Your anxiety beast and you

A compassionate guide to living in an increasingly anxious world

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Author’s note

Therapists’ tools of the trade include wielding powerful metaphors to label a problem or issue. Often these metaphors are used to rally a person to overcome an antagonist, such as, anxiety is a ‘bully’!, ‘villain!’, ‘trickster!’ or ‘competitor!’

I was trained in the use of antagonistic metaphors to describe anxiety. In my early days as a therapist, I often described anxiety as a ‘liar’, ‘competitor’ and even as ‘Darth Vader’. Then I had the good fortune to attend a training seminar with Dr Paul Gilbert, the founder of compassion-focused therapy (CFT), who helped me to realize that by shifting the metaphor to a more compassionate one, you could help people shift from their threat system (I’m in danger!), or their drive system (I need an adrenaline boost to vanquish my enemy!), to the soothing system (My anxiety means well; it is trying to help me. I don’t need to fight it.).

I began integrating compassion-focused therapy into my clinical work and my own inner life. Shifting from antagonistic anxiety metaphors to compassionate anxiety metaphors helped my therapy clients (and myself) cope more adaptively with the reality of anxiety. This gave birth to the ‘anxiety beast’. Using the term ‘beast’ may initially sound antagonistic, but it was taken from the fairytale Beauty and the Beast where superficial looks can be greatly deceiving.

This book is designed to be a workbook. It is less helpful to passively read this book than to actively engage with the exercises in the order they are presented. The cases (unless they are specifically about my own experiences) are not about specific clients of mine, but representations of the types of challenges and issues that I typically see in my therapy practice, where I specialize in the treatment of anxiety disorders and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Finally, in order to avoid tossing visual roadblocks throughout this book, references and recommended readings are placed at the end of the book.

I wish you well on your journey ahead.
INTRODUCTION:
YOU HAVE AN ANXIETY BEAST INSIDE OF YOU

*Beauty and the Beast* is a fairytale about a young woman terrorized by a ferocious beast. Early in the tale, the Beast appears to be the dastardly villain of the story; however, over time, the Beauty begins to see the Beast for what he truly is — an imperfect hero.

Now on his good days, the Beast still stinks like a wet dog. He still howls obnoxiously at the full moon and scratches himself at inappropriate times. But he is a hero, nonetheless, although one with many flaws. Upon meeting the Beast, the Beauty is repulsed by his roaring and stomping. She doesn’t see that behind his monstrous appearance and blustery demeanor he has a good heart and that he means well.

Anxiety also feels beastly at times, roaring loudly in your mind and through your body, but it is also greatly misunderstood. When you look beyond your gut instinct to run from it, you’ll see that it isn’t the malevolent force that it sometimes appears to be. In the end, your anxiety beast is designed to help and protect you.

At some point in our lives, most of us have had the experience of anxiety roaring like a ferocious beast in our minds. Yet, today’s culture places Zen
peacefulness as the ideal to strive for. Anxiety is made out to be a beastly villain in your life’s story.

Noticing that you feel anxious at times, while buying into society’s message that anxiety is abnormal, can bring with it a sense of failure or shame. This only serves to add suffering to your experience of anxiety.

People then often try to run from their anxiety beast. They may hide behind an online distraction or two. They may numb out or escape by using a variety of easily obtainable substances. Or they may seek relief by avoiding anxiety-provoking activities, such as dating, public speaking, flying or any number of things we humans misperceive as a threat.

But the beast always finds its way back — always there, hidden inside your mind, waiting to roar. But is it really the villain of the story?

In this book, you’ll learn about why anxiety is so often misperceived as the antagonist. You’ll then be re-introduced to your anxiety in a whole new light and see that anxiety is not the villain, but the flawed hero.

Anxiety is necessary for human survival. Rather than jumping on the cultural bandwagon that you can and must vanquish this normal and necessary emotion, this book focuses on changing your relationship with your inner anxiety beast. Rather than treating anxiety like your enemy (and getting that whole shame-suffering thing), you’ll learn to see it as your inner hero — your loud, smelly, hyperactive, not-too-bright, hero — who always means well.

This book uses strategies from science-based therapies, such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), compassion-focused therapy (CFT), and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), to present a hands-on manual for having a better relationship with your inner anxiety beast. This new relationship is based upon being kinder and more compassionate with your inner anxiety experience and actively training it to be a better beastly companion.

If you wish to continue to hate your anxiety beast, struggle with it, and ultimately scheme to do away with it altogether, then you may find this book, especially chapter three, to be downright appalling. I’d set this book down and quickly walk away if I were you.
INTRODUCTION

If, however, you are ready to skip to the second half of the fairytale, where you realize that your anxiety beast isn't so bad after all, and then move forward with the challenging yet rewarding work of befriending and then training your little beast, then read on.

