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Heart, Hope, Healing

How to Use Anxiety as the Empathic Wise Guide Within You

BY KARYN SHANKS MD | MAY 1, 2020



Anxiety Reframe

How does it make sense to use “anxiety” and “empathic wise guide” in the same phrase?

Isn't the opposite true? Aren't our anxious minds—you know, the way they churn and burn with worry about the past, present, and future—our downfall? A whopping character flaw? A total loss of control? The terrible, shameful energy that keeps us separated from our true selves and happiness and potential?

I speak to you as someone whose anxiety has been a lifelong companion, and as a fellow traveler with so many clients, family, and friends who've struggled with it. And while I used to believe it was something *wrong* with me, my terrible shameful secret, I now know the truth: *anxiety is my guide (if I'm willing to listen), my inner wisdom, my genius!*

We may call it different things—overwhelm, exhaustion, worry, stress, fear, insecurity, or over-our-heads and out-of-our-minds. It comes in an infinite array of flavors. But there are common denominators for us all, nuggets of wisdom we can all share, and action steps we can take to relieve the burden and discover the wisdom within it.

Anxiety is a Wise Guide

At first, I thought there was something terribly wrong with me.

When I was a little girl, I was anxious a good bit of the time, though I didn't call it that—I didn't know *what* to call it. I thought I was defective and the only one to feel so uncomfortable on the inside.

I was easily overwhelmed by too much of just about everything—too much attention, too much noise, too much anger, too many people, too much to do.

I picked up on the emotions of the people all around me, including the unspoken stuff. I couldn't discern whose emotions they were—mine? I felt unnerved by the stressed-out people in my life, perceiving their emotions and behavior as all about me.

I savored quiet spaces, time alone, and spent hours in solitary play. Crowds and excesses of polite conversation my young mind didn't understand sucked the life right out of me (even today I avoid crowded stores, big gatherings, and loud music), making me feel grumpy, tired, and anxious.

It was easy for my child mind to conclude that I was just shy, anti-social, hard to get along with, easily irritated, awkward, stubborn, and unlovable.

But I learned anxiety meant some pretty cool things about me.

That I am sensitive, intuitive, and empathic—common traits of the classic introvert.

Anxiety was often the mismatch between my introverted constitution and the way I tried to live my life—the way my school and family and culture wanted me to live my life—like an extrovert. I envied the easy outgoingness of my fearless popular friends, and tried to be like them, but inevitably fell flat, a failure.

Then I started to look at anxiety in a different way.

Anxiety is a Superpower

While being sensitive leads easily to anxiety and overwhelm, it's a *good* thing. I often feel uncertain and uneasy, and life always seems risky, but I stay awake and tuned in. This leads me to discover insights, and to understand myself and others better through heightened

empathy.

Anxiety lends a sense of urgency that helps me clear away the clutter, the nonsense, and the debris that gets in the way of the truth. It takes me straight into the heart of the matter and what matters most. It connects me more deeply to the people and things I love. To tell the truth. To be kind. To forgive all.

Anxiety is My Inner Wisdom

I've learned that all of our emotions and internal sensations represent the intelligence of our bodies—purposeful reactions and adaptations to our circumstances—*not accidents, mistakes, or bad luck.*

Our work is to honor the wisdom of these emotions and sensations inside us, uncomfortable as they may be, to discover the inner wisdom that guides our lives.

This work is not for sissies.

In spite of the gnawing anguish anxiety has always caused me, I've come to see it as a guide, a most remarkable guide, that shows me exactly where I need to do my work.

But it can also lead to overload. We can become flooded with the sensory information from our environments, brains reading the overload and calling on our internal stress reinforcements to protect us. While the stress hormones are meant to strengthen us, they can lead to overwhelm.

Our inner wisdom must be contained and protected.

While sensitivity is a gift, I've had to learn to contain it—to put [boundaries](#) around it to protect me from too much stimulation—and to honor my need for quiet and restoration. And I've had to get clear about whose emotions are whose—is the fear I sense mine or does it belong to the person standing next to me? Whose anger do I experience when I walk in a room?

I've had to learn to trust my anxiety.

