

Unwinding Anxiety: New Science Shows How to Break the Cycles of Worry and Fear to Heal Your Mind

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Anxiety is a learned habit loop driven by fear, avoidance, and temporary relief. Worry, procrastination, and compulsive coping behaviors persist because the brain mislearns their reward value. Anxiety eases by bringing curious, embodied awareness to what anxiety actually delivers in the present moment, allowing the brain to update old patterns naturally.

Therapeutic Orientation

Neuroscience-informed, mindfulness-based, CBT-adjacent, nervous system-informed frameworks

Key Concepts

- Anxiety operates as a habit loop: trigger → behavior → temporary reward (often avoidance or relief)
- Worry and avoidance are negatively reinforcing habits that persist even when they worsen anxiety over time
- The prefrontal cortex predicts danger based on past experience and spins worry when it lacks accurate present-moment information
- You cannot think your way out of anxiety; the brain updates habits through embodied, experiential feedback
- Mindful curiosity functions as a “bigger, better offer” than avoidance or reassurance-seeking
- Awareness rather than willpower is what allows the brain to recalibrate reward values and loosen anxiety patterns

Practice Ideas

- Begin noticing anxiety as a habit in motion rather than a problem to solve
- Gently map your anxiety loops by identifying triggers, habitual responses, and what relief or cost actually follows
- When anxiety arises, ask “What do I get from this?” and feel the answer in your body rather than analyzing it
- Experiment with curiosity as a response: *What does this feel like right now? Where do I notice it?*
- Use brief, frequent moments of awareness throughout the day rather than long or effortful practices
- Journal prompt: What typically triggers my anxiety, and what do I habitually do next?
- Journal prompt: When I slow down and pay attention, how rewarding is that behavior actually?

For Clients

This book may be helpful if you:

- Experience chronic worry, anxiety, or overthinking
- Struggle with procrastination, reassurance-seeking, or avoidance

- Feel stuck in anxiety patterns despite insight or coping skills
- Want a compassionate, non-pathologizing way to work with anxiety

What it's not:

- A quick-fix anxiety cure
- A thought-stopping or positive-thinking approach
- A replacement for therapy, especially for trauma-related anxiety

For Therapists

- Offers a clear, non-shaming framework for understanding anxiety as habit learning
- Integrates with CBT, ACT, mindfulness-based, and somatic approaches
- Useful for psychoeducation, especially around worry, avoidance, and procrastination
- Emphasizes experiential learning over cognitive disputation
- May feel insufficient for clients with significant trauma, dissociation, or panic without additional support

Clinical Takeaways

- Normalize anxiety as learned brain behavior
- Shift interventions from “reducing anxiety” to updating reward learning
- Use curiosity and embodied awareness as mechanisms of change

Recommendation

Recommended for adults with mild to moderate anxiety, worry, or habit-based avoidance.