

ANXIETY AS AN ALLY



How I Turned a Worried
Mind into My Best Friend

BY DAN RYCKERT

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Introduction

I'm as far removed from being a doctor as a human being can possibly be. I went to college for the most slacker-y of slacker majors (Film Studies), and it still took me five and a half years to actually get a degree. After graduating, I went on to early jobs at a local television station and a GPS company before eventually landing dream jobs where I play video games and talk about them for a living. None of my educational or vocational history points towards expert knowledge of the workings of the human mind, but a couple of pesky psychological conditions taught me that I better learn more about them if I didn't want to become a victim of them.

While I'm not a doctor, my 12-year battle with panic disorder and generalized anxiety disorder (along with a fun sprinkling of OCD and ADHD) has placed me in offices with many of them. I've been tested by MDs, spent countless hours speaking with psychologists, sat in chairs with needles in my head, tried various medications and herbal supplements, joined mental health message boards, discussed my problems with support groups, and tried many more things in the relentless pursuit of understanding and easing my anxious mind. Without a doubt, it has been the most difficult thing I've ever been through in my life.

Despite this, I sit here in 2015 happier and more successful than I've ever been. It's taken a dozen years, but all of those different approaches I've tried have left me with an assortment of techniques and reminders that keep me sane, healthy, and optimistic. I have a job that's been my dream since I was nine years old. I have a positive disposition that's virtually never compromised. For at least half a decade now, each year of my life has been significantly more enjoyable and fulfilling than its predecessor. In an odd way, I owe much of if not most of this to my struggle with anxiety.

It's a safe bet that many of you are familiar with my work online, whether it's from Giant Bomb, Game Informer, or Twitter. On the internet, I rarely speak up about serious subjects. Discussing things like my anxiety issues can be tricky, and it takes me out of my comfort zone. That's part of why I'm writing this book. Identifying something that scares you and tackling it headfirst regardless is one of the many approaches that I've found to help. Because of this, I've turned my initial hesitation to talk about this subject into a reason that I have to write it. Talking about these issues is an important step to recovery, and I hope that reading about my experiences and successes in the realm of anxiety disorders will be of help to others that haven't yet attained a firm grasp on them.

Most of this book is a chronological history of my experience with anxiety disorders. It starts with my first panic attack in 2003, and moves on to cover my college years of struggling to find ways to combat panic disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. Later, you'll learn about my slow realization of which methods worked for me and which didn't. My years of experimenting with a variety of remedies eventually paid off, as the strategies I taught myself prepared me for my jobs in the gaming industry. In the final chapters, I'll break down my most important tips for quick reference.

It took me twelve years to get to this point of having a relatively anxiety-free life. I hope that by discussing how I got here, I can provide some tips on how to accelerate your own process of eliminating anxiety. Your solutions may differ from mine, but this book will give examples of positive mindsets and methods that should apply to anyone even if my path isn't exactly the same as yours. In addition, I hope that this is a book that you can give to family and friends that struggle to understand what it's like to live with anxiety disorders.

Anxiety is a chronic condition. At no point in my life can I climb a hill and confidently yell "It's over!" It will be with me until the day I die, but I've learned how to harness it as a positive force instead of being burdened by the difficulties it comes with. It's my hope that as you read this book, you'll identify with many of these struggles and find benefit from the same approaches that have changed my life for the better.

The Beginning

My full-blown anxiety disorders didn't go into effect until a specific moment at the beginning of 2003, but evidence of me being a high-strung kid had long been present. I was socially awkward throughout all of my pre-college schooling, leading to plenty of name-calling and punches being thrown my way for years. I was a kid that was obsessed with video games and professional wrestling, couldn't talk to a girl to save my life, and never went to any school functions or parties. This wasn't unique to me, as it's a common story among many kids whether they were destined to develop anxiety disorders or not.

Despite never feeling fully comfortable in these early years, I had never experienced a panic attack, nor had I any knowledge of them. While my first panic attack was still months away, I entered a college preparatory program in the summer of 2002 with a great deal of nervousness. I had graduated high school in May of that year, and my mother convinced me to enroll in a one-month "Freshman Summer Institute" program that would prepare me for the full transition to come in the fall. It was a bite-sized version of a real college semester, requiring me to live in the dorms and attend a couple of summer classes.

This was my first time being forced out of my long-established comfort zone of playing video games at home on a near-nightly basis, and I can't say I handled it particularly well. I lived on campus in Lawrence, Kansas, which was only half an hour from my childhood home in Olathe. It may have been a stone's throw from the familiarity of home, but the forced social interaction made it feel like I might as well have been stationed in Siberia. Within a week, I was pacing in the lobby of the dorms, explaining to my parents on the phone that I had nothing in common with my peers. They drank and smoked pot, they listened to music I didn't like, and yet they all seemed happy to be there and had an instant kinship with each other. In retrospect, they probably harbored many of the anxieties I felt at that pivotal moment in our lives, but they did a much better job of hiding it. In my mind, I didn't belong there and I dreaded the years to come as I continued transitioning into the real world.

Early on, I found respite in the two classes that I was enrolled in. I never really enjoyed sitting in classrooms (and that feeling intensified as time went on), but it was a setting that I was at least familiar with. One was a basic introduction to the university and college life, and the other was Psychology 101. The latter was taught by a friendly, middle-aged professor named Buddy, and I hung around after most classes to chat with him. As a kid, I always felt more comfortable speaking with adults than with those my own age, and that had apparently carried over into (almost) adulthood. He always struck me as a genuinely happy person, so I enjoyed hearing his thoughts on life and how the mind works.

Because of Buddy's obvious intelligence and positive disposition, I gave something a chance that I normally wouldn't have. One day in class, he started talking to us about meditation. I knew nothing about it, and had always just assumed it was some pseudo-religious thing that hippies did while repeating weird chants. But because of how much I respected Buddy, I temporarily shut down the "this is a bunch of hippie crap" alarm that was blaring in my head, and I gave it a shot. He had the entire class close their eyes, and guided us through a simple meditation for ten minutes. He instructed us to focus on our breath as it moved in and out, and had us direct it to specific parts of our body in sequence (feet, calves, thighs, stomach, etc).

