

# Anxiety & Friends

by Rob Adams

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# Author's Note

The first thing I need to say is that if you're reading this out of any kind of desperation, you're thinking of hurting yourself, or if you feel like your anxiety or depression or anything else is becoming too much to handle, please research your national suicide hotline immediately before reading this any further. They will be able to help you far more than I can.

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One of the unfortunate and rather sneaky symptoms of depression is a lack of motivation. I've wanted to write this little book for at least a year now, but the ambition just hasn't been there for me. However, sometimes the stars align, and you end up taking a course in college that allows you to write said book for a portion of your final grade. And that, my friends, is how I finally ended up here, taking up a seat in front of my laptop, the cursor upon the blank page blinking in anticipation for something majestic to spill out of my head... alright, alright, I've already exhausted almost all of the dramatics permitted in this book, so I'll have to tone it down. Gotta save some of that for later.

Now then, my vision for this project is very specific, and as such, I refuse to stray from it for any reason. I assure you, I'm not going to be bogging you down with statistics or scientific mumbo-jumbo that wouldn't make sense to anyone outside of a psychology conference. I write the same way I speak; my style has a tendency to be casual and intelligible, and admittedly pretty dorky at times, but that's just how I am, and I think it'll help to provide some positivity to this otherwise discouraging topic. I'm not gonna try to pass myself off as some degree-wielding, chivalrous expert on anxiety or anything else I discuss here, but as someone who's lived the vast majority of my life with mental illnesses and has taken huge steps in the direction of freeing myself from them, I feel more than qualified to discuss both the illnesses themselves and the coping and healing strategies that I've used to treat them at length.

My ultimate goal here is to provide you the reader with a short, accessible book full of simple, yet practical information that you'll be able to easily understand and apply to your daily life immediately **for free** without needing a psychological dictionary next to you at all times for reference. Even if you don't have any trace of a mental illness to speak of – and I pray that you don't – I still want this book to hold some value to you, whether that's helping you grasp what a friend or family member may be going through, or merely educating yourself on the life of someone with a mental illness in general. I want this to be the book that would've helped twelve-year-old me when he discovered that he just couldn't talk to anyone he didn't know, no matter how hard he tried. Or maybe thirteen-year-old me who lost a best friend and blamed the whole thing on himself and his personality. Or high school me who struggled to fully and unapologetically express himself without sweating over the opinions of other people. Or college sophomore me who just left a three-year emotionally abusive relationship and didn't know how to functionally exist anymore. But thankfully, I don't need this book now. I've done my time, I understand why everything happened the way it did, and things have been picking up for me. But

for you, someone that might still be serving that undeserved sentence, or maybe you know someone that is – that's who I'm writing this for. This is the book I wish I had back then, and this is the book that I hope will help whoever needs it now.

## Introduction

Mental illnesses have been an outcasted (that's a word now, I hope you like it) topic of conversation for as long as humans were readily aware of their existence. Even long before the phrase was coined, “specialists” of the past would blame any unusual mental behavior on things like demonic possession, amongst other flattering diagnoses – and believe me, their treatment plans weren't anything to get excited about either (without getting too detailed about it, they would drill a hole into the patient's skull to let the demons out – yikes!). I'm certainly not saying that future scientific advancements in the field of mental health would benefit anyone though. Have you ever seen one of those documentaries on the old psychiatric institutions? You know, the ones with abusive nurses, farm animal living conditions, mystery meat and strange pills in a cup for lunch every day – those institutions? They sure do make appropriate settings for horror movies, but can you imagine actually having to live in a place like that? Not all psychiatric institutions were like that back then, of course, but still, no thanks, I'm allergic to Hell on Earth.

Thankfully, for those of us with mental illnesses these days, the Internet age has done wonders for exposing the world to this taboo side of medical health. With such a large population of people living with one psychologically-related illness or another, it was only a matter of time before that seed would take root and blossom out of control to the point where the majority would have have no choice but to accept their existence.

It's almost impossible for anyone to not be affected in some way by mental illness. If you're blessed enough to not have to live with one, then you probably know someone that does, whether they've publicly announced it or not. There's still a pretty heavy stigma in place against people with mental illnesses, so it's not unusual for sufferers to keep that particular closet door closed at all times. But bearing this in mind, the world would be much better off if we were all a little more knowledgeable on matters such as these, just as someone would teach themselves about politics or global warming. Yes, the effects are that substantial.