While anxiety is still scary, I've learned to walk right into it, rather than numbing it out. I now trust there's always a message. We can label it as social anxiety disorder, but the truth is, there is *always* a reason. I've learned to "read" my anxiety as a guidepost for what's going on in my life, what I need to look at more closely, or how I need to tend to myself more carefully.

What My Genius Anxious Mind Has Taught Me

My anxious mind delivers clear and important messages to me, presented in ways to *be sure* to grab my attention (it's not to be ignored!). Not that I'm happy about it, but if I can peek around the discomfort and look beyond the stories I create to explain it (often with disparaging conclusions about me or how my life is falling apart), there's always something to learn:

- Sometimes there's too much going on around me, overwhelming my senses, triggering my survival-oriented stress responses, making it feel like catastrophe has hit, when really, I'm just on overdrive. I need to let go and rest.
- Or, I've lost touch with my deepest inner self. I've focused too long and hard on my thoughts buzzing around, on my stories or the opinions and impressions of others, rather than on my deeper core of heart and gut and body. Where my strength lies. Where my truest wisdom lies.
- As an empathic person, I may be experiencing someone else's anxiety. It's not mine at all. I must learn the fine art of caring for others without taking on their emotional stuff.
- I'm worried about the future, what has not yet come to pass, rather than focusing on what's happening right now in this moment or situation in front of me.
- I've let mistakes and disappointments lead me down a path of guilt and shame, rather than seeing the opportunities for needed change, of improvement, and growth.
- I've neglected the needs of my body and gotten out of physiological balance—not enough sleep, rest, play, connection, movement, or good food.

Anxiety Cure?

Not completely, nor do I want to dismantle this key part of my internal surveillance system. If anxiety is my guide, I want to keep the way it gets my attention, leading me to positive action. What I want to change is my worry that it's something *wrong* with me—or anything. I want to embrace the messages of my body while using strategies to discharge the powerful emotions that arise, and the stress molecules that are released that make me feel uncomfortable. I want to care for myself in ways that are supportive and strengthening, that lead to reduction in the stress responses that feed my anxiety and discomfort.

From Overwhelm to Wisdom: Strategies

to Build Anxiety Resilience

Know that you are not alone—anxiety is normal

You are not a freak. We're all freaking anxious—most of us just don't admit it. There is always hope and many inroads to understanding and healing the excesses of anxiety and overwhelm.

Reframe what the anxiety means

Rather than something that is wrong with you or a catastrophe, consider that you are a sensitive, intuitive human being, who feels *everything*. That this is a gift to be cherished. That perhaps everything you feel and know about the world around you has overwhelmed you. And that our work is to protect you from the overload, to create healthy boundaries around you, while honoring your beautiful sensitive introverted self.

Create healthy boundaries

For sensitive intuitives like us, anxiety can lead to overwhelm. We must learn how to protect ourselves from the excessive energy of others and the world around us. It is necessary to have periods of retreat—from people, places, noise, information, news—for rest and renewal.

Release the energy of anxiety from the body in healthy ways

Move your body. Do chores. Go for a walk. Work out. Do yoga. Get out of your head and into your body.

Use positive affirmations

This is not to pretend that the anxiety doesn't exist or the problems you are dealing with aren't important. It's *to lend strength to the neural networks of your nervous system that remind you about the goodness of life*—the messages we desperately need when in the throws of anxiety, that support our way out. My favorites: “This too shall pass.” “Good things are happening.” Or my special favorite: “Help!” (Somehow, magically, the help always comes.)

Take care of your body

Eat well, sleep enough, move a lot, rest, and play. Work with a trusted healthcare practitioner who can help you with individualized nutrition plans, and who can help you learn about genetic vulnerabilities that can lead to anxiety and make appropriate corrections. For more on this, see next week's article, *Anxiety: Simple Strategies for Working with Your Biology*.

Tell someone you trust and debrief

Talk to a friend, family member, therapist, or healthcare practitioner. Tell your story. Let it all out no matter how crazy you feel you are at this moment. Let them listen and support you. We've actually all been there at one time or another.

