

3

changing your relationship with anxiety

EMBARKING ON A NEW PATH

Despite the fact that fear and anxiety are helpful emotions experienced by all humans, many of us are locked in a chronic struggle with these states. Avoiding situations and activities that could elicit anxiety seems like a way to restore peace and balance to our lives. Unfortunately, this strategy doesn't seem to relieve distress significantly, and it keeps us from fully engaging in life.

As you saw in the stories told in Chapter 2, the struggle with anxiety can take a toll on our physical and emotional well-being, cause conflict in our relationships, and diminish the overall quality of our lives. Struggling with anxiety keeps Eric from fully paying attention to either his work or his family, and he's feeling the fallout in both arenas. Tianna avoids so many of her moment-to-moment experiences to eliminate anxiety—from asking friends if she can join their exercise group to confronting her boss about having to miss deadlines—that she has no idea how these choices have contributed to her apparent inability to start getting in shape. Anxiety about the future and her recent feelings of vulnerability are keeping Annie from pursuing and enjoying what she values most in life.

The goal of this book is to demonstrate how you can use mindfulness to disengage from your struggle with anxiety and fully participate

in your life. Mindfulness (described more fully in the next chapter) is a skill that all humans already possess. But, as with every other skill, the more you practice it, the easier it is to use. In this chapter you'll learn how mindfulness practice can directly affect three major consequences of struggling with anxiety:

- To escape our fears, we often restrict or narrow our attention, and this lack of flexible attention makes it difficult to make informed choices. Mindfulness involves paying attention in a unique way. When we are mindful we notice where our attention is focused, and we may choose to shift or expand our attention. The quality of attention in mindfulness is also special. As mentioned earlier, it involves taking a fresh look at a familiar response—bringing a gentle curiosity and compassion to our experiences.

- Another way we avoid anxiety and stress is to try to opt out of our experience—the thoughts, emotions, sensations, and all the rest—which can cause us to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Being mindful allows us to appreciate and participate in all aspects of our lives, even the more difficult and painful moments. We can use this skill to be more effective and present in our everyday activities.

- Eliminating anxiety can become an all-consuming effort, leaving us little time for experiencing the joy and fulfillment of whatever we find meaningful in daily life. Mindfulness encourages us to enjoy being fully engaged in life and to keep pursuing what matters most.

Problem 1: Struggles with Anxiety Interfere with Attention

Keisha watches the seconds tick by on the clock hanging at the front of the lecture hall. According to her calculations, there is time for only two more student presentations, and the odds are 1 to 5 that she will be chosen to go today. Keisha panics at the dryness in her mouth and debates whether she should take a drink from her water bottle now or conserve the water in case she is called on to present. Cautiously, she reaches out toward the bottle to sneak a sip and notices with despair that her hand is shaking. Keisha scans the room to see if there is anything she can use to prop up her notes

when she is standing at the front of the class. Her initial plan had been to hold the note cards in her hand, but her shakiness would be too visible. Keisha glances down at her note cards; maybe she should run through the presentation in her head just in case. But looking at the words swimming on the page makes her more anxious, so she flips the stack of cards over and looks away.

She knows she should pay attention to the current presenter, but Keisha is absorbed in her own thoughts. She puts hours into reading and studying for this class every week, and she is barely pulling off a C average. Keisha imagines the whispering, snickering, and eye-rolling that will break out as she stumbles through her talk. None of Keisha's friends even know about her struggle with anxiety. Her fear is limited to public speaking, and she has been so careful to avoid classes with a presentation requirement. This professor never assigned a project before—why couldn't he have waited one more year before changing the syllabus? Keisha imagines the reaction of her sorority sisters when they hear about the disastrous presentation. Her reputation for being poised and cool under pressure will be blown completely.

Keisha is startled by the polite applause that breaks out as her roommate Joslin gathers up her notes and makes her way back to her seat. "How did I do?" Joslin whispers eagerly, but Keisha is too busy trying to avoid eye contact with her professor to respond. Joslin's smile fades, and she rolls her eyes, thinking to herself, "Keisha is so self-absorbed and stuck up. She couldn't care less about me or my presentation."

