

a n i n s t a n t h e l p b o o k f o r t e e n s

mindfulness for teen anxiety

a workbook for overcoming
anxiety at home, at school
& everywhere else

*** stop getting
overwhelmed** by
social situations

*** stay calm** in
the face of panic

*** let go of your fears &
build a balanced life**



CHRISTOPHER WILLARD, PsyD

“If, like all teens, you sometimes feel anxious, or if, like many teens, you suffer from intense anxiety, reading a few pages in this book will help you feel calmer. Every chapter is like a reassuring talk with a good friend. This book gives you real, practical, simple skills for easing anxiety, being more relaxed and kinder to yourself, and ultimately living a happier life.”

—**Amy Saltzman, MD**, author of *A Still Quiet Place*

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BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Introduction

In my years of working with young adults from many different backgrounds and situations, I've found that it is the smartest and most creative ones who suffer the most from anxiety. I believe that anxiety is the result of a smart, creative mind run amok. Think about it—if you are suffering from anxiety, you can probably think of dozens of reasons why your class presentation will go wrong, why the prom will be a disaster, or why your parents will be disappointed in you. The minds of most other people don't generate nearly as many ideas, either positive or anxious.

The good news is that you don't have to be afraid of your own mind any longer. With some help and some hard work, and by using some of the practices in this book, you can get that amazing mind of yours back to working *for* you, not *against* you.

One of the best adages I've heard essentially says that our thoughts can be our greatest servants or our worst masters. This adage rings very true for me as someone who has seen and helped hundreds, not thousands of people overcome anxiety disorders. When our minds are working for us, they can skillfully produce the answer to a math problem, process visual information from dozens of sources while we are driving at sixty miles per hour, or instruct our bodies in the thousands of muscle movements required just to dribble a basketball. But when our brains are misfiring, they can send us the wrong messages—that it's time to panic, that something terrible is about to happen to us or someone we love—and that's when things start to get really scary in our minds.

It's not entirely clear why some of us have anxiety; researchers still don't completely agree. For a long time, debates raged about nature versus nurture; you've probably even discussed this in your science classes. What we understand today is that anxiety is probably the result of both. You may have genes that make you more vulnerable to anxiety, and you may have experienced situations or stressors that are activating your anxiety.

Whatever the source of your anxiety, this book offers ways to deal with it in the moment, along with practices to help keep it at bay, and discusses some lifestyle changes for reducing stress that may be making your anxiety worse. It includes written exercises and also asks questions, with lines for writing down your responses. Some of these might feel too personal to write in this book, so feel free to write your answers elsewhere, or not at all; if you don't write, at least give the questions some thought.

Many of the tools have been adapted from very ancient practices, and others come from modern psychotherapy techniques. For example, the Body Scan ([activity 17](#)) and Lake Meditation ([activity 21](#)) are based on mindfulness-based stress reduction, developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Thoughts on Paradox ([activity 20](#)) was adapted from Steven Hayes's acceptance and commitment therapy, and ideas about the wise mind ([activity 51](#)) are from Marsha Linehan's dialectical behavior therapy. Chris Germer inspired practices like The Compassionate Friend ([activity 27](#)), A Pebble for Your Pocket ([activity 40](#)), and, with Kristen Neff, Mind and Body ([activity 16](#)); the two write about mindful self-compassion. Noah Levine was the source of words to repeat when walking mindfully ([activity 30](#)), and Gregory Kramer (with others) developed the concept of insight dialogue ([activity 39](#)). My friend Ashley Sitkin helped me with the yoga practice ([activity 46](#)), and the acronym RAIN ([activity 50](#)) was developed by Michele McDonald.

If you feel like you need motivation, it can help to go through this book with a friend, relative, or therapist. And although you can skip around and just read the parts that feel most important to you

you will get the most out of the book by doing the whole thing start to finish, and regularly practicing what you've learned along the way.

Learning to manage day-to-day anxiety is not going to be an easy path, but it is a path that a lot of other teens and adults have followed successfully, and so can you.

ABOUT ANXIETY

Some people have a genetic predisposition to anxiety; because of the genes they inherited, they are more likely to develop anxiety disorders than other people. But all of us experience anxiety at some point in our lives, and with good reason. We need a protective alarm system to alert us to danger and help us stay safe.

Having anxiety is like having an oversensitive alarm system that goes off at all the wrong times, keeping us from getting anything done. It can be downright embarrassing in the wrong situation. Or worse, it can end up putting us in more danger because we are so focused on the false alarm that we miss the signals of real danger.