I’m a child riding in the car with my father who is driving us on the freeway — way too fast, like always.

It’s very early in the morning and the sun has yet to rise. I’m drifting in and out of sleep while my father is spacing out to the blackness ahead.

Slumber is once again about to overtake me when I see something in the road in front of us.

‘Wake up — Danger!’ my anxiety thunders within my nervous system.

I am jolted awake. Adrenaline is racing through my body and my heart is furiously pulsing blood and oxygen to my muscles. I am wide awake and laser-focused.

‘Look out! Stop the car!’ I shout to my father.

Suddenly alert, he immediately slams on the brakes and we skid to a halt, narrowly missing the semi-truck which has jack-knifed across the freeway just in front of us.

We live.
Anxiety can feel like a voracious beast howling loudly when you are trying to sleep. It growls about danger in situations that you know are quite safe. Its bellowing distracts you when you want to focus. It warns you to stay away from living the life you want to live. And it can make you hurt.

It can be so difficult to live with an emotion that you just want gone. It’s natural to want to evict your anxiety beast and try to force it to pack up and move out of your head — permanently!

The idea that anxiety is bad — a tormentor — can be a deeply held belief. If you are like most people, you have never challenged this belief — it just feels true.
What do you think about your anxiety?

Tick all that applies to you in the box below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I HATE it!</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I just want it to go and leave me in peace!</td>
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<tr>
<td>It’s a disease and I need to cure it!</td>
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<tr>
<td>It’s like a demon, invading my brain and trying to make me suffer!</td>
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<tr>
<td>It’s trying to defeat me at my own life!</td>
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<tr>
<td>It’s my enemy and I must fight it or get away from it!</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other people live calm lives while I am cursed by anxiety!</td>
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<tr>
<td>It delights in tormenting me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is the villain in my life’s story!</td>
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<tr>
<td>It’s all of the above and oh so much more!</td>
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**Where does the belief that anxiety is ‘bad’ come from?**

Why is anxiety the emotion we love to hate?

*Because it’s uncomfortable!*

You’re just trying to peacefully live your life when, suddenly, your anxiety beast starts to howl! By howling, I mean your brain is flooded with thoughts and images of danger and dread.

*You’re going to get fired!*  
*You’re losing control!*  
*You’re going to have a panic attack!*  
*You’re going to have a heart attack!*  
*You might pass out!*  
*You might fail the test!*  
*You can’t escape!*  
*You won’t make it back to safety!*  
*You’ll never make it to the bathroom in time!*  
*You’re going to choke! (metaphorically or literally)*  
*You’re going to humiliate yourself!*
SOCIETY’S MESSAGE ABOUT ANXIETY IS ALL WRONG

You’ll never feel better!
Nobody here likes you!
You might suffocate!
The plane will crash!
You’re going to die!

List some of your anxiety thoughts:

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Your beast’s noisy howling in your mind is accompanied by physical howling within your body. You may experience a range of sensations, including:

- agitation
- irritability
- muscle tension
- sweating
- shaking
- numbness
- heart pounding or palpitations
- chest pain
- stomach discomfort, maybe to the point of vomiting
- frequent urination or bowel movements
- pressure in your chest
• light-headedness, spinning
• jelly legs
• shortness of breath/feeling of being smothered
• tingling
• sexual dysfunction
• dry mouth
• choking/lump in the throat
• chills or hot flashes
• dizziness
• feeling you or the situation is not real.

Which anxiety-generated body sensations do you experience?

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These symptoms range from being barely noticeable to feeling downright painful. You are going about your day when suddenly you are walloped with worry or punched with panic, while your bowels are aching with angst!

When anxiety howls or roars, you can hear it and you certainly can feel it! And like all other species out there, we humans are designed to seek comfort and avoid pain. It’s no wonder that you just want to make it all stop.
This is the time to mention that if you are having these types of sensations and have not seen a doctor, then it’s a good idea to do so. It’s important to rule out a medical condition that might be causing or exacerbating these symptoms.

Anxiety tries to make you miss out on the things you value

Your anxiety beast might howl to prevent you from getting out of your house and living your life. It might howl if you want to make a life change, like a career shift. Perhaps you want to start dating, but your anxiety howls at the thought of downloading the latest dating app. Maybe it’s long overdue for you to ask your boss for a raise — you know you’ve earned it — but your anxiety says don’t you dare!

When your beast howls at the things in life that are important to you, it generates an urge deep inside you to avoid those things. If your anxiety succeeds at convincing you to avoid important activities, then you are no longer living life on your own terms.

