A lot of anxiety
Work/school performance			
Being late for meeting, class, or appointment			
Losing my job; failing or quitting school			
Thinking I'm falling behind; not keeping up at work or school			
Not succeeding; failing to meet expectations, goals, or targets			
Possible negative work evaluation or poor marks			
Having unfinished work			
Making mistakes			
Not doing my best			
Other: _____			
Other: _____			
Social relationships			
Going to social event (such as a party) with a lot of unfamiliar people			
Making a telephone call to a stranger			
Walking into a theater, church, group setting late			
Being assertive			
Expressing my opinion, especially in a group			
Having friends over for dinner			
Working out in the gym			
Concern that others think I'm stupid, boring, or no fun			
Feeling of not knowing what to say			
Thought of not fitting in with these people			

(continued)

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Possible anxiety triggers	No anxiety	A little anxiety	A lot of anxiety
<i>Social relationships (continued)</i>			
Thought that I've made a bad impression or a fool of myself			
Concern that I've been rude or impolite			
Thought that I'm not accepted			
Giving a presentation			
Thought of looking nervous, uncomfortable			
Other: _____			
Other: _____			
<i>Finances</i>			
Difficulty paying bills			
Reminded of being in debt			
Concern I'll not have enough money			
Overspending			
Not saving enough/investments underperforming			
Not meeting my budget			
Not having enough money; not making ends meet			
Need a better income			
Other: _____			
Other: _____			
<i>Intimate/family relationships</i>			
Argument with partner/child/parent			
Accident, injury to partner/child/parent			
Thought that I'm unattractive to intimate partner			
Thought that I'm not loved by intimate partner			
Thought that my intimate partner isn't committed to me			
Thought that my intimate partner is not faithful			

(continued)

Possible anxiety triggers	No anxiety	A little anxiety	A lot of anxiety
<i>Intimate/family relationships (continued)</i>			
Currently having no intimate partner			
Beginning of a romantic relationship			
Experiencing a lack of intimacy			
Other: _____			
Other: _____			
<i>Health</i>			
Concerns about a chronic medical condition			
Chronic pain			
Waiting for the results of a medical test			
Sudden chest pains			
Being in public and getting an infectious illness			
Concern about being overweight or in poor health			
Going to the doctor or hospital			
Feeling nausea or upset stomach			
Headache			
Unexpected aches and pains			
Feeling dizzy, unsteady, or weak			
Feeling tired, lack of energy			
Poor sleep			
Concern of a possible heart attack, stroke, or aneurysm			
Concern about forgetting, confusion, or poor concentration			
Thoughts of death and dying			
Other: _____			
Other: _____			

before giving a speech or performing in front of a large audience, meeting an important person for the first time, waiting for the results of a medical test, hearing that our partner has doubts about the relationship, and the like. What makes normal, mild anxiety different from its more severe counterpart is our ability to tolerate it and recover quickly.

EVALUATION EXERCISE **Rediscover Mild Anxiety**

Maybe you've forgotten what a normal feeling of anxiety is like because you've been so focused on your anxiety problems. The exercise in Worksheet 3.2 will help you reconnect with your experiences of mild anxiety. You can use the experiences you marked as causing a little anxiety on the previous worksheet as typical triggers of mild anxiety.

➔ *Troubleshooting Tips: Capturing Moments of Mild Anxiety*

It can be difficult to think of anxiety as a normal, even helpful, emotion when you're struggling with anxiety problems. If you couldn't recall any experiences of mild anxiety for Worksheet 3.2, you can use the worksheet as a self-monitoring form. Over the next week or two, write down times when you faced a difficult, stressful, or challenging problem. Use the symptom checklist (Step 2) to indicate how you felt physically, how it affected your thinking, how you behaved, and what you felt (subjective) when facing the problem. Complete the checklist as soon as possible while your memory is fresh. It's hard to remember the symptoms of mild anxiety because the experience evaporates quickly. If the self-monitoring strategy is not helpful, try completing Worksheet 3.2 when you and your partner or family member are dealing with the same problem. You can discuss how you each experienced the problem using Worksheet 3.2 as your guide.

