This is a chapter excerpt from Guilford Publications.
Worry Less, Live More: The Mindful Way through Anxiety Workbook, by Susan M. Orsillo and Lizabeth Roemer.
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Understanding Fear and Anxiety

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Daring to live the life we want requires us to respond skillfully and effectively to our emotions. And we are most able to do that when we have a clear understanding of why they arise and how they work. Everyone talks about feeling anxious, worried, tense, or scared from time to time, but we may not be fully aware of what each of these words means, how to notice them in ourselves, and why we have these experiences. It may seem like these things are obvious. But we've found that one very helpful step in changing the ways we respond to anxiety in our lives is to have a better, more scientific understanding of what these natural reactions are and how to detect them.

In this chapter, we will . . .

1. Describe the difference between fear, anxiety, stress, and worry
2. Describe how to recognize clear and subtle signs of these states
3. Deepen our understanding of the fear response

Getting These Terms Straight

Fear—refers to the thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations that humans (and animals) naturally have *in the face* of threats. Threats can be physical dangers or the possibility of rejection. They can also be real and in the moment or imagined and in our minds.

You're crossing the street and you see a bus hurtling toward you; your heart races, your palms sweat, your thoughts scream out danger, and you run out of the way.

You hear someone yell something derogatory at you and move toward you in a threatening way. You feel your face flush and your blood pump through your body, as you are unsure whether to run or stand and defend yourself.

You are in a social situation where you might be judged, like when you give a presentation in front of a group, and you have the same physical response—racing heart, palms sweating—as well as thoughts that people do not like what you're saying or are not paying attention and urges to run from the room.

You vividly imagine taking a risk—like trying out for a sports team or auditioning for a play—and you have the same thoughts and sensations you would have if it were actually happening.

Anxiety—is closely connected to fear, but occurs in *anticipation* of a feared situation. Often this can be accompanied by sensations of muscle tension or uneasiness or feeling on edge and easily startled, as well as thoughts about what might go wrong. Anxiety usually leads us to want to avoid a situation or reminders of a situation.

Before a job interview, a first date, or doing something else new, you might notice that your mind is racing and your body is tense in anticipation of something potentially going wrong. This might lead you to put off preparing for the interview or to consider canceling the date.

Understanding the nature of fear, anxiety, stress, and worry is an important foundation for making changes that can help you dare to live the life you want.

Stress—is the response we have—thoughts, feelings, physical sensations—to any demand or stressor. Stressors can be happy occasions (new relationships, a promotion) or extremely unpleasant events (death of a partner, witnessing an attack). They can be events that already happened (illness) or something that could happen (possibly being fired from a job). Stressors can be sudden events (like a test or an argument) or ongoing experiences (a long commute, discrimination). When we have a stress response, hormones and nerve chemicals are released to help us cope. But if we are chronically stressed, these physical changes can be harmful to our health. Both fearful events and worries can elicit stress responses. We can experience chronic levels of stress that we aren't even aware of but that affect our emotions and our actions in problematic ways, such as leading us to act impulsively or feel irritable or reactive.

After the birth of a child, there are multiple demands on one's time, energy, and financial resources. You may feel love and excitement, but may also feel many new pressures.

Worry—is the cognitive component of anxiety and can often occur even well in advance of a potential threat. When we engage in worry, we often ask ourselves "what if" questions. It

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can seem like this is solving a problem, but instead we often just go from one potential problem to another and have difficulty focusing on the task at hand.

We revisit worry in more detail in Chapter 2.

As I (L. R.) think about writing this book I ask myself, "What if we don't explain these concepts clearly enough for people?" and "What if there is a better way to start things off?"

As you drive to work, you find yourself thinking "What if something happens to my mother on the long car ride she has planned for the weekend?"

As you try to fall asleep, you keep thinking "What if I sleep through my alarm? What if traffic is bad tomorrow and I'm late for my appointment?"

What Are Fear and Anxiety Made Up Of?

TRY THIS

Take a moment to think about how you know when you're anxious or afraid. It might help to think of a recent example of a time you felt this way. What do you notice? Are there sensations in your body? What kinds of thoughts do you have, or what do you tell yourself? What kinds of feelings come/came up for you in this situation? What do/did you do? After you have thought about this for a few moments, look at the lists on pages 16–17 to see if you recognize any responses listed there.