It can be helpful to know what causes your anxiety, but sometimes it feels more important just to know what to do about it. That is the main goal of this book: to give you practical tools you can use for the toughest anxiety-provoking situations. It may feel hard to be young and facing anxiety, but the positive side is that once you work through your anxiety, which you can, you will be able to help yourself and others for the rest of your life.

And there is a lot of good news. For one thing, you are not alone. One in six teens has an anxiety disorder, which means there's a good chance someone else in your group of friends, a few other kids in every classroom you walk into or sports team you play on, and maybe even a few hundred kids in your entire school all have anxiety. In addition, one in four people will develop an anxiety problem in the course of their lives. You could consider yourself lucky to be getting a head start on learning to cope when you are young. But the best news of all is that anxiety gets better. It is possible to learn to minimize your anxiety so it comes less often, and to deal with it when it does come, so that it no longer has so much power over you or what you want to do with your life.

why do you get anxious?

Like many illnesses, anxiety disorders tend to run in families. You might want to check with your parents and other relatives to see if they have struggled with anxiety and what they have done to overcome it.

Do you know anyone in your family who has or might have anxiety? Maybe a relative who seems high-strung or easily stressed out? If you can, talk to that person and write here what he or she has done to deal with anxiety.

Anxious people often start with this genetic predisposition. From there, certain events in their lives can make them a bit more anxious. If we've had bad experiences with public speaking in the past, it makes sense that we will start to feel anxious just thinking about it in the future. Even just watching someone else struggle with situations like that can teach us to be cautious, but it might also teach us to be anxious, depending on the circumstances. Some of us can get over these events quickly and move on, but for those of us who were born more sensitive, our alarm systems can reset themselves to go off more easily and get in our way even long after we are safe again. And of course, some experiences are far worse than bungling a class presentation and can affect us even more deeply.

What memories stand out for you or make you anxious just to think about?

Does anything you are anxious about stem from a bad experience someone you know has had? If so, write about what happened.

Think of people in your life you can speak with about some of these experiences. Consider friends, relatives, or other trustworthy adults. Write down their names here.

Think about how much of your anxiety you feel comfortable sharing with those people; it doesn't have to be your life story or your worst panic attack. Decide to share a bit with one person in the next week, and notice how you feel before, during, and after sharing.

There are a number of other factors that contribute to developing anxiety. For one thing, we live in a dangerous world. We get so many messages from the media, school, our parents, and our friends regarding what we should worry about, from terrorism to STDs, that it's no wonder we walk around

with our alarm systems set to high alert. We each need a reliable alarm system for a dangerous world, but that system should also differentiate between realistic worries and unrealistic ones. This book can help you not believe everything you think or every signal your body sends your way.

What are some messages you've received that tell you the world is a dangerous place?

What are some of your parents' and your friends' biggest worries?

Which, if any, of these worries have you "caught" from them?

So why do you get anxious? It is most likely a combination of your genes, events in your life, and the kind of world you've grown up in. The scientific term for this is the biopsychosocial model, a fancy phrase you can now casually drop into conversation in your next psychology class!

anxiety's aliases

Many people, when they first start experiencing anxiety, don't recognize the symptoms. That's because we don't always have experience with anxiety and are not well informed about it. It can be helpful to know what other feelings are often associated with anxiety.

Exercise: Identifying Anxiety by Other Names

Look over this list, and circle any words that you feel most apply to you. Use the blank lines to add other words or phrases about anxiety.

Afraid

Agitated

Alarmed

Apprehensive

Concerned

Edgy

Fearful

Freaking out

Fretful

Frightened

Frozen

Hesitant

Jittery

Nervous

Overwhelmed

Panicked

Petrified

Restless

Scared

Stressed

Terrified

Thoughts racing

Troubled

Tweaking out

Uneasy

Worried

recognizing anxiety in your body

We often experience anxiety first in our bodies, and then in our minds. Since physical signs can be an early warning signal that anxiety is coming, getting to know your body, and what it may be trying to tell you, is a helpful first step.

Exercise: Physical Signs

Take a look at this list, and see if any of these are symptoms or signals you get when you are anxious, or just before you get anxious. You can use the blank lines to add any others.

Aching jaw

Backache

Breathing faster and more constricted

Butterflies in stomach

Chest pains

Clenching or grinding teeth

Cramps

Difficulty sleeping

Dry mouth

Feeling numb or tingly

Feeling unusually hot or cold

Feeling weak

Flushed or hot cheeks

Getting colds or flus more often

Goosebumps

Headache

Heartburn or indigestion

Heat in chest

Light-headedness or dizziness

Muscle tension

Nausea

Neck ache

Pounding heart

Quavering voice

Shaky hands

Stomachache

Sweating

Tightness or soreness in throat

your anxiety triggers

There are a number of common situations that cause anxiety in even the mellowest of people. You will almost certainly face many of these situations at some point in your life, if you haven't faced them already.