When feeling anxious, were some of the physical, cognitive, behavioral, and subjective characteristics more prominent than others? Whatever your experience of mild anxiety, it's clear you're able to tolerate these symptoms. This is what keeps the anxious feelings brief and mild. Clearly, you're able to deal effectively with anxiety when it involves the symptoms you checked off on this worksheet. Keep this worksheet handy so you can compare it with your experiences of problematic anxiety, the topic of the next chapter.

If Alyssa completed Worksheet 3.2, her mild anxiety experiences might be having to pitch a new online advertising strategy to senior management and going to a parent-teacher meeting. Anxiety in both situations was mild and manageable, but Alyssa might notice certain physical symptoms like upset stomach and tense muscles. Her cognitive concerns might be fear of negative evaluation and poor concentration. Behaviorally, she might show some signs of restlessness and difficulty speaking.

Mild Anxiety Checklist

Instructions: There are two parts to this worksheet.

Step 1. In the space provided, briefly describe two experiences of normal, mild anxiety. On these occasions you felt slightly nervous, tense, or anxious, and you were thinking that something unfortunate could happen to you or a loved one. The anxiety may have occurred in a situation that would cause most people some anxiety.

1. Mild anxiety experience: _____

2. Mild anxiety experience: _____

Step 2. Below you'll find a checklist of features common to all levels of anxiety. Place a checkmark beside the symptoms you had during the mild anxiety experiences recorded in Step 1.

Physical features

- Increased heart rate, palpitations
- Shortness of breath, rapid breathing
- Chest pain or pressure
- Choking sensation
- Dizziness, lightheadedness
- Sweating, hot flashes, chills
- Nausea, upset stomach, diarrhea
- Trembling, shaking
- Tingling or numbness in arms, legs
- Weakness, unsteadiness, faintness
- Tense muscles, rigidity
- Dry mouth

Behavioral features

- Avoidance of threat cues or situations
- Escape, flight
- Pursuit of safety, reassurance
- Restlessness, agitation, pacing
- Hyperventilation
- Freezing, motionlessness
- Difficulty speaking

Cognitive (thinking) features

- Fear of losing control, being unable to cope
- Fear of physical injury or death
- Fear of going crazy
- Fear of negative evaluation by others
- Frightening thoughts, images, or memories
- Perceptions of unreality or detachment
- Poor concentration, confusion, distractibility
- Narrowing of attention, hypervigilance for threat
- Poor memory
- Difficulty in reasoning, loss of objectivity

Subjective features

- Feeling nervous, tense, wound up
- Feeling frightened, fearful, terrified
- Being edgy, jumpy, jittery
- Being impatient, frustrated

Alyssa might also feel somewhat edgy and wound up. However, none of these symptoms are difficult to handle, and so she'd be able to function very well in these situations. Were your mild anxiety experiences like Alyssa's, or did you check different symptoms? We don't all experience anxiety the same way. It's entirely possible that some symptoms are easier to tolerate than others, and that might be one reason your anxiety remains low in these situations. Later we'll see how the features you experience with low anxiety compare with the symptoms you have when anxiety is severe.

The Making of Mild Anxiety

There are certain ways we think, feel, and behave to keep our anxious feelings in check. Figure 3.1 on the facing page depicts three gears that keep your anxiety in the normal range of emotion.

The Cognition Gear

We keep our anxious feelings mild by evaluating the threat or danger in realistic terms. We avoid thinking the worst or catastrophizing the situation. Realistic thinking about threat involves:

- Downgrading the personal significance and intensity of the anxiety-provoking situation
- Assuming a mild to moderate negative outcome is most likely
- Thinking that a seriously bad outcome is not immediate but a possibility in the distant future

Alyssa had to make an important presentation to her department, but she felt only mildly anxious. She kept her anxious feelings in check by telling herself there was nothing special about this presentation and even if she didn't perform her best, nothing would happen. She believed it was highly unlikely that she'd do so poorly that it would ruin her reputation at work. Getting a poor performance evaluation that would threaten her job was not something Alyssa thought was imminent, although she did recognize her job security was not absolute by any means.