Each of us varies in the ways we commonly experience fear or anxiety.

- We may notice a lot of sensations in our bodies.
- We may notice our minds get very busy with a lot of rapidly occurring negative, fearful thoughts.
- We may notice that our minds go completely blank.
- Our behavioral signs of anxiety may be very clear to us (e.g., we procrastinate, avoid situations where we might experience anxiety, do not pursue things that matter to us).
- Our behavioral signs of anxiety might be subtle and hard to notice (e.g., we don't realize how many social opportunities we passed up until we bring more attention to the choices we are making).
- We may just feel fear when we are afraid.
- We may have a lot of different emotions—fear, anger, disgust, hopelessness—that arise all at the same time.
- We might be clear about exactly what emotions we are feeling.
- We might just notice we feel "bad" or "distressed" or even "numb" or "shut down."

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Physical Sensations

Rapid heart rate	Blushing	Headaches
Sweating	Dry mouth	Restlessness
Dizziness or lightheadedness	Stomach distress	Fatigue
Shortness of breath	Tension or soreness in the neck, shoulders, or any other muscles	Irritability
Trembling or shaky feelings		

Thoughts/Cognitive Symptoms

Worries about what might occur in the future (e.g., "No one will talk to me at the party," "I will fail this test," "My parents will become ill," "My children will not be happy," "I will end up alone," "I will have a panic attack at the supermarket," "I am going to get sick from the germs in this bathroom," "People won't take me seriously at school")

Ruminations about the past (e.g., "I can't believe I said that," "My boss thought I did a terrible job," "I wish I hadn't snapped at my partner that way," "Having nothing to say in that conversation was so humiliating")

Thoughts about being in danger (e.g., "I can't do this," "I am having a heart attack," "I am losing my mind")

Narrowed attention toward threat or danger, inattention to evidence of safety

Other Emotions

Sadness	Disgust	"Overwhelmed"
Anger	Shame	"Numb"
Surprise	Hopelessness	

Behaviors

Repetitive behaviors or habits (e.g., biting fingernails, picking skin, playing with hair, tapping feet)

Avoidance or escape (e.g., turning down a social invitation; passing up a promotion; calling in sick to work; making an excuse to cancel a social engagement; leaving an event early; asking someone else to make a phone call for you; taking an alternative route to avoid a bridge or tunnel; using a ritual, security object, or lucky charm to get through an anxious experience)

Distraction techniques (e.g., overeating, smoking, watching television, having a few glasses of wine or a couple of beers, sleeping, shopping, putting excessive energy into work, exercising vigorously to try to "tire out" your body, coming up with a busy schedule to keep your mind off worries)

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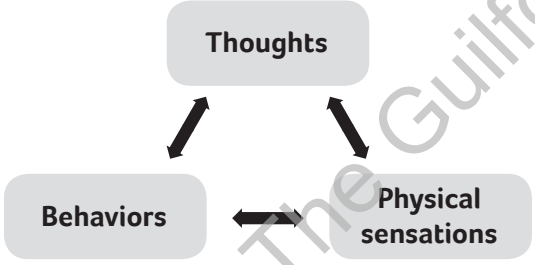
Doing what you "should" do (e.g., taking care of every responsibility you have to avoid being judged negatively or criticized)

Checking and overpreparing (e.g., asking others for reassurance, reading every report that your colleague wrote before writing your own, endlessly searching the Internet to find out how to prevent an accident from happening)

Attempts to gain power or protect oneself (e.g., acting aggressively toward others, using threatening language, lashing out in anger)

Yet, for all of us, no matter what sign of fear and anxiety we notice first, a reaction in one part of the system sets off reactions in the other. This is often called the cycle of fear and anxiety.