The next student up is Andres. He and Keisha sometimes grab a coffee in the student union after class, and she had been thinking of inviting him to a party at her friend's apartment this weekend. Andres flashes her a confident grin as he heads up the aisle to the front of the class and tries to catch her eye several times throughout the presentation. He is trying to impress her with the depth and quality of his work. But Keisha stares ahead blankly with a solemn look on her face that Andres misinterprets as boredom and disinterest. In reality, Keisha is frantically searching her memory for strategies to control her anxiety. "Once in high school, I tried picturing everyone in their underwear, but that just made me more embarrassed," she recalls.

Somehow Keisha makes it through the rest of class, and a wave of relief washes over her when she realizes her presentation is postponed for another day. She turns to Joslin, intending to treat her to a celebratory lunch downtown, but her roommate storms away with a cold, angry expression on her face. Puzzled by her friend's response, Keisha tries to catch up with Andres. Maybe they could grab lunch at the union and she would work up the courage to invite him to the party. Andres glances her way for a moment, and Keisha smiles, but it is too late. Andres has already turned away and is walking back toward his dorm with a group of friends. Keisha feels her relief drain away, replaced by feelings of sadness and confusion as she walks across the campus alone.

Our attention is narrowed and diminished.

To increase our chances of survival in the face of danger, fear directs us to focus all of our attention on whatever threat is before us. The anxious apprehension of a future threat motivates us to continuously scan the environment for potential danger. Although this narrow and selective attention is aimed at keeping us safe, it prevents us from noticing and attending to nonthreatening parts of our experience. For example, if we are shopping at a convenience store and an armed robber storms in, our attention will be focused on his every move. The fact that we don't notice that the milk is on sale is inconsequential. But in other situations where we are afraid or anxious, missing out on the details may have more significant consequences.

In the last chapter, we considered how our preoccupation with worry and anxiety can reduce the enjoyment and pleasure we get out of our experiences. Eric clearly values his family and tries to make spending time with them a priority. Although he is physically present with his wife and daughter a fair amount of the time, because he is consumed with worry and inattentive, the relationships are strained and distant. Narrowed attention keeps Eric from fully connecting with his family.

When our attention is fixed on possible threats, we may also overlook valuable information that could help us more effectively pursue what matters most. Keisha clearly cares about others and wants their acceptance and approval. She believes that the best way to connect with others is to control her anxiety and avoid negative evaluation.

Unfortunately, Keisha's intense self-focus prevented her from noticing how her behavior affected others. Ironically, observing and responding effectively to these cues—praising Joslin for a fabulous presentation, nodding and smiling at Andres during his talk—would have provided Keisha with the very social approval and connection she was seeking. Keisha's limited awareness of her behavior and its consequences leaves her confused about the way her classmates responded. Her narrowed attention prevented her from learning from her experience. It is likely she will continue to rigidly apply the same ineffective anxiety control strategy the next time she encounters a social threat.

Ben slams his cell phone shut and throws it across the room in anger. Once again, he has been unable to convince his brother, David, to stop drinking and check into a rehab program. No surprise, he silently fumes, David has always been thick-skulled, stubborn, and irresponsible.

Ben's mother died when he and David were both just kids, and for 2 years they were shuffled from relative to relative like unwanted baggage. Finally, their father showed up and dragged them halfway across the country to live in a dingy one-bedroom apartment. Ben couldn't wait to escape that hellhole, and the day he graduated from high school he went straight to his local recruiter and enlisted in the Marine Corps. Now Ben was working on completing his graduate degree in engineering.

David, on the other hand, had dropped out of school when he turned 16 and worked alongside their father at the meat-packing plant. David couldn't keep a dime in his pocket. He spent most of his money on booze, and whatever was left over he blew at the racetrack. David was the biological father of three children with two different women who were constantly taking him to court for missed child-support payments.