We also keep our anxiousness to a minimum by believing we can deal with the demanding situation at hand. Anxiety rises when we believe we're too weak, helpless, or vulnerable to deal with an anticipated negative outcome. So we keep our anxious feelings under control by:

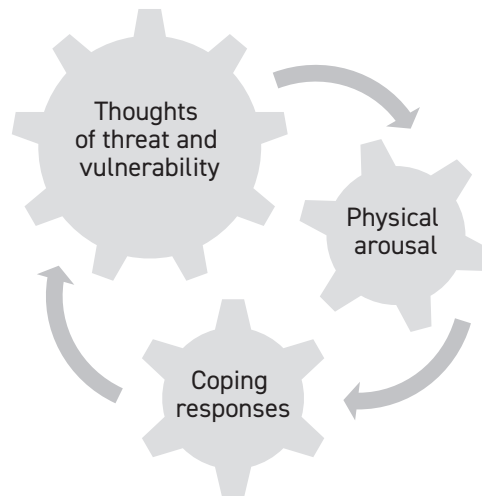


FIGURE 3.1. The basic cognitive behavioral model of anxiety.

- Believing we're able to cope with the situation causing the anxiety
- Focusing on our problem-solving skills
- Tolerating uncomfortable feelings

Alyssa believed in herself when it came to her work performance. She knew from experience that she was quite good at making presentations, so she treated the current assignment as a problem to be solved. She realized from personal experience that she could perform well even when a little anxious. In fact she believed a little anxiety kept her sharp and on her toes. So Alyssa was able to keep her work anxiety to a minimum by believing no threat was too great and her coping skills were ready and able to deal with any challenge that came her way.

In CT-R the focus is on the pursuit of valued goals and aspirations for the future. A good way to keep anxiety low is to concentrate on the important goals in your life. This is more than just distracting yourself with “busy work.” It involves passionate engagement in what you consider most important that builds on your strengths and talents. It doesn't have to be engagement in a big task. Rather it can be specific activities that are connected to a larger life goal.

Being productive and successful were valued goals for Alyssa. She knew that making a good presentation was an important part of succeeding at work. When she started to feel nervous about a presentation, she was able to shift her attention to improving the presentation and away from how she felt. What's important to you? Have you noticed you're less anxious when you're engaged in an important and interesting task? In mildly anxiety-provoking situations you may be thinking more about what you have to do, what we call goal-directed activity, rather than how you feel.

The Physical Arousal Gear

Even when our anxiety is mild, we can still feel it in our body. Look back at Worksheet 3.2. Which physical sensations did you check? Why do you think these symptoms remained relatively mild and eventually disappeared? There are probably two things you did when you had tense muscles, felt lightheaded, had an upset stomach, or some other symptom.

1. **Generated a benign interpretation:** You did not consider the physical sensation serious; you believed it was due to stress, feeling tired, or overwork and that it would eventually fade away.
2. **Got distracted:** Instead of focusing on the physical symptom and worrying about it, you focused your attention on something else, like an important task or a conversation with a friend.

When Alyssa felt stressed and anxious at work, she noticed that her heart raced and she felt hot and sometimes lightheaded. She recently had a complete physical checkup, and given her age and low risk factors, she knew these symptoms were due to stress rather than a cardiovascular problem. So, rather than fear the symptoms, she took them as a sign to calm down and take a couple of deep breaths. Rather than trying to control the symptoms, she let them pass on their own. She was then able to get back into her work.

The recovery orientation to CBT emphasizes what is “best about you.” In CT-R the therapist guides individuals in discovering positive beliefs about themselves, other people, and their future.¹² What might be some positive beliefs about being physically aroused when anxious? When anxiety is mild, or even helpful, it’s likely you consider physical arousal an asset rather than a hindrance. For example, you might interpret your tension, increased heart rate, or tingling sensation as a sign that you’re attentive, “pumped,” or ready for action. This is the interpretation you make of these symptoms at the start of a sporting competition, a music recital, or when embarking on a dangerous military mission. You might call it “an adrenaline rush,” but what’s important is the belief that it’s a positive sign. When anxiety is helpful, we tend to see physical arousal as helpful, even a sign of strength. When anxious feelings are heightened, we’re more likely to believe physical arousal is a problem and that we need to calm down.