This is all very basic Meditation 101 stuff, but it was new to me at the time and was completely different than I expected. There was no chanting, no mantras, no praying to some god that I had never heard of — just breathing. He had a way of making it easy for even a class full of first-timers to fully focus on his instructions, and rarely did I find my mind wandering for those ten minutes. At the end, he instructed us to open our eyes and note how we felt. Even though I had yet to experience panic attacks or generalized anxiety, I noticed a distinct calm once the meditation was complete. I was floored by the feeling, and I remember Buddy saying "Note how you all feel after just ten minutes. If you do this for an hour a day, it will change your life. I promise you."

As impressed as I was by the effects of the ten minutes, I didn't continue to do it after that class. I felt like learning how to talk to girls was a more pressing issue in my life, but that still seemed too daunting so I stuck with the safety of video games in my free time. The ensuing months played out in predictable fashion. I remained unsure of how much I liked this new college life, but was slowly coming around to the idea of meeting like-minded new friends in this new environment. I started playing video games with my door open, and would even walk in to other rooms and introduce myself when I noticed other people doing the same.

Gaming became the common ground for me and many others on the floor, and my social anxiety was becoming less of an issue on a weekly basis. Before long, I was printing up flyers for a Soul Calibur tournament and putting them up all over campus. I went from hating the idea of socializing with my peers in the summer to gathering dozens of them in front of a TV and a Dreamcast in the dorm lobby by the end of 2002. Things were changing quickly, and I was actually starting to like college.

My first panic attack was on New Year's Day, 2003. It's very clear to me now that it was a panic attack, but as an 18 year-old kid with no previous knowledge of them, it was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life. I was fairly hung over after a fun New Year's Eve with some newfound friends (I'd learn the hangover/anxiety connection years later), and we went to see *Gangs of New York*. I had seen hundreds of movies in the theater, even spending four years working at an AMC prior to college and seeing just about everything that came out during that period. I'd usually sit dead center in the row to get the best view of the screen, as I did on this night. It was a holiday and the movie had only been out less than two weeks, so it was a packed house.

Near the end of the 160-minute running time of the film, I started feeling woozy and noticed a tingling sensation in my extremities. It was near the end of the movie, and I was getting pretty into it so I initially chalked it up to excitement. As Leonardo DiCaprio and Daniel Day-Lewis fought during the climax, I could tell that something much worse was happening. The most frustrating part was, I couldn't place where this sudden feeling of complete dread was coming from.

I started sweating and placed my head in my hands, and my feet began to tap involuntarily. My breathing and heart rate became rapid, and my body and mind just couldn't take it any more. Despite being really into the movie for the previous two and a half hours, everything inside of me was suddenly screaming that I had to get out of the room. I was even too rattled to feel like a jerk as I scooted past everyone in my row, obstructing their view during a pivotal scene.

I rushed into the bathroom with no real intention other than getting away from people. Hurrying into an open stall, I shut the door behind me and immediately started dry heaving into the toilet. My stomach felt fine, but my mind decided that dry heaving was the way to deal with this situation for some reason. Producing nothing, I wound up sitting on the toilet fully clothed and resting my head in my hands again as I tried to steady my erratic breathing. I was sweating profusely at this

point, and more scared than I had ever been in my entire life. This wasn't "feeling sick," this was feeling like I was about to die at any moment from some unknown cause.

When I felt composed enough to face people again, I went to the sink and splashed some water on my face, then exited the bathroom. My friends were waiting outside, and were understandably wondering what the hell was wrong with me. I had left during the climax of a movie, and I was covered in sweat and clearly rattled the next time they saw me. I remember muttering something about feeling sick or hung over, and said I just needed to go home and rest a bit.

While it was a terrible and confusing night, I told myself that it was nothing more than a freak occurrence. My body felt fine when I woke up the next morning, and my mind wasn't giving off any red flags that anything was wrong. I continued as normal for the next week of the long holiday break (our school didn't start up again until three weeks into January), and nothing flared up.

A week after seeing *Gangs of New York*, I ventured back into the theater to see an even longer movie, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. It was the same seating situation at the same theater with the same group of friends, but I didn't go in with any real worries of a repeat of the incident that occurred just a week prior.

In almost the exact same situation, the feelings of dread popped up near the end. The same shallow breathing, the same rapid heart rate, the same sweaty face and palms. Again, I rushed out of the theater and took refuge in the same bathroom stall. This is where I really started to worry, as it surely wasn't a coincidence. Why did this feeling seem to overtake my body twice, in the exact same situation? Was I doomed to miss the climax of every movie for the rest of my life so that I could sit on the toilet for mysterious reasons? I was far from an expert on medical issues, but I had never even heard of anything like what I was experiencing.

I reacted in the worst possible way – by going home and spending the entire night searching the internet for answers about what could possibly be wrong with me. At one point, I thought I had Lyme disease. At others, I was convinced that I had any number of rare neurological disorders. When nothing seemed to be an obvious answer, I settled on a particularly ominous one – *I must be going crazy*.

Lying in bed that night, it was impossible to quiet my mind. I've had trouble sleeping throughout my entire life, but this was on a level that I had never experienced. The sun came up without me getting a single minute of sleep, and I was frequently hopping out of bed to do more fruitless internet searches throughout the night and morning.

Making the situation worse the next day was the fact that I was afraid to tell my mother about it. Growing up, she had always been easy to approach and very helpful whenever I had questions, concerns, or just needed someone to talk to. That said, this seemed like a very different beast. I knew I could turn to her for motherly advice on how to ask a girl out or how I should prepare for college, but "Mom, I think I might be going crazy" seemed like a much taller order for a conversation.