In this book, I'm going to be discussing four different aspects of mental illness, but as the title states, all of them are going to be tied back into the main topic of conversation: anxiety. All of the things I've written about here are things that I have personally struggled with firsthand, and as such, I'm going to do my best to illustrate a clear picture of what it's like to live with each of these illnesses. At the beginning of each chapter, there will be a short (and entirely fictional) story depicting a moment in time in the life of someone who has a typical diagnosis of the mental illness in question. Being able to empathize with these people, even if you can only relate in some small way, is something I hope you'll be able to take away from this book. The chapters will also feature non-scientific definitions, signs and symptoms often associated with the illnesses, and methods that I've used myself to cope with and rise above them. Now then, I do believe I've dragged this introduction out long enough. Let's get to the good stuff, shall we? After you.

# Anxiety

Mark is a sophomore in high school. Right now, he's sitting at his usual desk in his psychology class, watching one of his fellow peers present their research project on Sigmund Freud. But Mark can't pay attention. He doesn't have an attention disorder, nor is he genuinely uninterested or trying to be rude. No, Mark is next in line to present his project – his teacher told him so. Like most people, public speaking is one of the last things Mark enjoys doing, but the way that his mind handles it is not quite the same. Nervousness is a common reaction to being placed under a spotlight. However, Mark's brain kicks things into overdrive whenever he's presented with a stressful situation. Instead of reading what's being displayed on the classroom projector, he's locked his focus onto the speaker. He notices how effortlessly they give their presentation, how standing in front of thirty people and speaking for several minutes without a hitch doesn't seem to phase them one bit. If anything, Mark would assume this is ordinary amongst his peers. It's here that Mark's brain begins to make assumptions, and even though they are largely untrue, he believes every word of them, because that's exactly what his mind is conditioned to do.

“Everyone is going to think I'm some sort of idiot. I'm going to go up there and make an ass of myself. I can't even remember what my presentation is about. I'm going to mess up horribly. What if they can tell that I'm anxious? No one else seems this nervous in front of everyone. I'm never gonna hear the end of this.” All of these thoughts pass through his mind within a matter of seconds. They encode themselves into his belief system. Once they're in there, it's nearly impossible to shake them off right away.

Like a sort of virus, these negative ideas start to make Mark feel very uneasy. He notices it's becoming harder to breathe, and as a result, his head starts to feel floaty. His hands are sweating and his stomach churns. The world around him seems to fade out of perspective, and all he can pay attention to now are the terrible things he's convinced himself of. Before class, he felt completely normal, but that was before he knew he had to present today. Now, he's beginning to question whether or not this is the onset of a stomach bug. Before long, the class around him is applauding, and the student that was presenting takes their seat again. The teacher calls Mark's name, and he feels like he's going to be physically sick.

This is anxiety.

## Basic Definition

Anxiety feels like the most frequent and relatable form of mental illness, mainly because it's a natural biological response that's hardwired into most living beings. We all experience it countless times throughout our lives, usually without us even being aware that it's happening. It's one of the many tools that Mother Nature has outfitted us with in order to keep us alive. When your brain senses a threat, it will put your body into what's commonly referred to as “fight or flight mode”. This sends adrenaline all throughout your system, preparing you to either fight back against something that might be endangering you, or to get the hell outta there. This was super useful back

in the day, and might possibly be the reason that your ancestors survived long enough to pass down their genetics so that you would eventually be born into this world. In a funny way, I guess we should be thankful for anxiety. But when your brain can't distinguish the difference between a saber-toothed tiger and a public presentation, that's when it becomes a problem.

There are a couple other terms I used in the story above - "conditioned" and "belief system" - that I would like to elaborate on as well. When I talk about conditioning, it's technically a psychological word, but fear not, I'll explain everything as simply as I possibly can. In short, conditioning is the process of expecting something to happen the more often it happens to you. For example, if you feed your dog every day after you come home from work, because it keeps happening after a specific signal (in this case, you coming home from work), your dog will learn to expect food as soon as you walk through the door after work. Easy enough, right? So, for our fictional friend Mark, maybe he's had bad experiences with public speaking in the past, or he's just had bad social experiences in general. There are any number of things that would attribute to a fear of public speaking, which is why it's actually considered one of the most common fears.