At least once a month Ben would get on David about his dead-end life. Ben knew it was his responsibility as the older brother to set David straight. But no matter how much he yelled, screamed, and berated his brother, Ben just could not get through to David. Last week Ben had even driven all the way out to David's apartment for a face-to-face confrontation. Not only was he unsuccessful in convincing David to stop drinking; he also couldn't get his

mule-headed brother to go and see a doctor even though he had been throwing up blood for a week.

Disgusted with his failed efforts, Ben decides to head to the library to work on his school assignments. He methodically makes his way through the first problem set before noticing the tightness in his chest and the tingling, numbing sensation in his arms and legs. Ben begins to panic. Heart disease runs in his family, and he fears he is in the midst of a heart attack. He lurches toward the reference desk to ask the librarian for help and is startled by the realization that tears are streaming down his face. "What the hell is wrong with me? I must be losing my mind," he thinks in horror.

Keisha's ability to observe and respond to her environment—notably the people whom she values—was diminished by the narrowing of attention that resulted from her struggles with anxiety. But this narrowing of attention can also inhibit us from fully noticing and understanding our own internal experiences. We may recognize that we are in a bad mood or upset, but we miss important nuances involved in our emotional responding. Ben is clear that David's behavior angers him, but his narrowed attention makes him less aware of his feelings of fear, sadness, and guilt about David's health and well-being. In turn, Ben has difficulty acknowledging the grief he feels about losing his mother, accepting the profound sadness of not being able to prevent David from making harmful choices, and noticing how alone he feels without a family he can depend on. Because Ben has such a limited awareness of the complexity of the emotions he is experiencing, he is frightened and confused by their intensity.

Having your attention commandeered by anxiety is like focusing a telescope on the tangled brush blocking your path and failing to see the hungry lion approaching from the left or the rescuer beckoning you to safety on the right. Mindfulness gives you a wide-angle lens.

The efficacy of Ben's actions is also limited by his restricted awareness of his emotions. Intense anger pervades all of his interactions with David, and as a result the brothers are mostly estranged. If Ben could express his vulnerability, share his fear and sadness, they might be able to share a closer bond. The confrontational strategy Ben uses to try to

get through to his brother consistently backfires as David shuts down whenever he feels attacked. David might be more receptive to Ben's advice to seek treatment if he knew how frightened and sad Ben was. Yet the brothers are locked in a vicious cycle. The more concerned and hopeless Ben feels about losing his brother, the angrier he becomes. And the more he lashes out at David, the less likely it is that the two will connect.

EXERCISE **Common beliefs about anxiety**

Which of the following common beliefs about anxiety do you hold?

- "I don't like to feel anxious because I believe it is a sign of weakness."
- "I get angry with myself for feeling nervous when there is no need to be."
- "I am disappointed in myself for being so anxious."
- "I feel flawed in some way because I get anxious in situations that don't bother other people."
- "I find my anxiety overwhelming."
- "I think anxiety can be dangerous."
- "I feel defined by my anxiety."
- "Before I can move forward with my life, I have to get my anxiety under control."
- "If I were a stronger person, I could stop myself from feeling anxious."

Our attention becomes reactive and self-critical.

Our struggle with fear and anxiety arises not from any actual harm caused by the physical sensations of these emotions. It comes from our **reaction** to these emotions and the thoughts, sensations, and images that accompany them. Consider the case of Jim. Joe and Jim both have teenage daughters who recently got their licenses. Both men have concerns about their daughter's safety. At times, Joe will be sitting at his desk working on the computer and will notice worries about his daughter's well-being catching his attention. Sometimes even vivid and fright-

ening images of her car smashed and flipped over on the side of the road pop into his mind. When these signs of anxiety surface, he acknowledges these reactions to be normal signs of being the concerned dad of a teenager. Eventually the thoughts and images pass and Joe is able to attend to other things.

Criticizing ourselves for feeling fear or anxiety is what hurts us—not the emotions themselves. Mindfulness can help us replace self-criticism with compassion.