The Coping Response Gear

When our anxiety is mild, we respond to our feelings differently than when it’s severe. You’re aware of the anxiety, but you continue to focus on whatever it is that you’re

doing. You follow through with the immediate goal that's before you. When a difficulty arises, you take a problem-solving approach and see the situation as a challenge. You might interpret the anxious feeling as a useful emotion that keeps you sharp and focused. Avoiding, delaying, or escaping from the thing that's making you feel anxious is the furthest thing from your mind.

This is the approach Alyssa took when feeling anxious about her presentations at work. From a CT-R perspective you could say that Alyssa's positive beliefs and expectations about herself were foremost in her mind and that she capitalized on her strengths and talents when dealing with the presentation. She considered her mild anxiousness helpful because it motivated her to stay focused on preparing the presentation. When she thought about doing a poor job, she looked back at the parts of the presentation that she felt less certain about and spent extra time collecting information that supported her arguments. Since the presentation was scheduled for the end of the week, she set aside time to work on it. She kept it a high priority and refused to let other work crowd out her scheduled prep time. In this way Alyssa worked with the anxiety, allowing herself to experience the feelings while maintaining a focus on her work.

EVALUATION EXERCISE **Tracking Mild Anxiety**

This exercise gives you an opportunity to better understand how the cognitive, physical, and coping gears operate to keep your anxiety at bay. All anxiety, whether mild or severe, can be broken down into triggers, thoughts, physical sensations, and coping responses. You'll find the work you've done in the previous exercises helpful when completing Worksheet 3.3. The example on page 49 illustrates how Alyssa might complete this worksheet.

Were you surprised at the number of times you kept your anxious feelings in the low intensity range? Were there certain ways of thinking or coping with the anxiety that kept it at a minimum? You might want to highlight these key cognitions and coping responses because they might be especially potent in keeping your anxiety mild.

If you take a look at Alyssa's example, you'll see two cognitions that were especially helpful in keeping her anxiety tolerable. The first was reminding herself she always was sufficiently prepared for past presentations no matter how little preparation time was available, and second, she could turn the presentation into a brainstorming session with her colleagues. In terms of behaviors, Alyssa's assertiveness in dealing with audience questions and knowing what to do if she got stuck in certain details of the presentation were most helpful. Have you, like Alyssa, discovered ways of thinking and behaving when mildly anxious that might help you with episodes of problematic anxiety?

My Mild Anxiety Log

Instructions: When completing this worksheet, think broadly about your mild anxiety triggers. Any external situation, thought, image, memory, or physical sensation could trigger mild anxious feelings. It is likely that only a few physical arousal symptoms will be present with mild anxiety. The cognition and behavior columns are the most important. For the cognition column, consider how you're thinking the situation is not that bad, that you'll be able to cope with it, and everything will work out in the end. For the behavior column, briefly describe how you turned the anxiety-provoking situation into a challenge, maintained a problem-solving focus, and didn't let anxiety derail your efforts.

Date and time	Anxiety situation/trigger	Physical sensations	Cognition (What were you thinking when mildly anxious?)	Coping (How did you respond to your mild anxiety?)
1.				
2.				

Alyssa's Mild Anxiety Log

Date and time	Anxiety situation/trigger	Physical sensations	Cognition (What were you thinking when mildly anxious?)	Coping (How did you respond to your mild anxiety?)
1. Tues, Feb 18, 2022, @ 2:30 P.M.	Sitting at my desk, trying to work on the presentation for Friday, but I'm getting a constant flow of interruptions	I feel tense and suddenly the room seems much hotter; I feel a pressure building in my chest, my mouth feels dry when I stand up. I feel a little unsteady and lightheaded	I'm never going to be ready with all these interruptions. Why can't people leave me alone? I'll have to work on the presentation at home, which is so difficult for the whole family. I always get the work done. I've even done some of my best work when in a crunch. This is not a major presentation; people realize I've had a lot of demands lately. If I'm not completely ready, I can devote more time to discussion and turn it into a brainstorming session.	I put a sign on my office door that said "do not disturb" between 3:00 and 4:00. I did not look at texts or emails for one hour. I read a couple of key documents and then listed the main points I wanted to get across in the presentation. I acknowledged I was feeling anxious, so I took a five-minute break to do controlled breathing and listen to some soothing music. If I got stuck on one part of the presentation, I skipped to another part so I could keep my work momentum for the full hour.
2.				