The other term I used, "belief system", doesn't necessarily apply only to psychology. Your belief system is, well, anything you believe. But it runs a lot deeper than that. Anxiety can affect your belief system so much that you actually start to believe things that are completely false. I won't focus on this too much until the chapter on phobias, but it's important to take note of this. Anxiety can take negative, isolated incidents and make you think they'll happen all the time. Even if the incident didn't happen directly to you. It could just be something you saw in the news. It's *that* powerful.

## Signs & Symptoms

Anxiety is unique in a way because it affects everyone differently. When you think of somebody who's anxious, you might picture them as acting a little antsy, maybe fidgeting or walking around with an apprehensive look on their face. Some lucky folks become anxious and merely exist in a nervous state. Nothing really happens to them except having to experience the feeling of nervousness. For someone with anxiety though, a nervous state usually brings on not just mental, but physical and emotional side effects as well. It's no longer just about the thing that makes us anxious, it then becomes about all the things that could possibly go wrong because we are anxious now. For some people, even just the fear of becoming anxious makes them anxious.

Only looking out for physical signs of anxiousness isn't usually a good way to determine whether someone with anxiety is actually feeling anxious at the moment or not. In fact, a lot of us have taught ourselves to behave rather normally in public. This is a defense mechanism. We don't want to be a burden to others, or appear unstable, so we learn how to act calm in most uncomfortable situations. Inside our heads is a completely different story though. If we're away from home, sometimes we're plotting ways we could leave in an emergency, or places we can go to be alone in case our anxiety gets the better of us. And furthermore, a lot of the physical symptoms of anxiety can be difficult to pinpoint unless you're the one experiencing them. When our bodies enter fight or flight mode, we become swamped with adrenaline. Adrenaline isn't always harmful, and it can actually give us the power to do some pretty incredible things when we're in danger. But

when it's released at the wrong times, it can have negative effects. Things such as dizziness, cold sweats, nausea, gastrointestinal upset, and shortness of breath are the common physical signs of an anxiety attack, but this list is nowhere near complete, nor does it feature any symptoms that would give off a red flag to anyone around us, unless it gets progressively worse to the point where we get sick or pass out.

Anxiety takes a toll on us emotionally too. When those with anxiety experience an episode, we can be very harsh on ourselves, wishing we didn't have to deal with it or behave the way that we do. It can be detrimental to our self-esteem over time, especially if one of the causes of our anxiety is why we're struggling with our personal image in the first place. This is why anxiety and depression usually go so well together; one feeds off the other, which in turn continues to produce more anxiety.

## Coping & Cures

I don't want what I'm about to say to discourage you in any way, but there's no actual "cure" for anxiety, per say. Keep in mind that anxiety is a biological knee-jerk reaction and can't be unlearned. If you're human, you're susceptible to becoming anxious as a result of one thing or another, so don't let yourself be fooled by anyone or anything that says otherwise. But for those with an anxiety disorder, you *can* learn to reduce how much it effects you, hopefully to the point where it's no longer a detriment to your day-to-day life.

I ask that you keep an open mind to the advice that I have, mainly because I took a different approach to reducing my anxiety than most common methods. I refused to take any pills or do anything that wasn't natural, and if possible, I highly recommend that you do the same. Pills that regulate your anxiety aren't actually fixing anything, they're only masking the problem. Although I know some people can't function without them, I always mention it as my first point because I feel a majority of people with anxiety don't *need* a prescription. Some of these pills are dangerous anyways, and over time, you'll need more and more of them due to an increased tolerance in order to get the same effect. But, I digress.

The first thing you should do, if it's an option to you, is seek help. And I'm not just talking about a book or someone that makes videos online (although these are often very useful at providing you with new knowledge). I mean going to see a therapist, or if that's not an affordable option, just tell someone that you can trust. Therapy isn't absolutely necessary, and I know people that have gotten through their mental illnesses without it, but it sure does speed up the process. Therapists know the inner workings of the brain and why yours is behaving the way it does. They know some of what you're going through, and they know ways to help you keep moving forward.