If it’s very important to you, odds are your anxiety beast will at some point howl about it. Following are examples of how your anxiety beast can dictate various parts of your life:

Dating and romantic relationships
What if they don’t like you?
What if you embarrass yourself?
What if they are an axe murderer?
You’re safer just being alone!

Family and friendships
What if the plane crashes on the way to visit Mother? Just stay home!
It’s too uncomfortable going out to meet new people!
You’ll be humiliated!

**Education and career**
If you’re not the top student in your class, then you’ll be a failure!
You’ll fail if you try!
That job interview will be too uncomfortable — they’ll think you’re weird!
If you ask for a raise, you’ll get fired!
That job is way out of your league, you’ll embarrass yourself!

**Health and wellbeing**
You’re too old to join that gym — you’ll look too out of place!
Your heart will give out if you exercise!
You look ridiculous meditating!
If you walk outside alone, people will think no one likes you!
Just stay in where it’s safe and comfortable!

**Adventure and vacations**
You’ll get lost, lonely, attacked, or robbed.
Your car, plane, bus, train, or boat might crash!
What if your hotel is impossible to find, too noisy, filled with bad or dangerous people, or has an odour that just won’t go away!
How about a vicarious adventure via Netflix binge-watching, instead?

**Hobbies and sport**
What if you don’t like it, aren’t good at it, don’t fit in, can’t understand the rules, or people think your interests are stupid?

**Spirituality**
What if there is no God?
What if there is a God, but she doesn’t like you?
What if you are praying to the wrong God?
What if you go to hell?
What if you go to heaven — and it’s boring and there’s no phone reception?
What if you don’t figure it all out before you die?

Morality and decency
What if you’re going to kill the person you love most?
What if you are going to do bad things — the worst kinds of things?
What if you are the one that is a beast?

And, of course, your very life!
You might get hurt.
You might be very sick!
Be very careful or you’ll die!

What important areas of your life does your anxiety target?

______________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________

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Society demonizes anxiety yet causes so much of it!

There are so many reasons why today’s modern, frenzied life adds to your anxiety. For starters, the technology of today often sends people the message that confident cheerfulness is the ideal (and normal) emotion to strive for. It’s then easy to falsely believe that whenever anxiety shows up in your life, that you are not living your life right — that you are not feeling the right feelings.
And this technology has recently become very tightly woven into the fabric of our daily existence.

What is one of the first things most people do when they wake up in the morning? They jump into the digital world of the Internet and their smartphones. For so many people, it is also the last thing they do before trying to go to sleep at night.

And guess what is stuffed in between? More and more social media, always-connected messaging, 24-hour news cycles, binge-watching shows, and the evermore sophisticated personalization of advertisements.

If you could travel back in time to 50 years ago and explain this to someone from our pre-Internet history, they might think you are describing a science-fiction novel — but it is very real.
More interactions among young people are virtual these days. A reported 90 percent of young adults in the USA use social media daily, and one in four adolescents report using it ‘almost constantly’. Increasing social media use is related to rising anxiety levels in some of us.

This increase in anxiety is due to multiple factors. One factor is the increasing negative online feedback that young people are receiving from peers — up to the point of malicious cyber-bullying. Communicating through a device rather than looking a fellow human being in the eye, makes it easier to treat another person rudely and even cruelly.

One's home has historically been a place to be soothed from the trials of the outer world. No longer. Rejection can now barge into your home, even into your very bed, courtesy of the electronic device in the palm of your hand.

Another challenge with social media is that stressful events in other people’s lives are now instantly beamed directly to you. For much of human history, we had a very small tribe to worry about. Our modern tribe is now virtually unlimited — and the trauma experienced (and Tweeted about) of someone on the other side of the world can negatively impact your well-being (although it can serve as a useful call to action).

And then there is the ‘fear of missing out’ or FOMO.

FOMO is now a worldwide anxiety-producing phenomenon. No matter where you are in the world, there is an Instagram photo giving you the message that you are at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people eating the wrong things and feeling the wrong emotion! No matter where you are or what you’re doing, you are wrong — just wrong!

Anxiety gets louder when you are observing the social media pics and posts of other people and then negatively comparing yourself and your life to the content of those posts.

Your life, when viewed through the social media comparison lens, is never good enough. While trying to enjoy that long-awaited beach getaway, you see a post of your friends having a wonderful time at a party and you feel like you are the one missing out!

Or, perhaps it is your friend who is posting glamorous pictures of their
beach vacation. Where does that leave you? You have bills to pay, chores to do, obligations to meet, and there is rain, snow, and cold weather. The party you went to with friends felt like a shallow consolation compared to your friend’s tropical adventure.

