

## *Strategies for Working With and Through Anxiety*

### Working With the Immediate Experience

**Accepting** means dropping resistance, denial, and resentment related to the present reality, namely, the reality that anxiety is happening in this body and mind. In this context, we might just as easily replace “accept” with “surrender” or “forgive.” By surrender, I mean a strategic choice to give up warring within your own mind and body. By forgive, I mean completely releasing of resentment or ill will toward your anxiety. Acceptance does not mean “liking.” It simply means that you are willing to give your attention to what is (in as caring and gentle a way as possible). Because the cycle of anxiety-feeding-on-resistance-feeding-on-anxiety is broken when we drop the resistance, this simple act of accepting what is, is transformative. If we do not make space for what is here in the body, in the mind, in this moment, there is no progress we can make because we are not dealing with what is real.

Examples of phrases associated with acceptance:

- “Anxiety is present.”
- “I choose to be with this experience (of anxiety).”
- “I will not go to war with myself.”
- “This is uncomfortable and it’s what’s here.”
- “Resistance feeds anxiety. I surrender my resistance.”

**Exploring:** Once we have acknowledged, “Anxiety is present in the body,” we can explore it as a somatic experience (i.e. as a set of physical sensations). Every emotion has corresponding sensations in the body that can become familiar and, therefore, less intimidating and/or convincing. Explore the shape, texture, density, heat, and frequency of the sensations you associate with anxiety (e.g. cool tingling vibration in the hands, a sour oval-shaped tightness in the belly, weighty restriction around the breath in the chest, etc.) Label them and acquaint yourself with the landscape of anxiety—dive into the sensations and pull back with your awareness as needed. If anxiety is about warning of danger, and if danger is associated with the unfamiliar, then making anxiety familiar is a liberating act. Additionally, getting out of the mental story that is keeping you locked in the anxiety by getting into the body may be very useful in interrupting the cycle. That being said, this tool is not for everyone all the time. Attending to physical sensations is not dangerous or tricky in and of itself, but because those who have experienced panic attacks and severe anxiety know that, when we don’t have sufficient confidence in our own capacity to self-soothe and relax around the tension, diving into the sensations associated with anxiety can exacerbate the experience. Take it slow and be gentle with yourself. Sooth yourself with kind encouragement as you explore.

Alternatively, if attending to sensations in the body appears to be exacerbating your anxiety, use other sense gates to ground your experience. Tune into sound and notice the vibrations striking your ear drum, their frequencies, volumes, and textures, how they rise and pass away. Tune into sight and forms. Notice color, shape, texture, distance and depth. Remind yourself with your senses, “This is a safe place.” This is called grounding through the sense gates or anchoring.

**Befriending:** This is perhaps the most important part of this process, and, in some ways, the most counterintuitive. It is not enough to just stop hating or resenting your anxiety, you have to learn to see it's nature clearly, as it has always been: a well-meaning, if not misguided, friend. Every emotion guides us toward or steers us away from experiences in line with how they pertain to our safety and survival. Ultimately, anxiety doesn't want to cause you harm; it wants to keep you safe. Anxiety paralyzes our bodies so that we don't move toward something perceived as dangerous. If anxiety arises when you are about to do something reckless or when you see the outline of a tiger beneath a tree, then it is doing its job and you should listen to it. On the other hand, if your anxiety is constantly seizing you when there is no threat to safety, it's malfunctioning and could benefit from rewiring. One common reason for the malfunction is that a traumatic event has shaken up our basic assumptions about what is safe and what is familiar. The death of a parent, a being who has been in this world every day that you have been alive, can make the whole world suddenly unfamiliar. Sexual assault can temporarily turn one's own body into an unfamiliar and frightening object and undermine our most basic sense of safety and dignity. Deep stories of shame can make us enemies with ourselves as well. Traumas like these and others can shake the foundation of who we have assumed we are in the world. And when the self is perceived as unfamiliar and unsafe, we are really in a challenging place.

One of the most powerful and simple befriending tools is to simply talk to your anxiety like it is a separate being. "I know you want to keep me safe. What are you trying to protect me from?" or even more broadly, "What do you want me to know?"/ "What do you want to tell me?" When we engage our anxiety in dialogue we create space between anxiety and the awareness of anxiety and discover that identification with the anxiety is not a given, that there is somewhere outside of the anxiety we can rest. When we see this clearly, we feel less trapped, less desperate to escape it. Writing a letter to your anxiety can also be a liberating act.

### Long-Term Practices

**Cultivating Refuge:** Because anxiety tries to keep us away from perceived danger, one way to mitigate its severity is to contemplate safety, familiarity, and comfort. Through journaling or conversation spend some time articulating how you relate to refuge: Where have I felt/do I feel safe? With whom do I feel grounded, comfortable, protected, empowered, etc. One way to organize your writings or thoughts on refuge is to start with the following three-part breakdown.

- **Mentors/Teachers:** Who are the people that I learn from? Who inspires and holds a safe space for me (even if they don't know me personally)? Who do I turn to for reliable guidance or to bring me back to reality when I am spinning out?
- **Teachings/Philosophy:** What are the teachings (sacred texts, books, essays, speeches, films, etc.) that have inspired me or changed the way I see the world for the better? What are my touchstone texts, the ones I return to as reference points when I feel out to sea?
- **Community/Locations:** Who are my people? Where do I go to be able to both offer and receive support, trust, and acceptance? Who are my true friends on this journey? What communities/spaces can hold me when I'm working with something challenging?

**Resourcing** is primarily about cultivating supportive perspectives and jettisoning harmful ones related to our anxiety. Here are three suggestions or frameworks for internally resourcing yourself in the face of anxiety.

- **Moving Beyond Scarcity:** Because anxiety is often linked to scarcity, the contemplation of and writing about gratitude and generosity can also ameliorate anxiety. The sense of “I have enough,” and “I am enough,” goes a long way toward undermining anxiety’s solidity. Consider making time to record three instances of gratitude/generosity each day.
- **Resting in Spaciousness:** There are few states more fundamentally connected with safety and abundance than kindness and compassion. The heart’s capacity is not defined in spatial or temporal terms because loving-kindness, and compassion are not finite resources—*all situations and persons can be met with loving-kindness regardless of circumstance*. This contemplation and practice highlights the boundless nature of the heart. Contemplating and abiding in the spaciousness of the heart makes vivid the vision of increased capacity to be with challenging experiences. Nothing overwhelms or threatens or harms space—space welcomes and holds. The cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion is one of the surest ways to expand one’s sense of internal resilience because, as we gain a sense of confidence through consistently accessing and resting in these qualities, our trust that we have what we need to make it through a particular challenge expands. (For more information on this subject, please see the complementary handout on Forgiveness and/or visit the website of Kristen Neff: [selfcompassion.org](http://selfcompassion.org))
- **Switching to a Sustainable Fuel Source:** Most people who struggle with anxiety have a story somewhere deep down that they need anxiety to accomplish things. The problem is that if we are under the impression that anxiety is the only fuel source that can help motivate us through challenging situations or into productivity, we will have a hard time reducing anxiety’s grip. It is important that we develop a new story that highlights alternative fuel sources like creativity, joy, connection, inspiration, care, friendship, peace, and so on. We can write a short story because we are anxious about not meeting a deadline or we can write because it would bring us joy to share our imagination with others. We can take out the trash because we are anxious about our partner being annoyed with us if we don’t, or we can do our chores as an expression of interdependence and out of a desire for a clean home. If we can tap into a pleasant and wholesome motivation, why continue to rely on something that feels so oppressive and painful? We often have more power over our relationship to circumstances and motivation than we give ourselves credit for.