Besides therapy, there's a lot of things you can do at home to reduce your anxiety as well. One of my personal favorites, and something I highly recommend, is meditation. Again, this requires an open mind and a lot of patience, but meditating will help you to practice calming your thoughts down, which is extremely useful for anxiety sufferers. No, you don't have to sit high atop a mountain peak dressed like a Shaolin monk to meditate. All that's recommended is a quiet place and a timer, if you have one. If you've ever sat by yourself with nothing distracting you, you've probably realized that your brain is a very hyper environment. It seems almost impossible to focus

on a single thought without ten more popping up to take its place. This is in part due to the kind of world we live in today with distractions arising around every corner, but also because most of us were never taught how to focus when we were growing up. Meditating, if done properly over a period of time, will help to instill some focus into you. I'm not saying this will cure all of your problems, but imagine the next time you have an anxiety attack if you could just focus on one thing instead of a blizzard of thoughts. But what's the best thing to focus your attention on both while meditating or while dealing with an anxious episode? I'm glad you asked! You'll wanna focus on your breath.

Now, breathing seems like a pretty easy thing to pay attention to, since we're all basically professionals at doing that, but when dealing with the maelstrom that is the human brain, it can be a lot more difficult than you'd think (no pun intended). I can't exactly *instruct* you on how to focus on your breath, but if I had to explain how I do it, it would go like this: breathe in through your nose, and out through your mouth; make sure to take deep breaths, and when you exhale, you wanna try to make a sound like waves crashing on a beach. It sounds kinda ridiculous to explain breathing to you, but I assure you that's the best way to do it, for both meditating and if you're having an anxiety attack, especially for the latter. If you're having an anxious episode, deep breaths will, in a sense, force your brain to relax. If you're taking regular, deep breaths instead of quick, shallow ones, then your brain will assume you're in no danger. This also ties back into that fight or flight response. Rapid breathing makes your mind think you're in danger or under some kind of stress. It increases your heart rate, and therefore, the level of stress that your body experiences.

Not all forms of meditation require you to sit by yourself with your eyes closed for extended periods of time though. In fact, almost anything could be considered meditation if you follow the guidelines for what meditation actually is. Meditation, to reiterate, is the process of focusing your mind on a single thing, but it doesn't have to be your breath; breathing is just a default in basic meditation. If you wanted to, you could listen to music, or draw something, or read a book, or take a walk – the possibilities are endless. As long as you are one hundred percent engrossed in what you're doing, it could be considered meditating. Sure, it doesn't fit the stereotypes, but for some people, coloring or writing a story are much easier to focus on than breathing.

It also helps to recognize what specifically is making you anxious. You might think that you have it figured out, but a lot of times, what sets off your anxiety isn't *actually* what's making you anxious. In the case of Mr. Non-Existent Mark up above, it appears that he's afraid of public speaking, but is he really? If he dove deeper into his past and made some connections though, he might find that public speaking is only a component of it. Since Mark doesn't exist (and I'm making this very clear for legal reasons), we can't tell exactly why he gets anxious in front of crowds of strangers, but since he's a figment of my imagination, we could probably associate it with being bullied in the past, or having had a bad experience while being in front of lots of people. Not that everyone that's afraid of public speaking has been bullied or has had a traumatic public experience, but just for the sake of this example, let's assume that it's one of those two things. Public speaking isn't *directly* what he's afraid of, but it could act as a doorway for letting his fears back in. Understanding the specifics of what causes you to have anxiety is crucial to eventually reducing it. It's like being your own doctor. If you don't have the option of going to therapy (where they would help you figure these things out), you can still delve into your past on your own and start to



connect the dots for yourself.

In the next chapter, I'll be discussing depression. I'm going to tackle it in the same way I did with this chapter, starting with a completely fictional character and story, but since this eBook is about anxiety and branches of anxiety, I'll be keeping the rest of these chapters a bit shorter, since some of the things I've already said, especially in the **Coping & Cures** section, will apply to the other topics as well.