Within a couple of days, a combination of factors likely led to me becoming very sick. I'd have to imagine that the lack of sleep and the extreme amounts of mental stress had done a physical number on my body. Not only was I not sleeping, I was so stressed that I wasn't even getting hungry. For days, I'd barely eat as I alternated between laying in bed with a racing mind and scouring the internet for any information I could find. Late at night, I frequently found myself dry-heaving in the bathroom due to panic, but there was rarely any food in my stomach.

One of these nights, my mother heard me loudly dry-heaving and came to check on me. "Party a bit too hard tonight?" she asked from the bathroom doorway.

"No, I just think I'm really sick," I responded.

"Surre," she said. "You know, you're 18. As long as you're being safe about everything, you don't have to hide it from me if you've been drinking."

I initially wanted to explain to her that I hadn't had a drop, but decided that her thinking I was drunk was a better alternative to thinking her son was insane.

After days of worsening symptoms (mental and physical), I decided that I had to go to the doctor. I'd avoid talking about the mental aspects that scared me the most, and see if the doctor could find something physically wrong with me that would explain what was happening.

When my appointment started, I began with my best explanation of the physical symptoms. I told him that I had been feeling feverish and fatigued, with odd tingling sensations in my extremities and an occasional sensation that made me feel like I needed to vomit. As I explained this, the very symptoms I described came down on me like an avalanche. My breathing and heart rate spiked faster than ever, and the doctor could tell something was wrong. He told me to lie down on the table immediately, and ran out of the room to grab a nurse and an EKG machine.

When the nurse arrived, she attached electrodes to my chest as the doctor monitored my heart activity. My heart rate was far above the standard resting rate for a healthy 18 year-old, and he ordered some blood tests to be done. It would take a few days for those results to come back, so he offered me a little outside of a prescription for some flu medication.

The phrases "panic attack" or "anxiety disorder" never came up during this visit or visits to several other doctors in the weeks to follow. Likewise, I never really saw those conditions discussed when I searched for my symptoms online (the diagnosis for just about every symptom on medical message boards tended to be around the severity level of "super cancer"). It seems like there are tons of resources for sufferers of anxiety now, so I'm not sure if I wasn't looking in the right places or if psychological disorders were less of a part of the national conversation in 2003. Looking back, it wouldn't surprise me if this were the case in the 50s or 60s, but I'm still surprised that I wasn't able to find much of any information about anxiety as recently as the 2000s.

With another scary experience under my belt and no real answers to speak of, I continued my new routine of laying in bed all day while hoping to feel better. My winter break was about to end, which I dreaded considering that my symptoms had only worsened since New Year's Day. Feeling like hell, I left the comfort of my childhood home and headed back to the hectic world of the dorms with some flu medication and a whole new suite of situations that I could fear attacks in.

My blood test results came in, and to my surprise they said that everything was completely normal. Nothing in the results hinted at anything out of the ordinary, which would have been a relief in any other situation but only added to the mystery here. I wanted to hear that some particular part of my body was wildly malfunctioning, and that I'd be as good as new after getting on a specific medication or having some procedure done. Instead, I was back to lying in bed with a 102-degree fever while my mind tried to wrap itself around what the hell was wrong with me.

This cycle continued into February with no signs of improvement. At this point, I had felt deathly ill and mentally exhausted for over three weeks. If I wasn't fighting to keep my breathing and heart rate under control, I was dizzy from a high fever. In the times that I was actually able to fall asleep, I'd wake up in the middle of the night, disoriented, sweating, and unable to fall back asleep. Laying in bed hadn't helped anything, so I told myself that getting up and being active would help shake me out of this funk. I asked my friends if they wanted to go see *Adaptation*, and part of me wondered if these attacks were somehow spurred on by seeing movies in theaters. This all sounds insane now, but I was grasping at straws for any kind of explanation. The initial attack happened at a movie, and the follow-up was during another movie, so that's about as much of a connection as I had

seen up to that point. If it happened a third time, then I could be fairly confident that something about the theater environment was triggering these attacks.

Instead of being polite enough to wait until the end of the movie, my symptoms decided they'd show up early and stick around for the duration. I tried to stick it out for over an hour, but eventually fell into the same fate of the previous two theater visits. There I was in the bathroom, head in hands and wondering what the hell a movie theater could be doing to my body. I still had no idea how to lessen these symptoms, and all I had was some DayQuil in my pocket. I broke the capsules out of their pouch and distinctly remember my hand shaking like the world's lamest junkie as I tried to bring the cold medicine to my mouth near the bathroom's water fountain.

That weekend, I drove back to my mom's house and stayed there, away from the hectic campus and dorm life. I saw two different doctors, neither of which offered any answers. On one late night, I went to the emergency room, convinced that my heart was near some kind of fatal condition. After a series of tests and talks with the doctor, my mother and I were informed that there was absolutely nothing physically wrong with me.

My mother knew that I had been complaining about being sick, but thought something was odd about my behavior. On the way home from the emergency room, I remember her earnestly asking me if I was on drugs. All I could do was say no, as I still wasn't anywhere near comfortable with discussing the truth of the matter with her or anyone else.

Diagnosis

When I went back to school the next week, I decided that I'd give the campus medical facilities a shot. I expected the same song and dance about how it was probably just the flu, but the doctor's immediate response shocked me.

"It sounds like you're describing a panic attack," he said.

I had probably heard that phrase in some context at some point in my life, but I had no sense of what it meant and certainly hadn't thought of it in conjunction with my current situation. He explained it to me, and asked me what I was doing whenever I felt them coming on suddenly.

"I was in movie theaters during the three biggest ones," I said. "So that doesn't make sense. I love movies, and I've seen tons of them in the theaters without any problems at all until recently."

He asked me if I was undergoing any major life changes that had brought about added day-to-day stress, and I told him that yes, I had been stressed for months thanks to the transition to college life. The doctor explained to me that the initial panic attack was probably a watershed moment for all of that pent-up anxiety, and that the subsequent theater attacks happened because I was unconsciously reminded of the circumstances surrounding my first attack. It wasn't movies that I was suddenly deathly afraid of, it was panic attacks.