No matter what you do in life, you can be left feeling that you would be so much better off if only you could live in the one-sided fiction of perfection that you visually inhale during a typical stroll down your Instagram feed. However, you remain a human being and therefore feel a range of emotions that don’t always involve smiley emojis.

Alongside social media FOMO, you are also bombarded by advertisements, which are designed to make you feel like there is something terribly wrong with you (or your life) that only this product or service can fix. These ads are increasingly tailored to your search profiles. This means that advertisers can more accurately target your deepest desires — and your deepest insecurities.

In between the heavy dose of advertising is the main course of unlimited movies and TV shows that get streamed directly to you anytime and anywhere. Instead of the long periods of quiet boredom every other human in history learned to tolerate, now there is an endless supply of media ready to jolt your nervous system awake (action, horror, and thrillers of all kinds).

Not only do these films or shows rev-up your nervous system, the heroes also set impossible standards with which people compare their lives. They are professional actors, painted in make-up, dressed and groomed meticulously by professionals, given unlimited re-takes, and are typically abnormally attractive. This perfection they portray can lead to your anxiety beast howling that there is something wrong with you by comparison.

…and then there is the endless news onslaught we face every day.

Perhaps like many, you seek a brief refuge from the stress of your day by checking in with the latest news stories. What harm could come from briefly checking your newsfeed just one more time?

Whereas earlier generations might have read a newspaper or watched the half-hour news at dinnertime, today’s news consumption is quite different. The news is now a 24-hour, never-ending catastrophe-displaying,
SOCIETY’S MESSAGE ABOUT ANXIETY IS ALL WRONG

click-bait generating, deluge of anxious material.

As I write this, this is just a quick glance at my newsfeed:

- Climate change is ushering in the Apocalypse — they’d recommend holding off on that waterfront property.
- The despised politician is out of control and is bringing on the end of the country and maybe even the world, and then I change the newsfeed and the despised opposition is evil and must be stopped!
- That food you love will kill you, but the food you forced yourself not to eat last week because it would kill you is now considered good for you.
- That actor you really liked is a sexual predator.
- There are immigrants coming to kill you.
- There are racists already among you.
- The social media giants are watching you and are monitoring every click you make on the Internet! Yes, even that — especially that!
- The nuclear arms race is getting trendy again.
- Terrorists are ready to set off a weapon of mass destruction anytime, anywhere.
- The insect population is collapsing, threatening the entire food chain.

All this from a five-minute perusal of the news on my smartphone. Many people leave the news on in their homes all day! It’s little wonder that the news can get your anxiety beast roaring in fear!

On top of the increased anxiety from our technological lives, there has been a cultural shift in how we raise our children, which is also tweaking anxiety beasts everywhere.

There is now societal pressure to over-parent children, which is increasing anxiety in both children and their parents. The parenting philosophy has gone from the ‘kids should be seen, but not heard’ hands-off philosophy
of past generations to ‘OMG, my child has got to be the smartest, most attractive, trendiest, most athletic and overall the most special of the special, or I have completely failed as a parent’

This cultural shift towards ‘helicopter parenting’ (day-to-day parental over-involvement) is leading to increases in anxiety, depression, and chronic ‘why-aren’t-I-special-when-I-get-in-the-real-world-itis’.

Then there is the related snow-plough parenting which involves ploughing away obstacles confronting one’s children before they have the chance to learn that they can handle anxiety, frustration, and failure and come out okay (such an important lesson!). There are parents, for example, who call their children’s college professors to argue for an improved grade.

So now that modern culture and technology has woken up your anxiety beast, it’s time for the experts to give you the impression that anxiety is a villain that you need to defeat. There is a seemingly endless supply of articles, blogs, videos, lectures, and books on anxiety that focus on anxiety as the villain in your life’s story. Just do a quick Google search and you will be bombarded by titles and subtitles including:

*Freeing Your Child from Anxiety*
*The Worry Cure*
*The Anxiety Cure*
*Anxiety-Free Kids*
*The Ultimate Way to Stop Anxiety and Panic Attacks*
*How to Break Free from Anxiety*
*Anxiety Be Gone*
*New Brave Tools to End Anxiety*
*Fearless in 21 Days*
*Crush Anxiety and Reach Your Full Potential*
*Badass Ways to End Anxiety and Stop Panic Attacks*
*Squash Anxiety*
*Simple Techniques to Get Rid of Anxiety, Panic Attacks and Feel Free Now*
*Healing Anxiety*
*End Anxiety*
Many of these writings contain pearls of wisdom regarding living well with the reality of anxiety. Some of these titles are on my bookshelf. However, the messages these books and articles often send is that anxiety is your adversary to be fought and defeated, and, of course, it can feel that way sometimes. But the truth of the matter is that anxiety is a part of life. There is no cure for the anxiety that comes with being human, just like there is no cure for sometimes feeling frustrated, sad or annoyed. Emotions, even the uncomfortable ones, are part of life. No matter how many books, articles and blogs you read, no matter how many videos, gurus, therapists and spiritual leaders you consult, no matter how many herbs or drugs you take, or exercises you practise, the reality is that you will still experience anxiety at times — and those levels are rising.