## Depression

An alarm breaks the silence of Anna's room. It's Monday morning, more specifically six a.m., and no one wants to get up and go to work at six a.m. on a Monday morning. But for her, it's a different story. It's not the usual grogginess or laziness that's keeping her from getting up, but the realization of being awake. Thoughts of the day ahead surge through her brain, and none of them are reassuring. Having to go to work, pretend that her life doesn't feel like it's spiraling out of control for eight hours, then come home just to do the same exact things she does everyday; it all feels so pointless. Her alarm finally ceases as her finger lands on the clock, but she doesn't roll out of bed. She's too busy thinking of another excuse. There's no motivation, no drive to even stand up. She can't possibly see herself surviving yet another day feeling like this. But she already called out sick once last week, and the week before that. Her boss would start getting suspicious. But as much as she needs this job, that realization does nothing for her. She doesn't care about working or money, or much of anything for that matter. She can't even recall the last time she found something funny. Her head swims with thoughts of the future. Is it always going to be like this? It's been like this for so long that it certainly feels like it's going to be. A never-ending cycle of days, weeks, and months doing the same exact thing just for survival. It feels like she's the only person on the face of the Earth. Sure, she has friends and family, but none of them would understand what she's feeling, and that makes her feel even more alone.

### Basic Definition

Depression isn't an easy thing to explain, and I'm not even sure if the example I gave above is an accurate representation of it outside of my own experiences. It's more than a lack of motivation to do things; it's the feeling that *everything* you do is pointless and that nothing good will ever come of anything. It's more than just being sad; it's feeling jaded towards everything and everyone, and not being able to experience happiness or other emotions to their full extent. It leaves you on autopilot most days, and you have no choice but to go along with it. For some of us (including myself), the depression comes and goes – I use the term “manic depression”, but specialists like to call it a bipolar disorder nowadays, and I'm not too sure how I feel about that one, to be honest – but others unfortunately have to live with depression the entirety of their waking lives.

Everyone gets depressed from time to time, and like anxiety, that's very normal. It can be a reaction to a difficult time in a person's life, whether that's experiencing loss or change. But when

someone is depressed more often than not, that's when it should become something of concern. As I stated before, depression can actually spawn from anxiety. Those of us with anxiety can sometimes feel helpless from our inability to control our nervousness, and this helplessness can quickly transform into negative feelings towards ourselves and our futures. We wonder if we're always going to have to live our lives like this, and the resulting thoughts usually make us even more upset. It's not uncommon for those with an anxiety disorder to experience depression, and that's why I felt it was important to bring it up here, even though it's not the main topic of this book.

## Signs & Symptoms

I mentioned a lack of motivation just now and at the beginning of the **Author's Note**, but obviously, that's not the main symptom of depression that people are aware of. But as I said, depression doesn't always mean sadness and dark thoughts. Those are certainly common amongst people with depression, but that's not always the case with everyone. For me personally, I'm no longer sad, and in fact, I'm happy most days, but my depression still comes through in a lack of motivation to get certain things done, although that's debatable whether that's a result of depression or just a disinterest in certain things that I have to do.

Depression can also leave us feeling empty, or like we're not actually living in our bodies, but as if we were standing beside ourselves, watching us cruise on autopilot; this particular feeling is called dissociation. You might also feel irritable or exhausted, or any range of emotions that are usually considered negative. These negative emotions are self-sustaining and will continue to feed off themselves in a repetitive loop of never-ending pessimism.

Of course, there's the much darker side of depression: suicide. It's such a difficult thing to discuss, but I don't want to gloss over it. Suicidal feelings are very real, and they're terrifying. People with depression may have suicidal thoughts as a result of no longer wanting to feel depressed. Nobody wants to die, but they feel as though it's the only way to escape from the heaviness of their illness. After so many weeks, months, and years of being depressed, it seems like the only way out. But I assure you, as someone that was at rock bottom with their anxiety and depression and is now feeling happier than ever, I want you to understand that depression *can* end if you allow it to, and you can be alive to witness it.

## Coping & Cures

Unlike anxiety, depression can certainly be one-hundred percent cured, but don't expect things to change overnight. It's a long walk out of Hell, and if you're dead-set on building yourself back up, you'd be surprised at what you can accomplish by just making some adjustments to your daily life.

First and foremost, start putting into practice the things from the last chapter. Even if you don't have anxiety, they still translate over into helping with depression as well. Five to ten minutes of meditation a day, taking deep breaths, and if things are very serious for you, therapy is

highly suggested. They may not cure your depression, but it sure does help to know how to calm yourself down when things feel like they're spiraling out of control.