Jim also worries about his daughter's safety, but he finds these worries deeply disturbing. Jim knows it is not rational, but

he has a superstitious feeling that if he imagines something terrible happening to his daughter, or experiences any doubts about her driving skills, she will be more likely to get into a crash. Jim thinks these thoughts are ridiculous and doesn't want anyone, especially his wife, to know about his concerns. His coworker, Joe, has a daughter who also just got her license. But Joe is always laughing and joking about his kids; he is not the slightest bit concerned about his daughter's driving safety. Joe's apparent cavalier attitude makes Jim feel that much worse about his own private reaction. "What the hell is wrong with me?" Jim thinks one particularly difficult day when he notices himself tearing up at the thought of losing his daughter. "A grown man crying about something that didn't even happen?" Jim thinks incredulously. "I better pull myself together before everyone starts to see how nuts I really am." Soon Jim develops the habit of drinking just a few beers each night to ease his mind. He finds that drinking calms him down enough so that he can fall asleep and push the disturbing thoughts and images out of his mind, at least for a few hours.

Jim's response to his anxiety is a pretty common one. Even though fear is a natural human response, many people are socialized to see it as a sign of weakness, irrationality, or failure. And because we often cannot see that other people are also experiencing fear and anxiety (just as Jim doesn't realize that Joe worries too), our belief that we alone are experiencing anxiety further teaches us to see it as a weakness or flaw. Because of that learning, we respond to fear and anxiety in a critical and judgmental way, viewing them as dangerous and overwhelming. Although emotions are reactions or responses to internal and external events, we feel personally responsible for our emotions and believe we should be able to control them.

We become defined by our emotional experiences.

Psychologist Steven Hayes and his colleagues have established that another uniquely human reaction to our thoughts, feelings, and sensations is to become fused with, or defined by, these experiences. In other words, rather than seeing fear as an emotion that comes and goes, we come to view it as an inherent part of our personality. Instead of acknowledging that most people occasionally have the thought “I am no good,” we believe it reflects the fact that we are different or flawed in some way.

Unfortunately, all of these reactions to fear and anxiety can feed on each other, creating a cycle of anxiety that is difficult to escape. For example, Claudia sees herself as flawed because she experiences fear and anxiety in social interactions. If she is planning to attend a party, she often starts to worry about her appearance or become anxious about making small talk. These fears and worries disturb her because she sees them as unique character flaws. She is certain others don't struggle the way she does; she can tell by how at ease most people seem at parties, at least on television. Naturally, her fear brings up urges to avoid, and Claudia inevitably calls with an excuse as to why she can't make the party. Because Claudia views anxiety as an obstacle that prevents her from making and keeping friends, she becomes angry, frustrated, and hopeless whenever the emotion arises. Claudia believes she cannot be happy or live life to its fullest until she rids herself of anxious thoughts and feelings. Thus she is extremely disappointed and deflated whenever anxious symptoms arise.

Mindfulness can help you see that you are not your anxiety.

Solution 1: Mindfulness Allows Us to Bring an Expanded, Compassionate Attention to Our Experience

Mindfulness practice teaches us how to focus, expand, or redirect our attention. It teaches us to recognize when our mind is pulled away from the present and toward an imagined, feared future event or an upsetting

episode from the past. Cultivating this awareness allows us to return our focus to the present so that we can participate more fully in our lives. Mindfulness can help us notice the layers and nuances of our thoughts and emotions, which promotes a deeper understanding of our internal reactions and allows us to flexibly consider our options. Broadened attention also increases our awareness of the consequences of our actions and makes it easier for us to learn from our experiences.

A key feature of mindfulness is that it changes our relationship with our internal experiences. Although anxiety prompts us to turn away from uncomfortable or painful experiences, mindfulness allows us to approach them. Rather than judging some internal experiences to be acceptable or desirable and others to be unacceptable or loathsome, mindfulness involves bringing curiosity and compassion to all of

It's natural to try to avoid pain, but avoiding it prevents us from understanding it and therefore dealing with it effectively.

our experiences. It encourages us to acknowledge that experiencing a full range of thoughts and feelings is what defines us as human.

The more we struggle with anxiety, the more we begin to respond out of habit. Any new situation might appear threatening, and our first response is often avoidance. Mindfulness allows us to look at each situation with a fresh eye, to curiously explore our anxious reactions as if they were a novel experience, and to consider new options that were previously hidden.