Explore and heed the messages of anxiety

Are you out of balance physically—not sleeping enough or eating too much sugar and processed food? Are you burning the candle at both ends again? Are you taking care of everyone in your life and leaving no time for yourself? Did you make a mistake and now have the opportunity to learn a better way? I know it's scary but walk right up to it. You gotta wade through the muck to get to the other side.

Stay grounded

Those of us with anxious constitutions often feel like we're floating outside of our bodies. We need the calm of bodies that feel connected to safe, solid ground. Stand tall and feel the earth beneath you.

Breathe

Deep intentional breathing (deep breath in that fills the belly and chest over 3-6 seconds, brief pause at the top, followed by a slow breath out, repeat) is the surest and quickest way to move our attention from anxious thoughts into the body, anchoring us to the present moment. It is a balm to the nervous system, reducing the outflow of stress hormones.

Get into your heart

The art of feeling grateful is a great distraction from the worry and stress of the mind. It is also, according to the HeartMath Institute researchers, a wonderful antidote to anxiety. It calms the nervous system, quiets the mind, and centers us in the present moment.

Anxiety Re-Boot 911

We also need rescue strategies for the acute, crisis-level, anxiety that sometimes blindsides us. Our nervous systems are primed to keep us alive in this way and we all have our triggers. Many are absolutely necessary (the car that swerves right into us, our child in danger), and some are well-practiced responses to predictable triggers that don't necessarily serve a useful purpose, other than getting our attention by making us feel like crawling out of our skin and bemoan how horrible we are. What to do?

911 Grounding

For me this may mean *literally laying down on the ground*. I recently received a major criticism of an important piece I was writing and it sent me into a tailspin of anxiety. I was fortunately alone in my office, had enough presence of mind to know I needed grounding, and I sprawled out flat on my office floor—it felt so soothing! Grounding is about stimulating as many high sensory areas of the body as possible—this flood of sensory input from our bodies to our brains serves as a temporary pre-frontal lobotomy—interrupting our anxious thoughts and calming our nervous system. It worked well for me that day.

911 Breathing

Slow deep breaths assist the grounding process. As I lay on my office floor, I put my attention to my breath. Slow inhale, slow exhale. Repeat. Breathe in, feel my chest and belly expand, feel my body against the ground, breathe out slowly. Repeat. While this didn't eliminate my anxiety, it put some distance between me and my anxious thoughts and soothed my nervous system enough that I could think more rationally about what had just happened: the criticism was not a character assassination. While it perhaps could have been delivered in a nicer way, there were nuggets of truth and helpful information in there for me to learn from.

911 Movement

I can't always move with crisis-level anxiety, which is why I hit the floor and focused on my breathing that day in my office. But for less acute anxiety, and for when my mind is overly busy, movement is just the thing to help calm me and sort things out. We all have our movements of choice. For me it's walking, focusing on an intense workout, or vigorously cleaning and decluttering. Yoga, hiking, gardening, and doing chores are all great options. Thing is to not just sit there and stew—move and groove, get out of your mind and into your body.

911 talk to someone you trust

Tell someone you trust and who loves you how you are feeling. Let them listen, support you, and soothe your anxiety with love.

911 Power Pose

This was hard for me in the seconds and minutes after my senses were assaulted by the criticism and I was feeling like a failure, but it helped. I went between holding my arms overhead power pose and laying on the ground (what a sight I must have been!). Stand strong, feet slightly wider than hip-distance apart, knees slightly bent. Look up and raise your arms up over your head in a “V” shape. Breathe in deeply, exhale slowly. Hold the pose. Feel the strength of the pose. Punctuate it with affirmations: “this too shall pass,” or “help!”

Become More Aware of Your Anxious Thoughts

They tell a story that may not be true. When it's not a true emergency situation you must run from, resist believing or acting upon your anxious thoughts until you're calmer and have gleaned some perspective on the situation.

Resources

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Karyn Shanks, MD, is a physician who lives and practices in Iowa City. Her work is inspired by the science of Functional Medicine, body-mind principles, and wisdom gleaned from the transformational journeys of thousands of clients over her twenty-five-year career. Her work honors each individual and the power of their stories, their inner wisdom, and innate healing potential. She believes that the bones of healing are in what we do for ourselves. She is the author of *Liftoff*, a manual of energy recovery and healing through essential self-care practices.

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