

anxiety
attacks

Dr Lucy Atcheson
with Sarah Tay

anxiety attacks

Conquering Your Insecurities,
Anxieties and Fears



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For everyone who has ever struggled
with stress or anxiety.

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Your breathing is rapid. Your heart is throbbing. Your eyes dart around taking in every single detail. Your palms are damp and clammy. Your arms and legs feel jittery. You twitch as if you're about to run a race. Your chest is pulsing. Your face flushes. Your palms squelch as you clench your fists. You're burning up. Your heart beats faster. Your jaw tightens. Your mouth dries. You have no control. You are in the grip of anxiety.

Anxiety and fear are emotions we can all relate to. They have always been part of the human make-up and they always will be, and because of this we all experience fleeting moments of fear within our daily lives. For example, we may feel worried about an interview; we might lose sleep over our child's exam results; we could be scared that our partner will leave us; or we may feel anxious about a medical appointment.

Anxiety spans a spectrum of intensity from insecurity to terror and, although it is at the milder end of the continuum, insecurity is the most common manifestation. Insecurity is a human characteristic and affects every single one of us, so

I will be covering this first. As you work through this book you will see that, moving along this continuum from insecurity, you encounter, among others, worry, anxiety, phobias, panic attacks and post-traumatic stress disorder. With so many forms of anxiety, and with these playing such powerful roles in our lives, do we have to sit back and accept it – or can we stand up to it? Can we fight back and overcome worries, anxieties, fears and insecurities that have been holding us back for a long time?

I believe we *can* fight anxiety in all its forms. I believe *you* can fight it – and that’s why I have written this book. I want to show you that fear doesn’t have to rule your life, and I want to help you free yourself from any frightening emotions that you no longer want. But before I go any further, I just want to mention three things.

First, anxiety will always exist. There’s no point me claiming that we can eliminate all fear from our lives, because we can’t. No matter how much we learn to control our emotional state, there will always be things – both significant and less so – that will make us want to turn on our heels and run for our lives. But whilst we can’t magic away all the things that frighten you, I can help you deal with them. I can show you the various forms of fear and share with you the techniques that will help you feel safe and in control so that you can teach yourself to beat them.

The second thing I want to mention is that, in dealing with anxiety, you face a classic Catch-22 situation. Anxiety makes you feel vulnerable and weak – but to beat it you have to be strong: you have to challenge your fear even when you feel like hiding. I know you won’t always believe it and I’m not promising that this will always be easy – but

I will keep reminding you that you can and will free yourself from anxiety, whenever and wherever it attacks you.

The final thing that may surprise you is that by reading this book you may uncover things that you weren't expecting to find. While it may not make sense to you now, one reason why you may have found it hard to overcome fear in the past is that you may hold a vested interest in being scared: an unconscious reason why you don't want to move on. You may be thinking, *What on earth do I get out of being scared?* – but many of us benefit from our anxiety.

Let me give you some examples. I worked with a woman who found it hard to overcome her phobia of paperclips because it kept her in a weak, vulnerable and child-like state so it meant that she didn't have to see the world as it really was. Another client found it more comfortable to invest all his mental energy worrying about spiders than thinking about what else he would do if he didn't have to be constantly on the lookout for eight-legged creatures: he was more scared by the prospect of having mental freedom than he was by the thought of being liberated from his phobia. So while it may not be immediately clear to you, by reading this book you will discover whether the thought of changing unsettles you and whether, at some deep level, you don't really want to be free of your fear.

By the end of this book you will have a deep understanding of anxiety, fear and insecurity and will be able to programme your brain to deal with these effectively. As you're reading this Introduction you may not even be aware of your anxieties and insecurities because you're so used to them, but they may be stopping you from having a healthy relationship, from getting the job you want or from

fulfilling your dreams. Through the process of working through this book I will show you how to discover and confront your limitations so you can live the life you truly desire and deserve.

To get to this point there will be times when I will need to get hard on your emotions, but I always want you to remember that I'm not being hard on *you*. In this book I'm bringing my therapy out of the consulting room and into your front room, and to do this effectively I need to treat you as I would any of my clients. To get a successful outcome I need to be firm with your symptoms (and, as you'll see later in the book, this means being firm with your internal critical voice) but I will always be sympathetic to you. So when it might seem as if I'm putting my foot down, I'm only doing so because this is what's necessary for you to be able to break your patterns of behaviour.

If you're prepared to follow the techniques and tips I suggest, your fears and insecurities will no longer dictate what you can or can't do or how you feel. I will teach you how, even in the scariest moment, you can look your fear in the eye and say, *No way! I am not going to let you take control. I'm in charge!* By understanding anxiety more you will be able to calm yourself down, take control and enjoy life. You will be the one in charge. You will have a different outlook on life and a different experience of life. You will be able to do whatever you wish – and life will be better than you could ever imagine.

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THIS BOOK

Read it all the way through

Because anxieties and fears are often found together, I suggest you read the book from cover to cover. Even if you don't suffer from a particular condition, by learning about each fear you will see how they fit together and how one type of fear can grow into another. Plus, by understanding and appreciating other people's anxiety you will gain a general understanding of human behaviour.

Learn from the case studies

I find that, in addition to explanation, the clearest way to help people understand anxiety is to give detailed case studies of real examples. This puts theory into a context of reality and will hopefully help you realize that other people share your experiences.

Note: Confidentiality Statement

At this point I would like to thank all of my clients. Working with them has enriched my understanding of psychology and human behaviour. While it is important in a book like this to illustrate such learning with case studies, I have taken every possible step to protect confidentiality. All names and other identifying features, such as gender, age, relationship status and profession have been changed; indeed, all of the case studies in this book present composite clients and are not based on particular individuals. The case

studies here are typical of many clients and situations, therefore they may resonate with many people but they are always representative of the many and never one particular case.

Take time to work through the recovery processes

While there are some key themes running through each treatment process, each one is suited to a particular fear or condition. You will be able to pick out these exercises because they're clearly marked with this sign: Ω. I have taken great care to explain each process in a step-by-step format and, where possible, have related it back to a case study so you see the theory in practice. You may find that it helps to work with a partner and you will notice that for some conditions this is essential.

Be honest and fair to yourself

Apart from a few exercises where you need to work with someone else, many of the tips and techniques are things you can do on your own, so be honest about what you're feeling and keep remembering that this will all be worth it. If you've made the effort to buy this book and even to get this far into it, you owe it to yourself to be honest.

There may be times when the ideas and processes seem overwhelming but, as you will see as you work your way through, one concept that pops up time and time again is that *we tend to imagine things to be worse than they really are*. So if you feel scared at any point, take a deep breath, centre yourself and keep going. By the end of this book

you can feel totally different about how you feel about yourself and you can be free of your anxiety.

Take action straight away

Although the recovery processes take time to work through, so that you can get to work on your fear as soon as possible, each chapter ends with some ‘Take-home tips’. These are things that you can do *now* and they form the first steps to freeing yourself from your anxiety.

And finally...

You, the reader, are the person who is beating your anxiety, so give yourself credit every step of the way. As you understand more about your fear; when you engage with your rational thinking; for the times you take control of your internal critical voice; and as you eventually beat your anxiety – praise yourself. Celebrate the triumphs – and the small steps. In facing your fear you are being brave – and that deserves validation. Enjoy the journey!