Recent research states that nearly 40 percent of adults report that their anxiety levels are increasing across a range of ages and other demographics. Likewise, anxiety disorders among children and teens have also been on the rise in recent years. College students in 1985 were asked if they felt ‘overwhelmed’ by all they had to do. Eighteen percent said yes. In the year 2000, that number increased to 28 percent. In the year 2016, that number had jumped up to nearly 41 percent. Also, 95 percent of school counselling directors reported that significant psychological problems were a growing issue, with anxiety being the top concern.

Given that the modern world is increasing your anxiety, while at the same time telling you that you are wrong for feeling it, it is no wonder that your anxiety beast feels like your enemy.
What are the costs of believing anxiety is the villain in your life?

Hating your beast is a losing proposition because *anxiety is normal!* A normal human life consists of feeling a range of emotions — happiness, sadness, anger, and fear — in every shade, flavour, and combination. You don’t get to see this, however, by observing other people’s social masks — the version of themselves that they show the outside world. By observing most people’s calm exterior, it is easy to get the impression that there is a way to become completely anxiety-free.

When you buy into this notion that anxiety is a villain that must be eradicated, like society tells you, you’ll be left feeling like you’ve failed when inevitably your beast will roar. This perceived failure can lead to feeling blame and shame on top of your anxiety. And you will also continue to feel that you have an adversary living inside your mind, tormenting you with the noise of its continued existence!
When I was a young, naive psychology student at Northeastern University, I thought training to be a psychologist would be like going to Hogwarts and learning ‘magical’ ways to forever rid people of their unpleasant emotions.

What I saw in every single research study on anxiety, however, was that even the best interventions, in the best of studies, did not bring anxiety down to zero — or anywhere close to a complete ‘cure’. They did, however, lessen the howling of the anxiety beast for most people and improve their quality of life, which are wonderful things, but anxiety to some degree remains a fact of life.

Viewing anxiety as a villain gives you anxiety about your anxiety

How do you feel when you run into the villainous people in your life? Maybe it is that ‘friend’ with whom you had a nasty falling out? Or perhaps it is your ex-boyfriend or girlfriend who cheated on you? Or, maybe it’s your former boss who was a nightmare to work for?

How does it feel in your body and in your mind when you inadvertently bump into one of those people at a social gathering that you didn’t even want to attend? Your heart rate increases, your muscles tense, a sense of dread emerges, and an urge to avoid arises — or aggressive feelings towards them may feel overwhelming.

If that villain is your own emotion that lives within your own nervous system, then that dread turns inward, time and time again. You can’t hide from your own mind for long. As Jon Kabat-Zinn says, ‘Wherever you go, there you are.’
Treating your anxiety beast like your enemy leads to suffering

When you hate and fight your anxiety, it only gets louder. Whenever you struggle against what is, suffering tends to increase. If you have a toothache, notice what happens if you tighten your muscles, hold your breath, fight your experience, all the while cursing your fate. You suffer.

Life is difficult and scary at times and it's normal to have the strong urge to fight or run from emotional discomfort. Unlike an enemy in the field of battle that can be vanquished or evaded, anxiety will continue to intermittently make its presence known, no matter how hard you try to combat it. Treating it like an enemy means struggling inside your own mind. There is no victory to be found there — only additional pain.

What if your anxiety beast is not your enemy?

Rather than treating your anxiety like a villain, running from or fighting with it, there is an alternative way forward, and it starts with changing how you view your anxiety.
Even though it hurts sometimes, even though it tries to make you avoid some things that are important to you, even though you live in a culture that currently despises it — anxiety does not have to be the villain of your life’s story. It doesn’t have to be your enemy. After all, the Dalai Lama has an anxiety beast, and so does your favourite TV psychologist, your therapist, and every person that has ever written a book, article, or blog about doing away with your anxiety. Like it or not, anxiety will remain part of our lives to some degree.

Since treating anxiety as your enemy has made you suffer, it is time to see your anxiety in a new light.