Now, as far as things I used specifically for depression, the methods are very simple; so simple, in fact, that you might think I'm being lazy or I'm a little bizarre (I'm both, actually, and proud of it, thank you very much), but bear with me, I didn't think they would work at first either. The first and easiest thing to do is laugh more. Sounds super obvious, I know, but again, just humor me for a moment (no pun intended). Laughter is a very potent medicine. When you're laughing, your brain assumes you aren't in any danger and that you're in a good mood. I'm not talking about fake laughter, clearly, but if you can get yourself to laugh more every day, you'll start to notice yourself shying away from those negative thoughts more easily. So listen to your favorite comedian, watch some silly video compilations, look up pictures of cats wearing sombreros; whatever makes you laugh, do more of it.

Mindfulness when you talk to yourself is also crucial to overcoming depression. Firstly, let's not pretend like we don't all talk to ourselves. It's a completely normal thing, and in fact, studies have shown that it helps with problem solving; just try to avoid conversing with yourself in public, unless you don't mind the awkward glances. But you have to be very careful when you do this, especially if you suffer from depression. I've never met a clinically depressed person (myself included) that thought highly of themselves. Usually, depression in those with anxiety as well is partially caused by a lack of self-confidence. What I started doing (and this sounds utterly ridiculous, I'm aware, but trust me) was every morning after brushing my teeth, I would look in the mirror and say something positive about myself. I know it might seem like an impossibility, but there has to be something you admire about yourself. Maybe it's how long you've kept fighting. Even if you have to make something up, fake it 'til you make it. For example, the first thing I started telling myself was that I'm attractive, which is the complete opposite of how I actually felt, but after a month or two, I started to believe it. Words are thoughts, and they contain more power than most of us are aware of. Plus, this method takes barely any effort, so what do you have to lose?

## Perfectionism

Dan is a second-year student at a small art campus. This semester, he enrolled in a painting class, and right now, he's been tasked with painting something that has a personal connection to him. He found, in his mind, the ideal thing to paint: his guitar. Before starting, he made sure everything was set up nicely. The guitar is placed in an open spot in his room, the curtains are drawn back and both of his lamps are on to provide as much light as possible, and he placed his easel at the correct angle. Lastly, he gathered all the colors of paint he would need for the project and applied liberal amounts of each onto his pallet. With everything finally ready, it was time for him to get to work.

He spent the entirety of his free time over the weekend painting the portrait of his guitar. It took him several tries to get the color just right, and he struggled with some of the shading, but by Sunday night, the painting was nearing completion. He decided to take a step back and admire the near-finished painting, but when he did, something felt off. He looked from the painting to his

guitar several times before realizing that the shape of the guitar wasn't correct. There wasn't enough of a curve on the left side. The painting was due the next day, and it was already past the time he usually goes to sleep. But in the end, he decided to stay up, layering over and over the side of the guitar to try to get it to meld into the background, but now the painting looked worse than before. It was too obvious that he was trying to mask his mistake.

Dan began to feel a bit panicked. He went from being proud of the painting to not even wanting to look at it. He wanted to completely start over, but there was no time.

## Basic Definition

Perfectionism is a branch off of anxiety, or some might say it's a symptom. Those with perfectionism exhibit anxiety-like behavior only at certain times. I think everyone has a bit of perfectionism in them, depending on the circumstances, and there's nothing wrong with shooting for the stars, but when someone feels that things always need to be perfect and it starts to interfere with their daily life, that's when it becomes an issue. They will often spend far too long completing a task, or start something over multiple times until it satisfies whatever their definition of "perfect" is. Artists of all kinds are infamous perfectionists, but it can occur in anyone, no matter their profession or hobbies.

If perfection is not met, by their standards, perfectionists can feel embittered towards themselves or whatever task they're trying to perfect. They might begin to feel anxious and feel subconsciously that something bad will happen if they don't complete something at one-hundred percent.

While there does seem to be a correlation between perfectionism and obsessive compulsive disorder, this would not normally be the case. Perfectionists exhibit repetitive behavior for the sake of completing a task perfectly, while those with OCD repeat tasks to quell an urge. This is not to say that those with OCD can't be perfectionists, but most perfectionists don't exhibit the other symptoms associated with OCD.

## Signs & Symptoms

I glossed over some of the symptoms in the previous section, but seeing as how perfectionism is like a cousin of anxiety, the effects can be fairly interchangeable. However, as I stated, perfectionism can be seen as a selective form of anxiety. It only comes around when something needs to be created or accomplished. When the perfectionist isn't personally satisfied with something, it can lead to anxiety, depression, lower self-esteem, or repetitive behaviors; it's like a catalyst for other mental illnesses.