Making Anxiety Helpful

At the beginning of this chapter we discussed the survival value of fear and anxiety. Next, we want to consider whether anxiety might confer some personal benefits in daily living. Many of the threats we face today are more psychological or even existential in nature, and so is it possible that anxiety is helpful in these situations? Is there a type of anxiety that is part of your adaptive mode, enabling you to be your best when making decisions or taking action on an important issue? Let's consider a few examples.

Have you ever worried about something you said to a friend or family member? Maybe you made a hasty comment and now, as you reflect on what you said, you wonder if they took it the wrong way. Your concern (mild anxiety) persists, and finally you speak to your friend. You find out your friend was offended by your remark. Now you have a chance to make matters right. In this case your anxiety was adaptive; it made you aware of a possible ruptured friendship so you then took corrective action. This action is consistent with one of your core values, which is to live in harmony with others. Some people, though, are excessively worried about offending others. In this case the anxiety ceases to have any adaptive value. It's like a faulty burglar alarm that is useless because most of the time it goes off when there's no robbery in progress.

We can all think of numerous times when we felt anxious about our work performance. A fear of failing, embarrassing yourself, or falling short of your standards caused some anxiety, which motivated you to work harder and perform better. Once again, a mild case of performance anxiety can be adaptive, but if it's too intense, the anxiety undermines your confidence and ability to work. At other times, mild anxiety in social situations can increase your awareness of social cues so you act appropriately. But when social anxiety becomes too severe, we become awkward and self-conscious around others.

There is a host of other situations where some anxiety and worry can motivate us to deal with real-life problems. Some worry about finances could make us more responsible with our money, anxiety about harm to our children could help us take appropriate precautions, and some worry about the future could motivate us to create reasonable contingency plans. Of course, anxiety in each scenario ceases to be adaptive when it becomes exaggerated and disproportionate to the situation at hand.

EVALUATION EXERCISE **Leaning into Anxiety and Worry**

This exercise will help you think about the possible advantages of mild anxiety in seven key areas of living. Not all of the life concerns listed in Worksheet 3.4 are equally relevant, so pick three or four that are most important to you. Think about a problem or challenge you faced in each of these areas and how some anxiety helped you deal with the difficulty. It's

When My Anxiety Was Helpful

Instructions: Select three or four life domains that are important to you. Think of an experience that caused you some nervousness, anxiety, worry, or stress, but your emotional state actually helped you deal successfully with the situation. After describing the situation in the first column, indicate in the second column how some anxiety or worry helped you perform better than if you had no anxiety.

Challenging/difficult situation, problem, or concern	How mild anxiety or worry helped me deal with the situation, problem, or concern
Work:	
Family/intimate relationships:	
Friendships/social sphere:	
Health/physical fitness:	
Leisure/recreation:	
Community/citizenship:	
Spirituality/religious faith:	

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important that you're able to recall specific examples from your life when mild anxiety or worry was helpful. This will make the concept of helpful anxiety meaningful to you.

➔ *Troubleshooting Tips: More Guidance in Discovering Helpful Anxiety*

If you had difficulty thinking of anxiety or worry as helpful, make sure that:

- You choose areas of living that are associated with several important challenges or problems that you remember experiencing. Most people can think of difficult situations in work/school or family/intimate relationships but would have greater difficulty with community/citizenship or spirituality/religious faith domains. You can also review your answers to Worksheets 3.1 and 3.3 to help you remember some relevant experiences.
- You're not misinterpreting or ignoring experiences that are mild anxiety. Some people don't think of nervousness, tension, or butterflies in their stomach as anxiety. But these are symptoms of mild anxiety, so you may have had these symptoms but not called it anxiety.
- You think of helpful anxiety as increasing your motivation, making you more creative, or encouraging you to take initiative to deal with the situation. These are ways in which mild anxiety or worry help us deal with problems of daily living.

Were you surprised to discover specific examples of anxiety working to your advantage? Some anxiety and worry can make us better at our job, more sensitive and understanding in our relationships, more conscientious about healthy living, and more committed to building relaxation and enjoyment in our weekly schedule.