THE HERO!
But a deeply flawed one …
If anxiety is not the villain of your life’s story, what is it?

Just like in the fairytale where the Beauty discovers that her vicious Beast turns out to have a heart of gold buried deep under his mangy coat, you can begin to see that your anxiety beast has never wished you any harm, though its roar has certainly been unpleasant at times.

Your anxiety beast has one job — to protect you from threats. And like a mighty hero, your beast stands guard over your life, ever vigilant, in its efforts to keep you safe.

All your anxiety beast ever wants to do is protect you from threats. It does this by triggering reactions in your body that give you certain temporary abilities to best manage a perceived threat — minor superpowers that your beast activates within your body to deal with a threat. These superpowers tend to be greatly enhanced and include focus, energy, power and protection. (As a side note, possible side effects of these superpowers may include agitation, sweating, shaking, numbness, heart pounding or palpitations, chest pain or pressure, stomach discomfort even to the point of vomiting, frequent urination or bowel movements, light-headedness, jelly legs, shortness of breath, feeling of being smothered, tingling, sexual dysfunction, dry mouth, lump in your throat, chills or hot flashes, dizziness, feeling you or the situation is not real, or feelings of panic.)

**FOCUS:** When your anxiety beast detects a potential threat, it gives you a razor-sharp ability to focus on that threat. It does this by giving you constant reminders and urges to *look over there* … *look over there* … *look over there* … *look over there!* In fact, it will make it difficult for you to focus on anything else other than the perceived threat. Your beast can literally narrow your vision (‘tunnel vision’) so that you are more focused on the ‘threat’ in front of you without the distraction of surrounding objects.

**ENERGY:** To protect you, your anxiety beast will crank up your cardiovascular system so that your heart rate and your breathing becomes more rapid. This gives you a quick boost of oxygen to your brain and muscles, providing you with the extra energy you need to fight or run from threats.
On top of that, increased adrenaline and cortisol are released in your body — hormones that provide you with an additional jolt of energy.

**POWER:** The added energy is combined with an automatic tightening of your muscles in order to maximize your physical strength. Your beast diverts blood flow away from non-essential functions (like digestion and sexual functioning), in order to free up resources to give you an intense power boost to fight or run from threats.

**PROTECTION:** In an effort to keep you safe, feelings of dread flood your mind, motivating you to take immediate protective measures using your enhanced focus, energy, and power. In this state, your blood moves away from the surface of your arms and legs, serving to not only better energize the muscles within your body, but to decrease the likelihood of you bleeding to death from wounds to those areas. Sweating also increases as a way to cool you down and make you more slippery, in the event of a predator trying to grab hold of you. Some people automatically blush as a signal of appeasement to a potential aggressor — in the case of a perceived social blunder.

Your beast helps you to channel these superpowers into a lightning-quick battle plan when you are faced with a threat. The plan typically consists of a fight, flight, freeze, or appease response, depending on the situation.

**FIGHT:** This is your anxiety beast’s response, if it thinks you’ve got what it takes to charge forward and defeat the threat. This could be fighting off a violent attack or scolding Beatrice from work who ate your tuna sandwich from the office fridge. If your beast thinks you can’t win, then it moves on to another response.

**FLIGHT:** If your beast thinks you can’t defeat the threat, but thinks you can avoid it, then it will motivate you to run for your very survival! This could take the form of showing up to a party, realizing you don’t know anyone there, and then turning around and quickly walking out.
**FREEZE:** This is what your anxiety beast urges you to do when it sees the threat as something you cannot defeat or avoid. It hopes that if you freeze, the threat won’t see you (or perhaps thinks you’re dead already) and will pass by, leaving you to live another day. Perhaps you did this in school when your teacher looked for volunteers to answer a question that you didn’t know the answer to — so you stared down at your desk praying he wouldn’t see you.

**APPEASE:** If the threat is bigger and faster, and it has already found you, perhaps the aggressor might be amenable to appeasement (give it your food and your deepest apologies, and then slowly back away). If you are mugged at gunpoint, it is wise to hand over your money and hope for the best.

These strategies serve you well when the threats you face are real.

I recently asked a firefighter what he thought would happen if he and his crew did not bring their anxiety with them while rushing into a burning building. He immediately answered, ‘We’d die.’ I’ve received similar responses from battle-hardened soldiers returning from war.

Police officers, firefighters, soldiers and so forth rush courageously towards danger, their anxiety beasts roaring their fierce battle cries, supporting their people by maximizing their ability to overcome the threats they are facing.

These strategies can also serve you well even when the threats may be less immediate.