This was the very definition of panic disorder, he explained – the fear of more panic attacks. They're so traumatic that the sufferer is terrified of experiencing more of them, and begins to avoid situations that may produce them.

I was floored. It was a totally new concept to me, but it was the first thing anyone had said that sounded like it made any sense at all. Why else would I feel like I was on the verge of death, despite nothing being physically wrong with me? I explained to the doctor that the physical sensations I had felt were very real...I wasn't imagining the heavy breathing, the rapid heartbeats, the sweating, etc. He immediately explained that the sensations were indeed real, but it was nothing more than my body activating "fight or flight" at inappropriate times.

The way he said all of this in such a matter-of-fact way made me feel so much better. It meant that I wasn't some anomaly – this had to be somewhat common. I could find others that had experienced what I was going through, and I wouldn't have to feel as alone in this condition as I had for the past several weeks. MDs were usually quicker to prescribe medicine than recommend therapy in my experience, and he put me on a low dosage of Paxil and told me to come back in a month.

I left that office feeling better than I had at any point since New Year's Eve. A diagnosis meant that this was something that I could fix, right? Unfortunately, that moment of joy was short-lived. A diagnosis is a big step in the right direction, but it's far from a remedy for a chronic condition.

The doctor had told me that it would take a few weeks for the Paxil to take full effect, but my brain has always defaulted to optimism. After all, I knew what was going on now and I had medication that would specifically target the problem. Surely it'd only take a few days before I was back on my feet and laughing, playing video games with my new friends, and getting nervous about the right things (talking to girls) again.

To my surprise, it would take much more than optimism and a diagnosis to turn things around. My flu symptoms persisted for months, with frequent fevers occurring into the spring (actually, my ears would get hot and turn red every night for several years). I wasn't bedridden like I

had been in those initial weeks, but I was quickly fatigued and never had the energy to do anything outside of occasionally going to class and playing some video games before bed. Even though the first semester of college had taught me that I love socializing and going to parties, I didn't go to any or have any alcohol for several months in this new semester.

To my disappointment, the Paxil prescription was not a magic pill that made all of these problems instantly disappear. Rather, it reminded me of the zombie-like feeling that I had experienced in elementary school after being prescribed Ritalin for ADHD. My fevers were still frequent, and now I had the added stress of worrying about what this medication was doing to me.

At this point in my life, I was writing, directing, and editing short films. Doing this was tremendously exciting for me, and I loved showing them to friends, taking my projects around to film festivals, and submitting them for awards. I worried that the Paxil would drain me of whatever creative energy I had, and I was becoming increasingly concerned about the fact that it wasn't actually helping to alleviate any of my symptoms. The last straw came when I made the (always poor) decision to read the reactions that other people had to the medication. I read numerous horror stories on message boards in which Paxil users described how the drug had "ruined their life" or intensified their symptoms, and I stopped taking it immediately. In hindsight, this was likely a poor decision. It can take many weeks for a new medication to fully take effect, and I hadn't even given it a real chance before I dropped it. Paxil's initial negative effects turned me off immediately, however, and I might have given up too quickly as a result.

The euphoria I felt when leaving the doctor's office upon my diagnosis had mostly faded. Sure, I had more answers than before, but that knowledge wasn't exactly making the symptoms any easier to deal with. And now, the magic pill that was supposed to laser in on my condition had turned out to be a dud. I want to note that it may have been ineffective for me, but this might not be the case for others with anxiety. I'll talk about this later, but different people have wildly different reactions to medication. For someone else, Paxil may have tremendously positive effects. It wasn't the answer for me, however.

When I decided to stop taking Paxil, I may have turned too harshly in the wrong direction. I still don't think medication is the magic key to solving anxiety issues (spoiler: that magic key doesn't exist), but I went so far in the opposite way that I swore off *any* medication for many years. I wouldn't take any cold medication when I was sick. I wouldn't get flu shots. In the most extreme case I can think of, I refused to take any pain medication when I had a molar taken out or when I had all four wisdom teeth removed. Like an idiot, I sat around for the entire wisdom teeth recovery process without taking the highly effective pain medication that I had been prescribed. I was so worried about feeling zombified or "high" that I put myself through a lot of unnecessary pain, and I've become less stubborn about that in recent years.

I wasn't quite back at square one, but I was back in the scary position of feeling terrible on a daily basis and still not knowing what to do about it. The doctor told me to come back in a month, but I assumed he'd just prescribe me a different medication, so I never followed up with him. Part of me hoped that the Paxil itself was what was causing my feelings of anxiety during the time I was on it. When I went off of it, I was discouraged by another night of panic attacks letting me know that this would be a longer battle than I had hoped.

Doctors didn't seem to know a solid solution to my issues, and I felt uncomfortable talking to my mother about it since she probably still thought that I was on drugs. Despite having a great relationship with my father, I knew this wasn't the kind of thing he'd be sympathetic towards. I didn't have anyone that I felt comfortable talking to about my anxiety, so I wrote in a journal for a brief

period of time. I found this journal in storage recently, and an entry from the end of February 2003 illustrates my mindset at the time:

Been doing a lot of thinking about my medical situation lately. I had another bad experience, which lets me know that this might not be going away as quickly as I might have hoped.

It's clear now that I have a serious problem concerning my throat, and an even more serious problem regarding the mental state I've lapsed into about once or twice a day (the "drugged" feeling).

I wish I could convey better to Mom (and the rest of the family) just what the "bad spells" are like. I don't think she has any idea how horrible they really are. She thinks (rightfully so) that it's all in my head. I wish she could know the sheer dread that these attacks cause. Choking, trouble breathing, stomachaches, fever, chills, and an overwhelming sense that I might be losing my mind. The five or six of these attacks in the last week-and-a-half have easily been the most terrifying experiences of my life. Mom is tired of hearing about it, and I can't say I blame her. It's all I've talked about for over fifty days now.

It's been difficult, but I'm confident that I will come out of this situation a better and stronger person. This situation can be seen as opportunity just as much as it can be seen as an affliction.