Alyssa felt pulled between her job and family responsibilities. This was an ongoing difficulty that made her mildly anxious and worried. But she used this anxiety to her advantage by being more conscious of not letting work demands encroach on her family life. Another challenging experience in the friendship domain was her concern that she'd lose her close friends because of neglect due to her busy life. Again, the mild anxiety associated with this concern was adaptive because it motivated her to set aside time for her friends.

Play to Your Strengths

In this chapter you've learned that in many situations you experience low levels of anxiousness. Maybe you're surprised to learn you experience mild anxiety episodes more often than more severe episodes. We hope you've learned from this chapter that *you're stronger than you think*. You're much better at dealing with difficulties than

you may have realized. Possibly you've been so focused on your problems with anxiety, worry, and panic that you've forgotten how well you deal with anxiety in other situations. The recovery orientation to CBT begins with helping people discover what is best about them. This is why we started with a chapter on adaptive anxiety. We want you to rediscover your emotional strength and use this as a starting point for developing a CBT program to tackle your anxiety problems.

Make no mistake about the goal, however: This is not just a “feel good” chapter. Have you discovered ways you think and act during mild anxiety that you can apply to occasions when anxiety becomes a problem? This next exercise is intended to help you pinpoint the strategies you use to manage anxiety in difficult situations. We call this My Adaptive Anxiety Profile because it represents what you do to keep anxiety tolerable, even helpful.

EVALUATION EXERCISE **The Adaptive Anxiety Profile**

The work you've done in this chapter is summarized in Worksheet 3.5. The best way to discover your strengths in dealing with anxiety is to do a “postmortem” on past difficulties you handled well. You're asked to take a closer look at some of your mild anxiety experiences and explain how you thought about the difficulty, your ability to deal with it, your tolerance for anxiety, and how you coped. Your answers to these questions will provide insight into how you turn down the anxiety dial in various situations.

➤ *Troubleshooting Tips: Seeing Past Severe Anxiety*

Everyone has their best moments when they use their anxiety and worry to some advantage in dealing with difficult situations or problems. But this can be hard to recognize when it seems like severe anxiety is unrelenting. It's like a spark of anxious feeling ignites a firestorm of anxiety or panic. And it may be true that you feel your anxiety much more intensely most of the time, whereas others may have fewer bouts of severe anxiety. You might have to strain to see your moments of mild anxiety within a whirlwind of severe anxiety. But we encourage you to take some extra time to search for the few times you experience mild anxiety or worry and consider whether your adaptive way of thinking and coping during mild anxiety could be used when feeling severe anxiety.

If you are still having difficulty completing the Adaptive Anxiety Profile, we've written a couple of scenarios based on Alyssa's story.

What did you tell yourself about the outcome or consequences of the difficulty that made you feel a little anxious or worried? Were you able to think of ways the situation was not as dire as you may have first thought? Were you able to believe you could deal with the difficulty, that you were not a victim of bad circumstances? How

My Adaptive Anxiety Profile

Instructions: Review your entries in Worksheet 3.4 and select two or three life experiences that were difficult but you managed the anxiety and worry so well that you were able to overcome the difficult circumstance. Next answer the four questions associated with each situation. Briefly explain what you thought and how you behaved in each situation that enabled you to keep your anxiety and worry low.

A. Challenging, difficult situation: _____

1. What I told myself that made me think the situation was not that serious: _____

2. What I told myself about my ability to deal with the situation: _____

3. What I told myself about my ability to tolerate or handle the anxiety caused by the situation: _____

4. How I responded to this situation that reduced the anxiety: _____

(continued)

B. Challenging, difficult situation: _____

1. What I told myself that made me think the situation was not that serious: _____

2. What I told myself about my ability to deal with the situation: _____

3. What I told myself about my ability to tolerate or handle the anxiety caused by the situation:

4. How I responded to this situation that reduced the anxiety: _____

(continued)

C. Challenging, difficult situation: _____

1. What I told myself that made me think the situation was not that serious: _____

2. What I told myself about my ability to deal with the situation: _____

3. What I told myself about my ability to tolerate or handle the anxiety caused by the situation:

4. How I responded to this situation that reduced the anxiety: _____

Alyssa's Adaptive Anxiety Profile

A. Challenging, difficult situation: A few months ago Daniel heard that his company was downsizing and his job could be terminated.