Problem 2: Struggles with Anxiety Motivate Us to Avoid Our Experience

Most of us have been in some sort of relationship—with a friend, coworker, or partner—that turned sour. Let's use the example of a deteriorating relationship with an employee, Chet, to consider the stages that you pass through as the relationship dissolves. Imagine that, based on your experience, Chet is not particularly helpful or supportive. You cannot see what value Chet brings to the company; he has no special skills or talents as far as you can tell. Soon you become easily annoyed and frustrated by Chet whenever you bump into him. He seems to push

all your buttons. You start to notice all the mistakes he makes, and even though you've warned him that he had better turn it around, every time you intervene, somehow things actually get worse. You can't help becoming very critical of what you view as his character flaws. As the relationship worsens, you start to avoid Chet. If you expect him to be in the break room at lunch, you eat at your desk. If you're talking with someone and he joins the conversation, you walk away. You take the long way around the office to use the bathroom because you don't want to pass Chet's desk. You strategize ways to keep him busy so that he is not available to attend your weekly staff meeting. After each unplanned encounter you spend hours fuming over his incompetence. Soon you realize your efforts to avoid Chet are actually getting in the way of your focusing on your own work because of the time and mental energy you're devoting to dealing with him. Finally, you reach your breaking point. You decide enough is enough, and you fire him. You hope you will never run into him again.

It can be challenging to end a relationship with someone, even if you no longer see his value, he pushes your buttons, and you're convinced he'll never be able to change. Unfortunately, it's impossible to end a relationship with your anxiety and other emotions, thoughts, and sensations. If you have a reactive, critical, and fused relationship with your anxiety, it makes sense that you would want to "break up." But because that's impossible, perhaps the best you can do is try to avoid your experiences at all costs.

One of the biggest struggles we have with anxiety—*anxious thoughts, related emotions, sensations of tension and arousal*—is that we want to avoid it. The more we struggle, the more motivated we are to use distraction, the power of positive thinking, a glass (or several) of wine, a carton of ice cream, or hours of mind-numbing reality television to try to avoid anxiety. As we discuss later in the book, unfortunately these efforts often backfire and create more distress and life interference.

Efforts to avoid our experience also contribute to the narrowed and restricted attention that is part of the struggle with anxiety. If we're always turning away from our emotions, it can be difficult to identify and understand them. If we're using all of our mental energy to push thoughts and images away, it can be difficult to focus on what is happening in the moment.

Solution 2: Mindfulness Helps Us Stop Rigidly and Automatically Avoiding Our Experience

Let's return for a moment to our souring relationship with the troublesome employee, Chet. Imagine that, before firing Chet, you decide to speak to Wilma in human resources about your problem. Wilma suggests that the three of you meet regularly for the next few weeks in an attempt to repair the relationship. Maybe you're skeptical; after all, you've been trying to fix this relationship for a long time to no avail. But, you decide, why not give this relationship one last chance?

One of the first things Wilma does is pass along Chet's employee file. As you read through the documents, you're surprised to learn the ways in which Chet is actually quite helpful to the company. Perhaps you still don't love having him around, but you acknowledge that he contributes something valuable and unique to the workplace. As you get to know Chet better, you start to understand his idiosyncrasies and accept them as a part of who he is.

At Wilma's urging you also try a new technique to deal with Chet when he makes a mistake. Rather than responding with harsh criticism, which you had hoped would be motivating (after all, isn't threatening to fire someone the best way to motivate him?), Wilma suggests that you first try to understand what happened and then encourage Chet to try something different next time. Maybe Chet was misinformed during his training, or perhaps he's just having a rough day. This new understanding of your employee allows you to feel compassionate toward him while also encouraging him to improve his performance. You take a leap of faith and try this new compassionate but firm approach. You are pleased and surprised to see his performance improve steadily.

Think of what just changed in your relationship with Chet as what could change in your relationship with anxiety—and any other emotion you're usually tempted to avoid—when you turn toward your experience and take a fresh look at a familiar response. You observed Chet with gentle curiosity and found out some surprising facts about him, just as you could about the anxiety you've come to abhor. You extended

Mindfulness helps us experience even uncomfortable emotions long enough to learn what they're really telling us to do.

compassion to him and his human foibles, just as you could to yourself and your natural, instinctive fear responses.