At the time of that entry, it seemed that I was still partially hoping for a biological explanation for the attacks. I made mention of serious problems with my throat, which in hindsight is just referring to one of the many symptoms I experience whenever my anxiety spikes. Having trouble swallowing food and feeling like there's a lump in my throat have been two of the longest-running sensations that my anxiety disorders have caused.

That journal entry also touches on something extremely important for anxiety sufferers and those that may be close to them. Panic attacks and generalized anxiety are *very* difficult to explain to the portion of the population that has never struggled with these conditions. It's easy for many people to equate panic attacks to sometime in the past in which they got nervous while giving a speech or performing in a play, but anxiety disorders are much different. Situational examples like a speech or play can make anyone nervous, not just those with chronic anxiety. One of the hardest things to deal with when dealing with anxiety disorders is when these attacks happen when there's no real reason for them. My first attacks weren't while I was giving speeches or getting ready to jump out of a plane. They happened while I was seeing movies, which has always been one of my favorite activities. I've had them while I've been playing video games by myself, spending a nice afternoon in with a girlfriend, or going on a jog. Panic attacks are often triggered by seemingly nothing, which is one of the most frustrating and confusing aspects of these disorders.

If you're a relative or a friend of someone that tells you that they're struggling with feelings like these, you need to believe them. There's nothing to be gained by making these symptoms up, so that son/daughter/brother/sister/friend is likely struggling with something very real and just needs someone to talk to. I don't fault my parents for the way they reacted to my first complaints about these symptoms. They didn't have any knowledge of what anxiety disorders were, and they gradually became more understanding and accepting of the condition as the years went on and they learned more about it. I hope that more and more people have at least some knowledge of anxiety disorders as the years go on and mental illness is more widely discussed. For those of us that struggle with them on a

daily basis, few things are as helpful as having close friends or relatives that are willing to lend an ear and try to understand what you're going through, regardless of whether they've experienced similar feelings themselves.

When I look at old journal entries from this period, I'm glad to see that I remained optimistic even in this confusing and terrifying period of my life. In the middle of some of these attack-filled nights, I distinctly remember having the thought of "If I make it to the end of 2003 without being in a padded cell, it'll be a miracle." It's easy to fear that an attack will never end while you're in the middle of one. The brain starts coming up with every worst case scenario that it can, but then there inevitably comes a point where it just...ends. It seems like the brain reaches some kind of threshold for anxiety that it can't support for long periods of time, and every panic attack reaches an end. Years later, I'd adopt "It always ends" as a kind of mantra whenever I caught myself in the middle of an attack. They're so terrible at the time and they seem like they'll never end, but there always comes a peak, and it always ends. Reminding myself of that is one of the most important tactics I've taught myself to think of whenever I'm in the middle of an attack, but it took many more years of struggling before I learned that particular lesson.

The Importance of Opening Up

In those first six months of dealing with panic disorder, I was constantly waiting for the magic solution that would “fix” me for good. I wanted a biological explanation that could be fixed with a simple procedure. I wanted to find a pill that would permanently level out whatever chemicals in my brain were misbalanced. Maybe I just had a really bad flu that came with some odd psychological side effects.

Six months in, I was starting to realize that this was not going to be an easy fix. Most of my flu symptoms disappeared after the first few months, but I still had the odd sensation of my ears getting red and hot every night like clockwork. Medication was something that I wanted no part of after the Paxil experiment, and I wouldn't consider it again for many years. It was time for me to find new ways of dealing with this problem, but I didn't quite know where to start.

Despite being fairly directionless at this point, I still took solace in the fact that I had a diagnosis. My enemy had a name now, and I knew how to find others that were going through the same thing I was. It would be years before I started talking openly about these problems with family and friends, so I found comfort in the anonymous nature of the internet. I no longer had to type a bunch of symptoms into WebMD and be terrified at the myriad results filled with awful-sounding diseases. All I had to do was type “panic disorder message board” into Google and was instantly directed to several active communities of users with anxiety.

Nights were always the worst, as I'd lay in bed with a racing mind that would inevitably start fixating on my condition. These were the times that I'd force myself to get up and look at threads on the message boards, reminding myself that I wasn't alone. I'd scroll through thread after thread, nodding as I recognized so many stories that mirrored my own. I'd feel more comfortable, and eventually my mind would settle down or exhaust itself and I'd be able to sleep (even if it happened to be 6am before this happened).

After many months of using message boards as my primary form of communication regarding anxiety, I decided to take the next step. Knowing that psychologists were simply for therapy and couldn't prescribe medication, I felt more comfortable going to one since I knew they wouldn't just scribble a prescription down and send me on my way. I saw several campus psychologists at the University of Kansas, and while I don't remember them saying anything particularly profound, it helped to talk face-to-face and at length to someone with knowledge of these matters.

One of them pointed me towards an anxiety support group that was held weekly on campus. Speaking in front of crowds was something that always triggered anxiety for me, but I assumed that this particular scenario would be easier considering that I'd be among others that would understand. I only went to a handful of these meetings, but they were certainly eye-opening. As I waited my turn to speak, I listened to story after story that let me know that I might not be as far gone as I thought I was. Living in my own little anxiety bubble, it was easy to think that I was the only one that had it this bad and that no one would ever understand how awful it got. Listening to the others that spoke before me realized that not only did they have it as bad as me, but many had it noticeably worse. I distinctly remember one girl that couldn't even look up as she spoke. She stared down at her fidgeting hands and softly told her story, stumbling over her words repeatedly. I was struggling for sure, but as I watched her I realized how much worse things could be. She described not being able to leave the house, and

that she had spent the entire previous night tossing and turning in bed out of fear of talking in front of this support group. I certainly felt my heart rate rise and I started to get nervous as my turn approached, but it was nowhere near the struggle this girl was going through.