Anxiety is often hardest to manage when it comes on unexpectedly, so knowing in advance which situations are likely to trigger your anxiety is half the work of managing it. The more you know yourself, the better off you will be in terms of knowing what skills will work in those situations.

Exercise: Common Anxiety Triggers

On a scale from 0 to 5 (with 5 being most anxious), rate how anxious each of these common triggers makes you feel, and then consider how much of a priority dealing with that situation is. For example, public speaking might make you really anxious, but if you don't have to do it often, it could be a low priority.

Over time, you can definitely lower your anxiety about any of these triggers, especially by using the practices in this book. You might not be able to get all of them to zero, but you can probably lower most of them.

- _____ Being alone
- _____ Being bored
- _____ Dating
- _____ Driving
- _____ Going to school
- _____ Grades
- _____ Health concerns
- _____ Insomnia
- _____ Interviews
- _____ Living in a chaotic house
- _____ Monday mornings
- _____ One-on-one interactions
- _____ Parties and social events
- _____ Performing in public

_____ Phobias*

_____ Public speaking

_____ Social situations

_____ Stress at home

_____ Studying

_____ Sunday evenings

_____ Talking to teachers

_____ Tests and exams

_____ Trying to sleep

_____ Writer's block

_____ Your family

* Phobias are fears that can cause anxiety. Some people are phobic about snakes, which is not much of a problem unless you live in a jungle or work at a zoo. But others are phobic about germs or social situations, which can be pretty hard to avoid without major disruption to your life. Some common phobias that can get in your way include traveling, being in small spaces, and visiting doctors' offices, among others.

tracking your anxiety

Looking at your patterns of anxiety over the course of an average day and week can help you respond proactively, rather than react with panic in the moment. You don't have to keep a journal about every second of every day, but it might be helpful to fill out this chart and look for patterns so you can anticipate challenges.

Exercise: Anxiety Record

Before completing this chart, make copies for later use. At the end of each day, write down situations that made you anxious at different times. Record the kinds of thoughts and physical sensations you were having for each situation, then rate your anxiety on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being most anxious.

Day _____				
	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Nighttime
Situation				
Thoughts				
Physical Sensations				
Anxiety Rating				

At the start of each week, look over your charts for the week before to help you anticipate upcoming situations that may cause anxiety.

avoidance and distraction traps

Anxiety is uncomfortable in our minds as well as in our bodies. The natural thing to do when we feel uncomfortable is to try to lessen the discomfort or make it end as quickly as possible. We might also avoid situations that make us uncomfortable in the first place.

These strategies can help in the short run but backfire in the long run. You can never live life to its fullest if you avoid *everything* that makes you uncomfortable. If you kept on avoiding, you would never ask out that boy or girl on a date; if you never participate in class, you might end up with a bad grade. Plus, when you avoid too often, you tend to start avoiding a lot of things, and friends and family may wonder what is going on, increasing your shame and creating a whole cycle of avoidance.

As if that weren't enough, avoidance can often make anxiety worse. As you start to avoid things that make you anxious, you get a bit of short-term relief, so you avoid more and more. At the same time, you miss out on the chance to learn that the thing you feared probably wouldn't have been that bad after all. Avoidance becomes a habit, and the thing you are avoiding only gets bigger in your mind.

Exercise: Coping Activities

There are both healthy and unhealthy ways of coping with anxiety, and you've probably already discovered a few yourself. Do you recognize any of the following in yourself or people around you who are also anxious? Circle the ones you find yourself doing, and think about whether you could trade some of the less healthy ones for healthier ones.

Healthy

- Community service
- Dancing
- Drawing or painting
- Eating a healthy meal
- Exercising
- Listening to music
- Looking at artwork
- Playing music
- Reading
- Spending time with friends or family
- Studying
- Taking care of your pet
- Writing

Unhealthy

Avoiding people

Avoiding situations

Bingeing on sweets

Blaming others

Cutting or self-harm

Drinking

Drugs

Isolating yourself from friends

Skipping class

Okay in Moderation

Buying yourself something nice

Computer/tablet time

Food

Personal grooming

Sleeping

Social media

TV or movies

Video games

Healthy distractions can be helpful ways to cope with anxiety, but it is important that they not veer into avoidance of other responsibilities in your life.

keeping your body healthy

Yes, your grandmother was right! Taking care of your body is important not only to your physical health but also to your mental health. Here are a few quick tips for basic body maintenance that can help keep your anxiety at bay, or at levels you can manage.