Why do people give up smoking? Because their beasts begin to roar at them when they reach for a pack. I’d like to eat fried food until the grease flows out of my ears; however, my beast reminds me of my family history of heart disease and motivates me to avoid an excess of this delicious treat.

Remember, your anxiety beast is just trying to help.

Yes, anxiety can be painful, distracting, and feel like a beast, but it is important to remember that your brain is not trying to torment you — it is trying to help you. Your inner hero, however, try as it might to help you, is very flawed.
All great heroes have a weakness; something that makes them less than perfect. For Supergirl, it’s Kryptonite; for Achilles, it’s that darn heel of his; and for Batman, well, it’s terrible movie franchises.

**For your anxiety beast, it’s ‘context’**

When you are faced with something that may be dangerous, and your anxiety ramps up in order to protect you, it is doing the right thing (trying to protect you) at the right time (when the situation is likely dangerous).

Without a doubt, we now live in the safest time for humans in our entire history. Despite the 24-hour news cycle of doom and gloom, this is actually a golden age of safety for our species. Yes, we still have wars, cruelties and poverty, but overall there has never been a safer (and better fed) time to be human.

Unfortunately, no one has let your anxiety beast in on this fact. It’s as eager as ever to protect you today as it was throughout our dangerous prehistoric history. In these modern times, it often mistakenly howls to protect you from things that are likely to be very safe.

In this way, it is doing the right thing (trying to protect you), but in the wrong context. It misperceives reasonably safe situations as dangerous, then dons its cape and jumps into action in less than the blink of an eye. This can be quite annoying when you are just trying to give a presentation at work.

For every time your anxiety beast gets it right in the modern world, there are multitudes of false alarms of varying degrees.
For example:

Feeling nervous when giving a toast at your sister’s wedding reception. Were you truly in danger and needed to prepare to fight or flee from your great aunt Bertha?

Feeling panicked when your airplane experienced turbulence. When anxiety shouted at you to grab the armrests in a white-knuckled death grip in order to hold up the plane in the sky, was that really necessary?

How about the onslaught of adrenaline while riding a roller-coaster at Disneyland? Was it true that you were really in danger of anything other than spending an outrageous amount of money on Mickey churros?

The reaction that your anxiety beast had in these situations were problems of context. You were clearly safe, yet your nervous system ramped up as if the situation was life-threatening. While your beastly bodyguard is overzealous and completely confused at times, it means well.

Let’s look at some of the contexts that might confuse your inner beast.

**External contexts**
These are the persons, places, things, and situations that occur outside of your body. For example:

- social or performance situations where you ‘risk’ a negative evaluation from others
- fear that an ‘other’ might harm you (other race, religion, belief system, nationality, social strata, rival high school, and so on)
- places that trigger scary thoughts or memories
- things that resemble potential contaminants
- things that are asymmetrical
- dating
- enclosed places/confine ment
- crowds
- heights
- forms of transport, such as airplanes or cars
- contaminants, such as germs, bodily fluids or chemicals
SOCIETY’S MESSAGE ABOUT ANXIETY IS ALL WRONG

- being alone (or being with other people)
- leaving your home or staying at home
- going to healthcare professionals
- certain foods
- loud noises
- darkness
- one’s physical appearance
- situations that are uncertain.

The possible external contexts that could make your anxiety beast howl are endless.

**Which external triggers makes your anxiety beast howl ‘danger’?**

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**Internal contexts**

These are contexts that occur beneath the skin, such as bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, mental images and memories. These internal events have the potential to confuse your anxiety beast as much as things that occur out in the world.

**Body sensations**

Your beast can glitch out on the various bodily sensations that come with being alive.
Sensation | Misinterpretation
--- | ---
Skipped heartbeat | Heart attack!
Headache | Brain tumour!
Stomach discomfort | Cancer!
Dizziness | Losing control!
Shortness of breath | Suffocation!

Emotions

Your beast might feel that certain emotions are a threat to you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Misinterpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>What if you lose control and kill someone?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Sadness | What if you never feel better?  
What if you’re going to lose everything good in your life? |
| Joy | Things are going too well; it’s all about to come crumbling down! |
| Disgust | What if you vomit or panic? |
| Fear | What if you have a heart attack, panic attack, or the anxiety just never stops? |

Ironically, your anxiety beast can be most concerned about itself. Just like a rambunctious puppy that sees a ‘vicious’ dog in the mirror and barks as if its life depends on it, when your anxiety howls at its own reflection, you are feeling anxious about feeling anxious.

Clark is running late — literally. The elevator is out of order and he is sprinting up the stairwell in a desperate effort to make it to the twelfth floor in time for a very important meeting.
SOCIETY’S MESSAGE ABOUT ANXIETY IS ALL WRONG

Anxiety: Hurry! What if you miss your meeting! You could get fired! Then you won’t have any money! Then what if you can’t find another job! This is an emergency!