The anxiety is a result of fearing that something negative will come from perfection not being met. This is usually a result of early childhood conditioning ("conditioning" again meaning to teach someone to behave a certain way through repetitive causes and effects). Perhaps when you were younger, you would be scolded for getting bad grades, or you were grounded, had things taken away from you, etc.. These kinds of parental errors can breed a perfectionist in the long run.

It may not even be a parent – it could be a teacher, or someone you had connections with in general. It might have even come from bullying. Only you would know what most likely caused it though, and that can help you further get to the root of the issue.

Depression could also arise, and this is tied to self-esteem. When someone holds themselves to impossibly high standards, they may take it out on themselves when those standards aren't achieved. They aren't aware that their standards are too high, and even if they are told so, they'll still feel obligated to try to perfect certain things.

Repetitive behaviors are something that also tend to happen, especially in neurotic perfectionists (like myself). We will often start things and never finish them, or completely scrap them and start over once they're done because the end result doesn't live up to our expectations. This can be extremely taxing on both our personal lives, as well as our self-esteem. If we're not upset with ourselves over imperfections, we're upset with ourselves because of our compulsive need to make things perfect. But perfectionism needs to be looked at as more of a bad habit, because it's something that can be broken over time with a lot of patience and self-control.

## Coping & Cures

When dealing with perfectionism, like anxiety or depression, it feels like something you simply cannot control. Even if you tell yourself that something is fine, in the back of your head, you'll still see all the imperfections. But there are ways to overcome this, and just as a heads up, it's not very comfortable.

The first thing you need to understand is that perfection does not exist. Make this your mantra, your motto, write it on the back of your hand if it helps you remember, but nothing in the history of the universe's existence has ever been perfect, and there's nothing wrong with that. The idea of perfection is entirely subjective, meaning each person has their own definition of what the word “perfect” means. A song might be perfect to one person, while another person might dislike the song altogether. We can approach perfection and get close to it, but we'll never actually achieve it.

With this in mind, I want you to try using the eighty percent tactic. Instead of shooting for perfection, which will never be achieved no matter how hard you try, aim for eighty percent perfection instead. This makes a task feel possible, and ultimately a lot less stressful to finish (spoiler alert: that's the method I'm using to write this book). As I said though, this may be very uncomfortable for some perfectionists – I know it is for me. But ask yourself this: would you rather finish something that's eighty percent perfect in your mind, or waste precious time trying to achieve something that doesn't exist? This method takes time though, and it might be a good idea to start small until you get the hang of it. But once you see how much you can accomplish by avoiding perfection, you'll never want anything to do with perfection ever again.

Taking breaks is also important for getting things done. When you start to stress over a task, walk away from it for a little while until the motivation strikes you again. This can sometimes take days, weeks, or even months, but keep in mind that the goal here is to complete the task without completely giving up, starting over, or having it negatively affect your life in the end.

# Phobias

Sarah walked through the front door of her house after a long day of classes. She kicked her shoes off and brought her bookbag into her bedroom. Despite being home, her work for the day wasn't over; she still had homework to do, and she was hoping to get it all done before dinner so she could have the rest of the night to relax. Thankfully, her homework was all online that day, so she figured it wouldn't take too long.

She sat down at her desk, turned on her PC, and got straight to work. But after only a few minutes of typing away answers to her homework questions, she saw something move out of the corner of her eye. She turned to see what it was, but when she did, she felt her skin crawl. A spider no bigger than the size of a nickel was taking a leisurely stroll across the wall behind her monitor. Sarah immediately kicked her rolling chair away from the desk and stared it down, watching it slowly disappear behind her screen before reappearing on the other side.

Her hands started to sweat, but the rest of her body felt cold. She felt her head becoming a little floaty. The spider took a turn and headed for the ceiling. She glared at it vigilantly, seeing it reach the top of the wall. Then, as it tried to switch from the wall to the ceiling, the poor thing lost its footing and fell behind her desk, and Sarah lost a few years off her life. Her fight or flight response kicked in, and she ran out of her room, leaving her school work behind.