The point of that last paragraph wasn't me thinking "Whew, at least I'm not like her!". I felt awful for her, as I couldn't even imagine how rough she had it on a day-to-day basis. I didn't feel relief that I wasn't as far down the anxiety rabbit hole as her, I simply gained perspective. All it took was that one girl to struggle through her story to make me realize that I didn't live in some awful little bubble that no one could understand. She understood more than I did, and yet here she was telling her story no matter how difficult it was for her. Fighting through intense anxiety in an effort to improve your condition is another key skill to learn, but it's another one that I wouldn't fully understand and utilize for years.

Telling my (relatively tame by comparison) story stirred up some jitters and fidgeting, but I got through it. It was once I was outside of the company of fellow anxiety sufferers that I really struggled with drawing any attention to myself. This feeling existed before my first panic attacks, even. During high school, I dreaded the idea of walking into class late. Even if it was just a minute or two after the bell rang, I couldn't bring myself to enter the classroom out of fear of everyone turning and looking at me. If I was driving to school and running late in the morning, I'd park in a nearby neighborhood and sit in my car for the entire duration of the first class. Once the bell rang again at 8:50am to signify the end of 1st hour, I'd walk into the school and go to my 2nd hour class on time. It was for the same reason that I always preferred to be behind the camera while I was making my short films. I loved writing, editing, and directing, but I never wanted to draw any actual attention to myself back then (this probably sounds absurd to anyone who follows me in my current line of work).

Once I had experienced full-blown panic attacks, this feeling only intensified. I'd sit in large college lecture halls as they did roll call, and feel my breathing speed up as they got closer to the Roll Call names. I'd try to slow my breathing, thinking "In just a minute or two, I'll say 'here' and this will all be over." I wasn't required to say anything beyond that one word, and no one would have even turned their head to look at me when I did. I knew this, but it still spiked my anxiety every single time. On some occasions, I remember my hands and feet going numb and my vision becoming black around the edges as the calling of my name approached.

These new fears started carrying over into my work life, as well. At the time, I raised money for the University of Kansas by working in a call center that secured donations from alumni. Each semester, the entire room of 24 callers would take turns standing up and introducing themselves to all the new hires that came on board. This would typically go on for about two weeks at the beginning of each semester, and each day would involve us telling a different "fun fact" about ourselves. All I would have had to do is stand up for about 10 seconds, say my name, year in school, hometown, and my favorite movie/song/candy/whatever. Like with the roll call situation, I'd feel the symptoms intensify every time it got closer to my turn. If the person right before me was taking longer than usual to tell their story or fact about themselves, the panic would increase exponentially until I wondered if I might pass out.

I knew I couldn't maintain these daily spikes in anxiety on a regular basis, so I went to a campus psychologist again. He suggested that I be open about my condition and explain my difficulties to my boss, and that most employers would respect that and do whatever they can to help. For my classes, he pointed me towards my school's Students with Disabilities department (which I had no previous knowledge of). The idea of opening up about my anxiety to school officials and my boss intimidated me, but it was less scary than the idea of continuing to dread these daily occurrences.

I went to my boss at the call center that night and asked if she had a moment. We had never talked about anything serious before and didn't really know each other well personally, so I instantly felt awkward as I started explaining the situation to her. I made a point of being completely open about it and explaining my situation, but I wanted to make sure that she wouldn't stop doing something the rest of the staff enjoyed (the introductions) on account of me. Her response was reassuring, letting me know that she had family members with similar problems and that she wanted to do whatever she could to help. She let me know that I could come into work 30 minutes late each day, which would get me there just in time to skip the intros and get started on actual work. Once the two-week introduction period was over, we'd get right back to a normal schedule. I was really surprised at how natural and helpful that conversation was, and it's something that has stuck with me for years.

From that moment on, I made a point to explain my anxiety situation to any new bosses at every job I had. That way, they'd know what was going on if I had to step outside for a moment to get a breather or something along those lines. Just knowing that my bosses were aware of my condition did wonders towards putting me at ease on a day to day basis. In all of these years of explaining my anxiety to employers, not one has responded in a negative way. Whether they knew anything about anxiety disorders or not, each and every one of them listened to what I had to say and responded in a way that made me feel better. This was one of my earliest experiences that taught me that being open about mental disorders is an incredibly important and helpful way to feel more comfortable in personal and professional situations.

Next up was the Students with Disabilities department. I didn't feel as uncomfortable with this meeting, as they were surely experienced in situations like mine. As I suspected, they had a plan ready to go for me. I was handed a sheet of paper with a list of requests, allowing me to check boxes for additional time on exams, a private testing room, optional attendance, personal study appointments with teachers, and plenty more. I didn't want to take too much advantage of the situation by just checking everything, so I made sure that attendance was my key focus so that I wouldn't have to participate in roll call. That way, I could walk into class a few minutes later, avoiding the anxiety and still taking in the material of the day.

Later, I did find it easy to go against my initial vow to not take advantage of the situation. While everything I said to the office was factual, it was tempting to skip class on a regular basis since I knew that it would never count against my grade. I skipped classes entirely, sometimes for months at a time as I opted to spend my time reviewing video games for a local newspaper. This is one of the only things that I've done in my quest to conquer anxiety that I'm not particularly proud of. I took advantage of a piece of paper that said I didn't have to go to class, even in classes that didn't do roll calls or require me to speak in front of people. Things worked out for me in the end, but I wouldn't recommend stepping outside of the bounds of what's necessary for anyone else that asks for help from a similar department at their school.

Two of my biggest stressors were now non-factors, which allowed me to breathe more easily. There was one other major worry for me, and that was the required presentations in the classes I was enrolled in. In the past, I had dropped these courses entirely when I saw a presentation on the syllabus. Other classes were required for me to graduate, however, and I'd have to figure out another way to get through these. Considering that my discussions with my call center boss and Students with Disabilities had gone so smoothly, I decided to be open about things and contact my teachers directly. I still have the email account that I used back then, so I found the following email exchange with one of my film teachers:

From me to the teacher:

Hi [Teacher],

Just got back from class, and I'm slightly concerned about it. The reason I say this is because I've developed a pretty intense panic disorder over the last year/year and a half. I'm currently seeing a medical doctor and a psychologist about it, and I'm trying to get it figured out.