Tonia feels anxious in classes that require participation. When she wakes up in the morning before class, she feels her heart racing and a knot in the pit of her stomach, and she has thoughts like "I'm not going to be able to remember what I want to say" and "People are going to think I'm stupid." The sensations she feels in her body produce more anxious thoughts like "Oh no, everyone is going to see how nervous I am" and "It seems like I am really starting to freak out," and her anxious thoughts fuel more uncomfortable physical sensations (like sweaty palms). These thoughts and sensations also cue an urge to engage in certain behaviors. As she struggles with her thoughts, feelings, and urges, Tonia begins picking at her nails and reading and rereading her notes and almost misses her bus. Now she has thoughts like "I'm going to have to walk in late, and everyone will look at me and think I don't take school seriously, even though I really care about learning and this subject. Maybe I just shouldn't go at all." These thoughts lead her face to feel flushed, and she thinks, "Everyone will see how anxious I am." By the time she gets to class, she is experiencing so much physiological anxiety and her thoughts are racing so fast that she can't remember what she read the night before. She doesn't speak in class because she is overwhelmed by anxiety and afraid of the consequences. After class, she is frustrated with herself for not contributing when she had important points to make. She thinks, "This is only going to get worse."

Mario has an important interview for a promotion tomorrow. He plans a busy day to try to keep his mind off the interview: going to the gym in the morning, spending the day at the science museum with his family, and then watching a basketball game with his friends in the

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evening. He finds that as he does each of these activities his mind keeps going to the interview the following day. He thinks, "What if I don't give them the answers they're looking for? What if I can't show them how capable I am of being a leader? What if they already have someone else in mind for the job? What if my alarm doesn't go off and I'm late, making a bad impression?" With each thought he feels his body getting more and more tense. He finds himself so absorbed in planning out answers to imaginary questions that his children have to call out to him multiple times to show him an interesting exhibit at the museum. He notices his partner looks annoyed with him when this happens for the fifth time. He starts thinking, "Why can't I enjoy being here with my family? What's wrong with me? I keep thinking about the future and I'm not paying attention to the people I love. What if my partner gets fed up and leaves me?" He briefly notices feelings of sadness and fear, yet pushes these feelings away and continues running through anxious thoughts in his head. While his mind continues spinning through these worries, his partner has to call his name several times to indicate that it is time to go get lunch. Mario feels embarrassed and angry with himself that he keeps being distracted and vows to do better. Still, he finds himself thinking about the job interview tomorrow, how much he would like the position, and how worried he is that he won't be selected. His shoulders ache from all the tension he is holding.

Suzanne describes herself as feeling "stressed out" and "overwhelmed" but has trouble pinpointing exactly what she is thinking and feeling. She describes her physical sensations as "agitation" or feeling "on edge" or sometimes feeling very slowed down and unmotivated. She feels like every moment is filled with tasks to do, and these tasks run through her head continually. She often finds herself in the middle of a room, uncertain why she entered the room in the first place. She thinks that other people manage their lives better than she does and that she is unreasonably "emotional" and that she really needs to "get a grip." The more she thinks this, the more she finds herself feeling overwhelmed and the harder it is for her to accomplish her goals for the day. She rarely reflects on how she's feeling about her life, but when she does, she feels generally dissatisfied. She hasn't intentionally avoided pursuing more meaningful interpersonal relationships or advancement at work; she just always feels too overwhelmed to take on any new challenges and finds herself feeling stuck and hopeless.

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Tonia, Mario, and Suzanne (and all the rest of us) each have very distinct patterns of physical sensations, thoughts, and actions. Yet in each case we can see how sensations lead to thoughts and vice versa and how both can influence behaviors, with behaviors feeding back to influence thoughts and sensations. And habits of responding (with worry, self-critical thoughts, avoidance, or emotionally shutting down) intensify the cycle, making distress more intense and interfering with how fully we can lead our lives. One important step to making changes in these naturally occurring cycles is beginning to recognize them so that we can interrupt them and develop new patterns of responding.

In Chapter 3, we will more fully explore how to notice when habits of responding to early signs of fear and anxiety intensify and prolong distress. And Part II will explain how to develop new ways of responding that can move you forward.

TRY THIS

Consider the following questions: Tonia felt anxious about speaking in class and ended up staying silent. What do you think were some of the benefits of making that choice? What were some of the costs? In that moment of anxiety, Tonia acted as if the benefits outweighed the costs. If she were able to step out of the fear and anxiety of that moment, do you think she would come to a different conclusion?

Recognizing the early signs of anxiety can help you choose to react in ways that aren't as likely to prolong or increase your distress.