## Basic Definition

Simply put, a phobia is an irrational fear. Some phobias, like our fictional character Sarah's fear of spiders, are very common. Things such as heights, the dark, clowns, bugs, and the IRS aren't unusual phobias to have. In fact, most people are afraid of at least one abnormal thing, so there's no shame in having them. Some phobias can even be healthy. Mild germophobia will help prevent you from getting sick more often. But it's things like the fear of social situations or public places that can really start to take a toll on your life. They can make life outside of your own home seem impossible, while some can still get to you from the safety of indoors.

Phobias stem from traumatic past experiences. Someone who gets food poisoning from a restaurant may never eat in one ever again. Or if you found getting vaccinations as a child horrifying, that might carry over into adulthood. It's our brain's attempt at “living and learning” through personal experience. It doesn't want you to have to go through the trauma again, so it sends signals that set off your fight or flight response so you know something isn't right. Like I said, not all phobias are necessarily bad, but some of the ones often associated with anxious and depressed people lean more towards being detrimental.

## Signs & Symptoms

Since phobias are linked to similar bodily reactions as anxiety, the symptoms are almost exactly the same. Just like perfectionism, however, this anxiety is only triggered by certain events.

Phobias are powerful though, and the fear they cause can be just as bad, if not worse than anxiety. And even if they're irrational, the fear they bring on is still very real. They may result in the sufferer behaving irrationally as well; they may go out of their way to avoid whatever it is that they're afraid of, even if it takes a ridiculous amount of effort. If confronted with their fear, this might induce a panic-like state. The fight or flight response takes over, which can result in irrational behavior. Other symptoms like cold sweats, increased heart rate, extreme nervousness, or negative/uncomfortable feelings can also result.

## Coping & Cures

Most irrational phobias can be cured (uncomfortably, of course) through what's called exposure therapy. It sounds exactly like what it involves. You know the whole “you have to face your fears” thing? Well, that's basically the idea here. By constantly being exposed to what you fear, your brain will eventually rewire itself after realizing the phobia is irrational. This can take a very long time, so persistence and willpower are key here. There are therapists that specialize in exposure therapy, but if you're really dead-set on curing yourself of an irrational fear, it can still be done at home.

For example, if you're afraid of the dark, you might spend five minutes every day in a dark room by yourself. Eventually, your brain will learn that nothing bad happens in the dark (as long as you're not starring in a horror movie). You can most likely find guides on what works for your specific phobia online. Like I said, it takes a lot of willpower to force yourself to face a deeply-rooted fear, but neuroplasticity in our brains (meaning our brains can be retrained) allows us to rid ourselves of irrational fears if we're dedicated to it.

## Conclusion

Well, it appears we're at the end of the book here. I think I've said everything that I wanted to say, and my vision is complete (Me: 1, Perfectionism: 0). I know my approach to this whole thing has been laid back and a little bizarre, but I take mental health very seriously. Everything I've written about here is something that I've dealt with (and I'm still dealing with) for a long time. But even though this book is a product of my experiences and somewhat of a milestone for me, that's not nearly as important as spreading the message of mental illness to others. It's a veil that needs to be lifted. Society has to stop hiding from the needs of its own members. We're not “broken” or “lazy”; we approach life more cautiously, and we're trying our damndest to heal and make each day better than the last.

I hope you've maybe learned something from this thing; I feel like I've learned at least one new thing about myself just from writing it. I'm not an expert on this stuff by any means, and I don't know all the fancy terms and phrases that psychiatrists like to throw around, but I do know what it's like to live with these illnesses, and I feel like that gives me more authority to talk about them, in a sort of way.

If you're struggling to keep your head up, just keep going; I promise, things do eventually

get better, but you have to allow them to get better. Accept that compliment, go see that movie with your friends, try new things, stare down your fears (unless you're afraid of sharks, or bears, or Bigfoot, then I really wouldn't advise doing that). Life's supposed to be fun, and unfortunately, a lot of people don't get to experience it to its fullest. A lot of people slug through each day, never knowing if things will get any better. And I know it's incredibly cliché, but coming from a guy that was selectively mute in the seventh grade that now sings at open mics nights in front of a room full of strangers, believe me, it can be done. I want to see more people – especially those suffering from the things I've mentioned here – living their lives the way they want to, not the way their mental illnesses makes them live it. And hey, like I said, this book and the advice in it was free, so give it a go and stick with it. You might be surprised by what happens.