As a result, you've changed your relationship with Chet, and now you'll no longer feel compelled to avoid him at all costs. You don't have to become his best friend or wander around the halls searching for him. But if you're in the break room and Chet shows up, you can just slide over, make room for him, and keep going about your business.

Similarly, because mindfulness changes the relationship you have with anxiety and the rest of your internal experience, it also reduces your urge to avoid. If you begin to see the value of anxiety and other emotions, bring compassion and understanding to your experience, and come to recognize that you are not defined or controlled by your anxiety, you may no longer see your reactions as dangerous and threatening. You probably will never actively seek out painful thoughts or negative emotions, just for the heck of it. But if engaging in your life in a meaningful way means that pain might show up every once in a while, mindfulness helps you slide over to make room.

Problem 3: Struggles with Anxiety Pull Us Away from What Matters Most

Being engaged in a constant battle against your internal experiences and trying to avoid anxiety-related thoughts, feelings, and emotions is time intensive and exhausting. As a result, when we're in the thick of this struggle, activities such as connecting with friends and family, cultivating new relationships, pursuing career challenges, nurturing our talents and interests, exploring our spirituality, and participating in our community are placed on the back burner. "As soon as we win this battle," we promise ourselves, "we will get back to the business of living."

Rejecting all fear and anxiety may mean narrowing your life in ways you never intended.

At first glance, this plan seems reasonable. Why not invest all your time and effort into conquering your

anxiety problems once and for all and then freely pursue the things in life that matter most to you? This problem-solving strategy works for other kinds of problems. For example, it makes sense to hold off on watching television until you finish writing a report that is due the next

day. It would be reasonable to put off going out for a walk until you finish loading the dishwasher.

The problem with applying this approach to managing your anxiety is that experiencing fear and anxiety, vulnerable and irrational thoughts, and uncomfortable physical sensations is an inherent part of being human. No amount of self-determination, motivation, discipline, therapy, or medication will help us overcome our humanness. So essentially if we take this approach we get stuck putting our life on hold while pursuing an unattainable goal.

Even if by chance we've been lucky enough to hold on to a few of the things that matter most to us, our anxiety and worry may make it difficult to freely enjoy and appreciate them. Struggling with anxiety can make everything feel like a chore, like we're going through the motions but missing out on the rewards. Being locked in a struggle with anxiety can make all of us feel like spectators on our own lives.

Solution 3: Mindfulness Promotes Engagement and Participation

Mindfulness not only helps us become aware of the obvious and subtle ways in which our attempts to avoid anxiety have set restrictions on the way we live our lives; it also allows us to honestly evaluate the life directions that are most personally meaningful and valuable to our sense of vitality and fulfillment.

Learning how to take a mindful stance toward painful thoughts and feelings decreases their intensity and inhibitive power, freeing us up to pursue valued life directions.

Mindfulness increases our willingness to experience the full range of thoughts, emotions, and sensations that arise when we are fully engaged and participating in life.

When Keisha (from the beginning of this chapter) began to practice mindfulness, she became aware of how focusing on her anxiety was pulling her away from connections with people she cared about. Keisha always knew that she valued relationships; in fact, her drive to perform perfectly in social situations was driven by the desire to be loved and

Mindfulness can show you how much you've given up to avoid anxiety and what it is you most want back in your life.