How to "Monitor" or Become More Aware of Experiences throughout the Day

One way to begin recognizing your responses is to start to "monitor" or notice when you're having certain thoughts, sensations, or emotions during the day. Throughout the book we will include forms to fill out to reinforce the habit of noticing your experience as it occurs and start to relate differently to it, as one important step in daring to live the life you want. You can use the forms right in the book, download the [redacted] *forms* so you can have extra copies, make your own forms, use a notebook to jot down observations, make notes on a smartphone, or take whatever approach is most manageable for you.

People find different strategies helpful for remembering to check in and pay attention to their experience:

- Checking in at certain times of day, like when you wake up, eat lunch, eat dinner, and go to bed
- Checking in as you switch tasks during the day
- Checking in when you notice you are feeling distressed (this can be more challenging, so be gentle with yourself while you try it)

TRY THIS

Now that you understand all the different signs of anxiety that may occur in your body, your mind, or through your behaviors, see if you can recognize these signs ***as they occur*** during the day. It might be helpful to use the Monitoring Your Fear and Anxiety form on page 20 to record them or download and use the monitoring form

More information on cultivating awareness and monitoring is in Chapter 6. If you find you really struggle with exercises involving noticing, you can skip ahead to that chapter for some more guidance.

Just note anything you notice in your body, mind, or behavior. Focus on simply observing what comes along with fear, anxiety, or stress for you. You may notice judgmental thoughts arising as you tune in to your responses. If that happens, see if you can just let those judgments be—no need to struggle with them or push them away—and as best you can, bring your attention back to simply observing. Observing and taking notes on

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Monitoring Your Fear and Anxiety

Date/Time	Current Situation	Physical Sensations	Thoughts	Behaviors

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your anxiety response is one way of learning to relate to it differently, so try it out and see what you notice. If you notice anything new in your experience, you can write this down too. Remember, the purpose of this exercise is to better learn to recognize the subtleties of your unique anxiety response, so it is important to record your observations in the moment as they are unfolding.

Understanding the Fear Response

In this section we focus primarily on fear. See Chapter 2 for a deeper look at the experience of worry.

Most people who struggle with fear and anxiety wish that these feelings would just go away. It can seem like feeling these feelings means there is something wrong with us. And we often feel alone in our struggle. We don't often know when friends, neighbors, or coworkers are struggling with anxiety unless they choose to tell us, because we can't see others' racing thoughts, knots in their stomach, or muscle tension. So we judge our own "insides" against other people's "outsides" and often conclude we need to get rid of these feelings to lead a good life. While wishing anxiety and fear away is very understandable, particularly when our struggle with these feelings can be so exhausting and time consuming, we are actually very lucky that we can so easily and readily experience fear. Fear serves an important function in our lives.

When we judge our own "insides" against other people's "outsides," we feel alone in our struggle with fear and anxiety.

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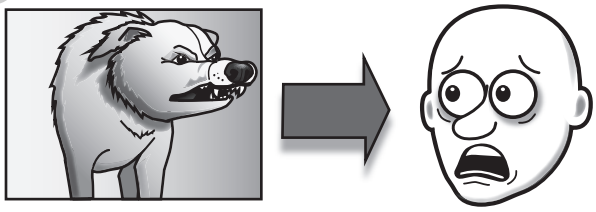
Fear and the Fight-or-Flight Response

We are biologically prepared to detect threat and respond with fear (blood rushing to our limbs, a perception of danger, an urge to fight or flee) when we encounter any potential threat. This immediate response has helped us survive.

Imagine we saw this dog:

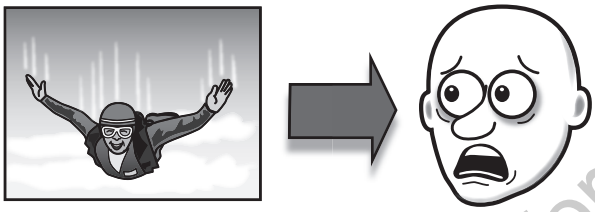


The best thing that can happen in this situation is that we experience an immediate spike in fear that leads us to run away from the dog, reducing the chances we get attacked. Our ancestors survived because of this instinctual response. They didn't question it at all, and followed the actions associated with the feeling.