1. What I told myself that made me think the situation was not that serious: At first I was worried and anxious, but I reminded myself that I have a good job and we can survive on one salary for a while if needed. Daniel has had to look for work in the past, and he's always found good employment because he has skills and an excellent employment record. No job is guaranteed for life, so one has to expect to change jobs several times during their working life. Anyway, he's been unhappy in this job; he'll get a good severance package that will give him time to look for more satisfying employment.
2. What I told myself about my ability to deal with the situation: There's nothing I can do to change the situation. I have no influence over his company's decision making. We've pulled together and managed past financial difficulties when we had much less money than we do now. Daniel's good at dealing with difficulties like this. I focused on giving him emotional support and encouragement while he waited to hear about his employment. I told myself we could use a few weeks of him off work so he could take on more family responsibilities and attend to some much-needed house repairs.
3. What I told myself about my ability to tolerate or handle the anxiety caused by the situation: If Daniel got laid off, I'd feel more anxious and worried if it dragged on for months. At the time, I was able to deal with the anxiety of not knowing whether he'd keep his job. It's only natural to have some worry and maybe lose a little sleep when waiting for possible "bad news." If I felt some anxiety, I imagined how much greater it must be for him. I kept my focus on Daniel and didn't become preoccupied with my feelings.
4. How I responded to this situation that reduced the anxiety: I focused on my work and family life to maintain a semblance of normality. I didn't question Daniel about what's happening with his job or the company's downsizing because talking endlessly about it only increased our anxiety. I didn't seek reassurance from him because he didn't know what was going to happen. I was available when he wanted to talk, but I also wanted to give the appearance of personal strength and confidence in his ability to weather this storm.

B. Challenging, difficult situation: My mother has not been well. She saw her family doctor, who recently booked a series of medical tests. This is worrying because cancer runs in my mother's family.

1. What I told myself that made me think the situation was not that serious: I reminded myself that my mother is getting older, so it's normal that health issues will arise. Most older adults have health problems.

Life is uncertain, so I have no choice but to live with the uncertainty of our health. I resisted jumping to conclusions and thinking the worst. Most medical conditions in older people are chronic and managed by medication and lifestyle changes. It's the nature of modern medicine that we have no choice but to wait for test results. I kept thinking that I don't want her to be treated without proper assessment and diagnosis. Like everyone in this situation, I could practice patience and wait, or I could fret but still have to wait. On many occasions I've had to wait for an outcome that could have been much worse than it was.

2. What I told myself about my ability to deal with the situation: *Whatever the outcome of the tests, I had no choice but to deal with it. We are a close family, and my parents needed my support. When Daniel had a serious car accident several years ago, I rose to the occasion and provided the support he needed to get back on his feet. I did it then, and I told myself I can do it again for my mother.*
3. What I told myself about my ability to tolerate or handle the anxiety caused by the situation: *I was worried and anxious until we got the test results back. I thought, "Well, everyone experiences some anxiety while waiting for results." When I thought about my mother's health problems, I said a prayer for her and then let my anxiety and worries ebb and flow naturally throughout the day.*
4. How I responded to this situation that reduced the anxiety: *I kept focused on my work and family responsibilities. I was in daily contact with my mother, but I didn't keep asking whether she had heard anything. I asked how she was feeling but decided it was best to normalize life as much as possible. I resisted telling her "everything will be all right" because I knew it was useless reassurance. I can't tell the future. Instead I had to live with the uncertainty of not knowing.*

did you convince yourself that you could tolerate the anxiety—that it wouldn't derail your efforts to deal with the problem? What coping strategies did you use to maintain a low level of anxiousness?

We've treated many individuals with anxiety problems who reported that concerns about employment and the health of loved ones caused severe anxiety and worry. But like Alyssa, most people are able to identify times when they experienced lower, more manageable, levels of anxiety and worry.