It doesn't make much sense to me, as I'm not a shy person by any means. However, for some reason, I've had countless full-scale panic attacks in very minor situations. To give you an idea of how bad it is, I'm always on the verge of a panic attack even when I have to say "here" during class roll calls. I almost had three just in the class with you today - once when you called on me because you thought my hand was raised, once when I had to read the dichotomy card (I almost couldn't even say the words), and another time when you looked at me to ask about the "gregarious" thing. I've had to drop several classes for this very reason (as soon as I see a presentation on the syllabus, I drop).

Lately, it seems like I can only function in classes where I'm just in the back of the class, virtually invisible. I can't even handle roll calls, let alone standing in front of a camera or standing up to do a spot check of my journal.

I'm not sure what exactly to do, because I need to graduate soon, and you recommended this class to me as something I should take to make that happen sooner. Would it be possible to do something on my own accord to get the credit for the class? I'd be fine with putting together projects on my own, I just can't do anything that would require me to be in front of a camera or in front of the class in any way.

Obviously, I can provide a doctor's note to validate this if you'd like. I have an appointment coming up soon, so it shouldn't be a problem by any means.

Any help would be greatly appreciated.

*Sincerely,
Dan Ryckert*

His response:

Wow. I am sorry to hear about that, My son and wife have panic attacks and agoraphobia/claustrophobia that they deal with medically, so I am familiar with your predicament. Are you on any medications? There are several good ones out there.

I don't think there will be a problem with having you participate in the class without having to do presentations. I'm not sure if you want to let anyone else know about your condition, and will respect your decision either way.

Perhaps you can present your ideas to the class via email, or in a chat format. You could also screen

projects w/o being present, and just get written responses. (This doesn't affect your production ability, does it?)

Anyway, let's see what we can do to work around this.

-[Teacher]

Sure enough, he responded with just as much understanding as everyone else that I had actually opened up to about it. Feeling better and better, I sent another teacher a similar email and quickly received the following response:

Hi Dan,

I sympathize with your situation. Thanks for being so forthright. I'll be in my office on Monday morning working on grades. Please see me or contact me and we'll work out something. Don't worry about your grade, okay? I promise you we'll work it out. I hope I didn't seem impatient in class the other night. It's just that so many students at the last minute come up with all sorts of problems...But know you are sincere. So don't worry, okay?

My cell phone is (X). And my office phone is (X). Call me Monday.

[Teacher]

At this point, I was starting to realize that opening up about my anxiety disorders wasn't the terrifying concept that I once thought it to be. Every single person in the academic or professional world that I opened up to about this responded in the most helpful ways possible, which immediately eliminated major, daily triggers for me. Part of me wonders if it's because firing a person or failing them out of a class because of a medical condition might have legal repercussions, but I prefer to believe that these were just sympathetic people that wanted to help someone that was struggling. Opening up to people in my personal life was still a scary idea, but getting work and school taken care of was tremendously reassuring and a massive step in the right direction for me.

Trial and Error

A couple of years into my experience with anxiety disorders, I had already overcome two of the toughest initial barriers. One was accepting that this would be a long fight with no magic solution. The other was discovering the importance of opening up about what I was going through. While these are huge steps that anyone struggling with anxiety eventually needs to go through, I had a long ways to go before I could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Both of those steps are important, but they aren't necessarily things that will alleviate the actual symptoms. Now that I was more comfortable with what panic disorder entailed, it was time to figure out how to make things better. I spent more time on mental health message boards and began reading any book I could find on the subject. As is the case with just about any medical condition, opinions varied wildly about the best remedies.

One common thread that kept coming up was the benefit of physical exercise. At no point in my life had I been particularly athletic, and I had never exercised on a regular basis outside of a high school weights class that I barely participated in. With that class being my only real experience with exercise, I started going to the campus gym without any idea of what the hell I was doing. I'd sit down at various weight machines, guess an amount to lift, and go through a few motions with horrible form until I didn't want to do it any more (which didn't take long, typically). I had no disciplined workout regimen, and as such I was destined to fail. Little weight was lost, little muscle was gained, and little progress was made in terms of my anxiety in the few months that I half-heartedly went to the gym.

That "magic pill" that I wanted early on in my disorder didn't exist, but I hadn't given up on the idea of something helping me out in some way. My experience with Paxil had soured me on prescription medication, so I went to an organic food store that offered an assortment of herbal remedies. Many users of mental health message boards recommended St. John's Wort, so I picked up a bottle and took it daily for a few months. There was no noticeable benefit that I was experiencing with this new supplement, so I dropped it once the bottle was empty.

Most of what I was trying during this period wasn't working, and much of it was due to my inability to commit. As I'll discuss later, exercise wound up being one of the most effective ways to combat anxiety, but my heart wasn't in it at this stage. I have no doubt that I would have gotten a head start on easing my anxiety if I had done some basic research on exercise and found a particular approach to it that worked for me, but I was grasping at straws during these years and was too quick to ditch certain approaches without doing the right research.

It was during this period (roughly 2005-2007) that I started experiencing some additional and certainly unwanted symptoms. I briefly dated a girl at this time, and I remember going to Applebee's with her once. As I ate, I started worrying about my throat not being able to swallow properly. Odd sensations in my esophagus had been a common experience ever since the early days of my anxiety problems, but it had never really given me problems while eating. On this occasion, I tried to swallow a bite of pasta but quickly coughed it up to my embarrassment. My mind had been worrying so much about swallowing that I actually started having trouble doing it, and I had to explain why it happened to the girl I was dating (becoming one of the first people outside of doctors, work, or school that I did this with).