accepted by others. Keisha assumed that exuding confidence was the best way to secure friends and that fixing her internal “flaws” was the only way she could become acceptable to others. Given her firm belief in the potential usefulness of this strategy, Keisha was reluctant to bring beginner’s mind (a mindfulness skill introduced in Chapter 5) to more closely examining her behavior, but she was soon startled by the reality that the more she focused on “fixing” herself the less she actually connected with others. Mindfulness helped Keisha become more aware of her own behavior and its unintended consequences. Also, mindfulness practice helped Keisha notice in the moment when her old self-ruminative habits kicked in. At these times, although her attention was drawn toward self-focus, Keisha learned to purposefully expand her awareness and began to notice subtle cues that others were trying to send her, like when Joslin was seeking her reassurance and Andres was expressing interest. Keisha also became more in tune with the full range of her responses in social situations. Although she felt fear and apprehension sitting with classmates before a presentation, she also noticed feelings of self-compassion, camaraderie, and pride. Keisha’s increased awareness helped her recognize how important these moments of connection were to her, so that she was able to choose to respond to her friends, rather than pulling into herself due to her anxiety. Her attention to these relationships helped to reduce her sense of unease and loneliness and led her to feel significantly more satisfied with her life.

Embarking on a New Path

Our goal is to introduce you to the concept of mindfulness and provide you with practices aimed at helping you change the relationship you have with anxiety and related emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations. You may have already noticed this relationship changing a bit as you learned about the nature of your responses and began to pay attention to them. But don’t worry if you haven’t. Mindfulness is a skill that becomes more automatic and natural with patience and faithful practice. In the next chapter we start teaching you a wide range of practices so that you can gradually develop this new type of awareness.

In the next chapter, we start by having you notice different physical

sensations like breathing, tensing your muscles, and relaxing. We also ask you to pay attention to your environment in a more careful and curious way—noticing what it is like to eat, being aware of sounds, realizing when you first become anxious. The discoveries that our clients (and others) make with these preliminary exercises make it easier to approach the more challenging mindfulness practices such as bringing curiosity and compassion to anxiety and other painful thoughts and emotions.

As you work on increasing your mindfulness, in the following chapters, we tell you what the most up-to-date psychological research says about how emotions function to enhance our lives and how attempts to control them only increase our struggle. Meanwhile, we encourage you to explore what matters most to you, to examine how anxiety and avoidance prevent you from living life to the fullest, and to develop a plan to work through obstacles to valued living.

Our experience has been that the more time and effort you can devote to this program, the more you will reap its benefits. Many people who struggle with anxiety have extremely busy lives. If trying to pile one more thing onto your already heavy load seems daunting, remember that struggling with anxiety is a habit that takes some time to develop. Developing new habits to take the place of the struggle will naturally take some time and practice. So we suggest you set aside some time to read, complete the exercises, and engage in mindfulness practice. Very quickly, you'll find that you've begun integrating these new techniques and skills into your daily life.

As suggested at the beginning of the book, we hope you take an open and curious stance and try the exercises even if they seem unfamiliar or outright awkward. Give each exercise a try, even if you don't think it will help. Then use your newly developed observation skills and your own fresh experience to determine which strategies or methods are most useful to you.

Regardless of how much you are currently struggling with anxiety or how long you have lived with your anxiety symptoms, keep in mind that you already possess all you need to live a valued, satisfying, and meaningful life. We hope you can use the strategies and methods described throughout the book, developed through our research and clinical work in the areas of anxiety and mindfulness, to change your relationship with anxiety and embark on a new path.

EXERCISE **Paying closer attention to fear and anxiety
in a new way**

In Chapter 1 we suggested that you begin observing your response when you notice yourself beginning to feel anxious or afraid. If you have been trying this, you have been practicing an early form of mindfulness! If not, you can begin doing so now. The idea is to carry a small notebook and record your anxious responses in the moment when you notice them, at least once or twice a day. In Chapter 1, we suggested recording the day, situation, and any anxious responses. A new challenge is to break down your anxious response into components. So, when you notice anxiety arising, take a moment and separately note your thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and behaviors. It can be really helpful to explore each domain to see whether you notice the subtle nuances in your responding. Remember, this method of observation involves *turning toward something that we would usually avoid* and *taking a fresh look at a familiar response*. In addition, when you notice critical thoughts about your responses arising, try to bring *kindness and compassion* to your responses. Remember what you've learned already about how natural it is to be anxious and how these are habitual responses that you've learned over time, not signs of weakness or flaws. We will work together to develop this self-compassion throughout the rest of the book, so don't be frustrated if you find it challenging to bring compassion right away. Just try it out for now and see what you notice.

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