By the seventh floor, however, the combination of the stress of being late and the physical exertion has cranked up his heart rate to a level he is not used to.

Anxiety: Forget the meeting, you’re having a heart attack! Get help now!

Clark sits down on the steps, pulls out his phone, and Googles ‘heart attack symptoms’. Alas, there is no phone reception.

And then there are the various contexts within the mind.

Thoughts, images and memories — oh my!

When you imagine something, your brain responds, to a degree, as if that thing were real. Imagine right now that you are about to eat your favourite food. What would it look like if it were right in front of you? Imagine leaning in and inhaling the delectable aroma. Imagine a fork or spoon full as you bring it up to your lips. Imagine savouring that delectable first bite.

If you are like most people, as you imagined this, your mouth moistened as your brain triggered your salivary glands to prepare your body for the incoming deliciousness. It is a glitch, however, as you sadly do not have that food to eat at this very moment.

Imagine a scary situation that your anxiety beast often prepares you to meet (or avoid). Close your eyes and try to recall this anxiety-provoking situation. Try to put yourself there in your imagination. Notice what you would see, hear and feel. Then notice how your body reacts. Did you sense your muscles tensing, your breathing becoming faster, and a squirt of adrenaline circulating through your body?
You are hardwired to imagine all sorts of threats that may take place in the future. Just bringing these thoughts and images to your mind will wake up your inner bodyguard, who will then prepare you for battle — right now!

You can also remember all sorts of threats from the past (a fight with your romantic partner, a conversation with your boss, or the time when you almost got bitten by that ferocious poodle while jogging). Your beast can get quite over-protective, even without you leaving the comfort of your own mind.

Your beast is doing the right thing by trying to protect you from these threats, but in the wrong context as there is no threat present right now.

Some people's beasts are not only afraid of the thing they just imagined, but also, they are afraid of having the thoughts themselves.

Selina is having a dinner party.

She’s in the kitchen, casually chatting with her best friend while chopping up vegetables for the salad. Her friend is standing close to her as Selina slices and dices with her largest and sharpest serrated knife. She suddenly remembers a story on the news she heard
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recently where someone stabbed a loved one to death.

*Anxiety: What if you snap and stab your friend! Don’t stand so close to her with the knife!*

The thought gut-punches Selina with fear. She takes a few steps away from her friend and slides the cutting board and knife across with her. Her friend keeps chatting and moves in even closer. She desperately tries to force the thought of stabbing her friend out of her mind.

*Anxiety: OMG, what if having this thought means you could do it?!? Don’t have the thought of stabbing! Don’t have the thought of stabbing! Don’t have the thought of stabbing! …*

The more Selina tries to not think The Thought, the more her anxiety fears it — and the more the thought plays over and over in her mind.

Sometimes these thoughts co-occur with urges.

**Urges**

Some beasts are paying attention to the types of urges that you have and then howl when it notices them. These urges can come from a very primitive part of your brain nicknamed the ‘reptilian brain’ because you and I and lizards (and many other animals) all share this same brain structure.

If someone cuts you off in traffic, the reptile in you may give you the urge to run them off the road. If you see an attractive person while you are walking down the street arm-in-arm with your significant other, you may have the urge to abandon them and try to woo the new prospect.

These primitive urges come with the territory of being alive. They are not indicative of who you are as a person, or what your values are, or what actions you will choose to take.

However, some anxiety beasts leap into action to try to protect their person from these urges — after all, your beast doesn’t want you to go to jail for assault nor does it want you to lose the security of a good relationship...
because you pounced on the first attractive person to walk by.

Fortunately, we modern humans have a newer brain structure (the pre-frontal cortex) that allows us to choose our behaviour in the face of older brain urges. Some beasts, however, get terrified that because you have an urge, you might suddenly snap and act on it.

Which internal triggers does your beast howl danger at?

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You have an anxious hero inside of you, whether you want one or not

Anxiety is not your fault. It is part of the range of experiences that come with being alive. Rather than making the anxiety louder and pouring suffering on top of the discomfort, you can build a better life with the range of emotions that make you human.

In the coming chapters, you will learn more about your anxious beast — where it comes from and how to have a better relationship with it. Rather than suffering, or feeling shame, or distress when experiencing anxiety, you will learn to refocus on acceptance and create a better life with your beast.

Rather than remaining locked in a battle against it, you will learn to become a more compassionate coach to your anxiety beast so that you can move forward with what is truly important to you with less suffering, while training it to become a better-behaved inner companion along the way.