From that day, I had trouble swallowing food for years. In college, I'd imagine I was one of

the few "adults" who bought chewable multivitamins because I worried about getting the full Centrum tabs down my throat. I still struggle with swallowing to this day, mostly when I'm at a restaurant and eating with a group of people. Anyone who's eaten out with me has surely noticed how I almost always leave about half of my meal uneaten, and I take the rest home in a box. It's never because I don't like the food or I'm not hungry, it's just that I struggle with swallowing in these situations. If I went out to eat with co-workers for lunch, I'd almost always bring at least half of my meal back and finish it at my desk so that they wouldn't have to sit and watch me slowly eat for another half hour. It's an annoying thing for me personally, but I'll take it over full-blown panic attacks at a restaurant any day of the week.

I picked up another habit during this time that still hasn't completely gone away. After years of having terrible vision, I had LASIK surgery so that I'd be free of glasses and contacts (at least temporarily...my vision would continue to degrade in later years). As anyone who's had the surgery can attest, your eyes feel very dry for weeks after the procedure. It's not dissimilar to the feeling of wearing contacts and having them dry out substantially. My way of combating this feeling was to close my eyes and roll them around briefly, which helped alleviate the dry feeling. For whatever reason (and I suspect this may be a bit of my OCD peeking through), I continued to do this involuntarily long after the side effects of the surgery had ceased. It's something I'm aware of and have tried to stop for almost ten years, but it's one of the more stubborn habits to come out of all of this. Watch any of my on-camera appearances I did back when I was at Game Informer, and you're sure to notice it at least a few times. It's very apparent during a panel I did for Giant Bomb in 2014, which is an event that I'll discuss in detail later.

These habits started around this time and have survived longer than I'd like, but they're both extremely minor compared to the sheer dread I was experiencing years before this. A more substantial struggle that reared its head around this time was the realization that panic disorder was not the only anxiety-related condition that I had.

Panic disorder is largely situational. Most of the time, it involves panic attacks that occur in predictable circumstances like public speaking, driving in heavy traffic, or being in the middle of packed crowds. These attacks also tend to be short-lived, rarely lasting longer than 20 minutes or so. What concerned me was that I started having longer feelings of unexplainable anxiety in situations that absolutely did not call for it. I'd be sitting on my couch watching TV or working on a video game review in my pajama pants (far from anxiety-provoking situations), and suddenly feel a wave of dread wash over me. It would get to the point where I couldn't do anything at all, even things as simple as paying attention to a TV show or movie. I was familiar with the uncomfortable feelings that anxiety brings about, but this was particularly confusing to me considering that I couldn't think of a single reason why it would be happening at these times.

Unlike my onset of panic disorder, I actually had some direction when it came to resources this time around. After asking around on mental health message boards about these symptoms, they suggested that I might also have generalized anxiety disorder. Never one to take internet comments as a gospel (a bad idea no matter what topic you're looking up, generally), I went to the campus psychologist again. As I expected, he gave me the official diagnosis.

Learning that I had generalized anxiety disorder wasn't a massive blow on the level of my onset of panic disorder, but it certainly didn't help. Before, my anxiety was largely predictable. I knew it wasn't going to be fun if I had to sit through a roll call situation, but at least I knew what was going to happen. With GAD, that looming specter of anxiety could appear at literally any time. I started experiencing prolonged anxiety during times that I was playing video games, spending time with my

family, driving to work, laying in bed, or any other typically benign situation. The symptoms weren't new, but their ability to pop up on a whim certainly was.

It was around this time that I decided to talk to my mother more about my issues. Considering that it had now been years of me occasionally bringing it up, she seemed to be beginning to understand that this wasn't just a temporary thing or me being on drugs. She told me that she had spoken to a neighbor about what I was describing, and he swore up and down that hypnotherapy helped him out. I realize that the placebo effect can have a very real impact, but I always preferred to do some research before I jumped into anything. I did some quick searches and came away skeptical of hypnotherapy's legitimacy, so I let her know that I appreciated the suggestion but wasn't interested in pursuing it. She asked around a bit at work and learned that her boss had a history with severe anxiety.

She let me know that he was willing to chat with me about what's worked for him, and I jumped at the chance. The only people I had talked to that knew anything about anxiety were psychologists and family members of those with the condition, but no one that had firsthand experience of their own (outside of hearing brief stories from that support group). I reached out to him via email, and he didn't take long to respond with his history of struggling with the condition. Having this line of communication open up made me feel great, and I looked forward to having a long conversation with someone that could relate to what I had been going through for the past few years.

My hopes got shot down with the next email. He wasted no time when it came to suggesting a spiritual solution, explaining that my anxiety came as a result of having a hole in my soul thanks to not having a "personal relationship with Christ." I'm completely fine with people taking whatever approach works for them, but I knew that suddenly becoming a religious convert wasn't the solution for me. We continued to talk for a while after I explained that I wasn't religious, but it became clear that every road kept leading straight to Jesus for him. It never got contentious, but I ended the conversation thread and decided to continue looking for other avenues.

I wanted to talk openly about my anxiety with those close to me, so I decided that it was time to try to talk to my dad about it for the first time. Unfortunately, his reaction was exactly what I expected. I've always had an amazing relationship with my father, but his personality isn't one that would take the time to learn about or understand something like anxiety disorders. Not long into me trying to explain the situation, he started saying things like "Just chill out, what's the problem?" and "What do you have to worry about? You're fine."

Reacting like this certainly isn't a sign of him being some uncaring, cold father, as it's an extremely common occurrence when family members are first told about anxiety concerns. For those that don't have any knowledge about conditions like these, it's confusing to hear people describe feeling intense dread when there are no pressing concerns. I was disappointed by the reaction, but not surprised. Thankfully, he'd very slowly come around in terms of being sympathetic about it, likely helped in no small part years later by his daughter experiencing identical symptoms at the exact same age mine started.

My dad was unhelpful, and the only other person with anxiety that I had met wanted me to spend my time praying that my symptoms would just disappear. I needed someone else to talk to, and I'd find it in someone I should have contacted right at the beginning.

A Summer of Improvement

I needed a new plan for fighting my symptoms. It was obvious that I didn't yet have the right

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