Getting Enough Sleep

Your body absolutely needs sleep to have the energy to keep anxiety at bay, but I know what a lot of young people say when I bring this up: “Yeah right. With SATs this Saturday, the big dance on Saturday night, and an English essay due on Monday?”

Maybe getting a lot of sleep isn’t as easy as you would like it to be, but it will make a big difference. Just as important as getting enough sleep, though, is getting quality sleep. Even just going to bed and waking up around the same time daily—staying within a “sleep window”—can make a big difference in how well you sleep and how well you function. And if that means not sleeping in so much on the weekends, give it a shot for a couple of weeks and see if it helps how you feel.

How much sleep are you getting on the average weeknight?

How much sleep are you getting on the average weekend?

Do you go to bed and wake up around the same time?

What is your bedtime routine? Is it relaxing to your mind and body, like washing and reading, or is it stimulating, like eating and screen time?

Getting Enough Exercise

Maybe you’re already a high school athlete, so getting exercise isn’t an issue. But even if you are a non-athlete, it might help to cross-train with exercise that doesn’t have the stress of competition or the performance associated with it. Consider dance, yoga, martial arts, or another practice. Find something that allows you to move your body without worries about how well you are performing for your teammates, coaches, and spectators.

If you find it hard to motivate yourself, make an exercise playlist, or find a podcast, an audiobook, or some comedy to listen to while you work out. You'll feel better in the moment, and exercise will also help you concentrate more effectively and think more creatively. It will boost your mood and lower your overall anxiety. In fact, a little jog up and down the stairs during a break on the SATs or before a stressful speech can really lower your anxiety and improve your performance. Skeptical? Try it once or twice. An added plus is that getting exercise will help you sleep.

What days and times can you set aside to get some exercise? Take out your calendar and mark them down.

What are some ways you can exercise if you don't exercise already? For example, could you walk to school, take the stairs instead of the elevator, jog, or take a yoga class?

What are some of your favorite forms of exercise you can do alone? With friends?

How are your anxiety and stress levels after you've exercised compared to before?

Eating Healthy

Breakfast is essential, even if you don't like to eat in the morning or your anxiety makes your stomach too nervous. Start with something easy to digest—trail mix, bananas, yogurt, or dry toast—and see how you can work up from there. Cut down on sugar, and eat more small meals if you have to, but remember that your body and mind need to have enough energy to keep going.

Are you eating three meals a day? How healthy are they?

What are some foods you are able to eat even with a nervous stomach?

What are some of your favorite healthy foods?

Cutting Down on Alcohol and Drugs

Alcohol and drugs (and that definitely includes caffeine) may seem to help you relax in the short run, but the medium- and long-term effects can wreak havoc on your body and mind, leaving you more vulnerable to anxiety. If you are hungover, your body and mind will be even more vulnerable to anxiety creeping back. Caffeine in coffee, tea, and energy drinks might keep you going while you're studying but will seriously raise your anxiety level. Think about it—many physical symptoms of anxiety are pretty much the same as the physical symptoms of drinking too much caffeine.

What's your substance intake like these days?

Can you cut down for a few weeks and see if it makes a difference in your overall anxiety?

Relaxing

Last, and most important, *relax*. When you can relax your mind and your body, a visit from anxiety will be far less likely. We all have different ways to relax. Here are a few suggestions: take a bath or shower, practice yoga, take a walk, do some crafting, or try some of the healthy distractions listed in exercise 6.

What are some ways you like to relax?

Which of these can you fit into your schedule?

The acronym HALT is one quick way to remember some of these self-care tips. Check in a few times a day and ask yourself: *Am I Hungry? Am I Angry? Am I Lonely? Am I Tired?* If you answer yes to any of those, think of a healthy way you can respond to those needs.

finding balance

Living a balanced life is one of the biggest challenges we face, and everything gets worse when we are stressed. I've heard it said that the average student needs time for three things—sleep, social life, and studying—but has time for only two. Does that feel accurate to you? If you focus on schoolwork and sleep, there's no time for a social life; if you focus on school and socializing, there's no way you're sleeping enough; and if you spend your time focusing on friendships and sleep, you're probably failing your classes. And what about sports, family, jobs, and the countless other concerns young people face, stressing themselves out by feeling as if there is always something more they could be doing? When your time is at a premium, your stress goes up, raising the likelihood of your anxiety getting worse.

Of sleep, social life, and studying, which do you find yourself emphasizing, and which do you find yourself neglecting or sacrificing?

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