If we look at the first question in each scenario of Alyssa's worksheet, you'll notice she corrected her way of thinking about Daniel's possibility of unemployment and her mother's health. Instead of thinking of the worst possible outcome, she forced herself to think of less threatening outcomes to the situations. If Daniel was made redundant, he might have a short period of unemployment but then would probably find another

job. Alyssa gave herself permission to be anxious waiting for her mother's medical test results, realizing this was a normal response that millions must endure.

Alyssa also reminded herself she can deal with these family difficulties. She told herself to remain focused on providing emotional support to Daniel and that she had no choice but to wait for her mother's test results. Based on past experience, she knew she could tolerate her anxious feelings, that the feeling of apprehension was temporary and would disappear once the situation changed.

But changing the way you think is not enough to reduce anxiety. The way we act also affects our anxiety. As seen in Alyssa's answers to the fourth question, she normalized her daily life as much as possible even though she was feeling anxious about Daniel's possible dismissal and her mother's test results. She stopped herself from seeking reassurance or avoiding any discussion with her husband or mother about their worries. She decided that if she acted strong and confident, it might undermine inner feelings of weakness and vulnerability.

The Next Chapter

This chapter focused on your experiences of mild, adaptive anxiety. Are you surprised to learn that you can manage anxiety quite well in many situations? When you minimize the negative consequences of difficult situations and take a problem-solving approach, you can reduce the intensity of anxiety symptoms.

Figure 3.2 provides a summary of the main psychological processes involved in the pathway of anxiety. The list on the left side highlights how certain ways of think-

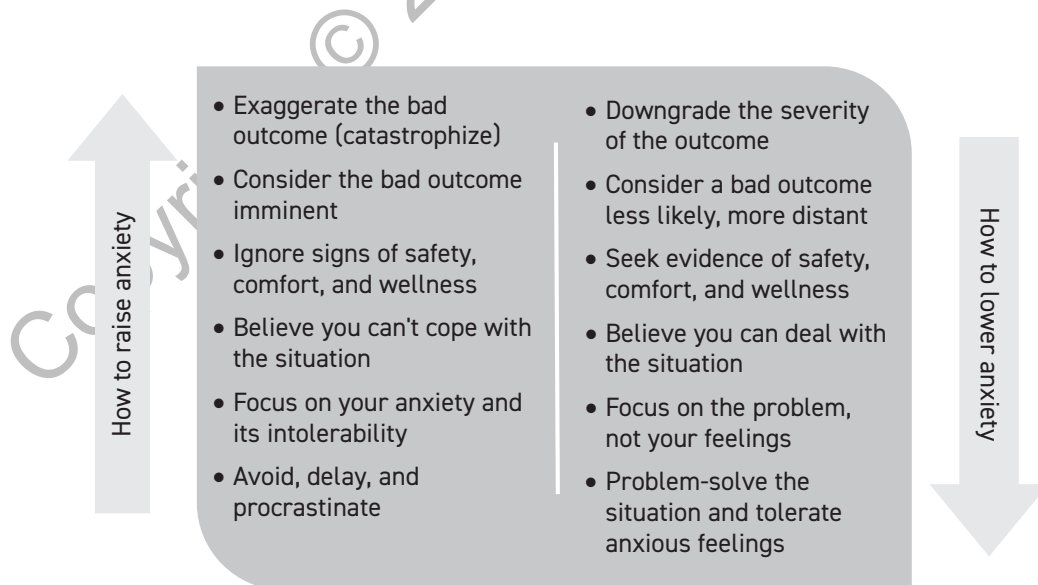


FIGURE 3.2. Key points about regulating anxious feelings.

ing and coping will increase the severity of your anxiety symptoms. This is the topic of Chapter 4, on problematic anxiety. The list on the right summarizes the main points of this chapter. This way of thinking and coping will lower anxiety so it can help you deal with life's challenges.

As you read through the key processes involved in lowering anxiety, review the work you've done in this chapter. When you experienced mild anxiety because of the responses you employed in the right-hand column, you were tapping into your positive, adaptive way of thinking and behaving.

Possibly a lot of your anxiety experiences fall somewhere in the middle range between mild, helpful nervousness at one end and severe, debilitating anxiety at the other. You may not be sure whether your feelings are normal or excessive. The next chapter explains how to assess your anxiety experiences to determine whether you might have an anxiety problem that would benefit from the CBT interventions presented in this workbook.