Fear is tied to an urge to act in very specific ways—when we experience fear we feel

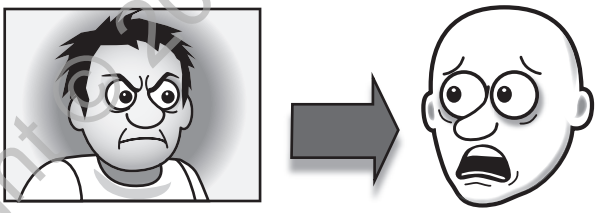
compelled to escape a situation or avoid entering it at all. We may also feel pressured to fight or attack the potential source of danger. This is referred to as a *fight-or-flight response*. Sometimes fear and anxiety in a situation where escape or attack does not seem possible lead to an urge instead to *freeze*, the way a deer does in headlights. These *action tendencies* can be experienced very strongly, so we often take the action suggested by our emotions. However, we do not have to act the way our emotions tell us to.

Imagine seeing this opportunity:



It is definitely true that we could get hurt skydiving. So noticing one's fear and avoiding this activity is one perfectly reasonable response. On the other hand, some people may really value "risky" activities like skydiving, skiing, or even riding a roller coaster. Some activities people think are "fun" require us to notice we are afraid, notice the urge to avoid or escape, and make the intentional choice to try the activity anyway.

A similar kind of learning happens with social cues. It makes sense that we learn to fear this angry person:



Someone who is angry could physically attack us or say something to us that could make us feel uncomfortable or guilty. So the safest response would be to avoid or escape from this person. Yet if this is a relationship with someone we value—like a boss or our partner—and the "threat" to us is uncomfortable (we are going to hear that we made a mistake on a report or acted inconsiderately) but not dangerous, we may actually want to approach the angry person. Again, rather than responding instinctively, we may need to notice our fear and also consider what matters to us personally when choosing a response. **Many of the activities that make life rewarding, enriching, and satisfying also elicit some fear. It is impossible to take risks or face challenges without feeling these feelings.** Using the awareness skills presented throughout this book, we can learn to pause when strong emotions arise and make a choice about how to respond given what is most important to us in that moment.

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TRY THIS

Certain activities that make life rewarding, enriching, and satisfying—such as doing something adventurous in our free time, taking on a challenge at school or work, or asking someone out on a date—are pretty much guaranteed to elicit some fear. *Can you think of some action you have thought about taking or some activity you considered trying that has these two characteristics? Something that would likely add to your quality of life and would probably cause you to feel some fear?*

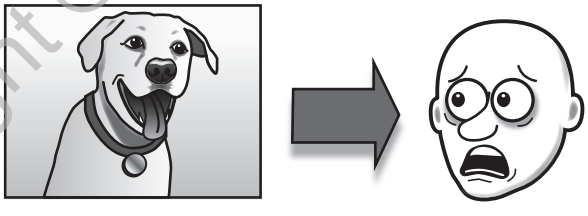
Fear and Generalization

Another thing that can cause us to struggle with fear is that our learning can generalize from one situation to another. That is, we can learn fear to a specific cue so strongly that we also respond fearfully to other cues that were present at the time or to cues that are related to the initially threatening situation.

This ability to generalize can be extremely adaptive. For example, if you learned to fear and avoid black widow spiders after being bitten by a brown recluse spider, because your fear of spiders has generalized to all spiders, you might be less likely to get bitten by a dangerous, venomous spider.

Through our capacity for learning, generalizing protects us from real threats but also makes us more vulnerable to new anxiety triggers.

Generalizing can, however, also lead us to fear and avoid situations and objects and situations that are not at all dangerous. For example, while it might be helpful to feel fear and avoid the attack dog illustrated earlier, through our tendency to generalize our learning we can come to have the same kind of response when we see this much less threatening-seeming dog.



Although this second dog may not seem as threatening to someone who has never encountered an attack dog, someone with that history may home in on the physical features this dog shares with the other dog that could be seen as threatening (e.g., sharp teeth and claws). This generalization might lead us to stay away from the less threatening dog instinctively, without thought, and keep us from learning that this dog is not dangerous.

Also, while it may be adaptive to feel fear in response to a threatening facial expression, through generalization learning we may find ourselves having a similar response to someone who looks more like this:

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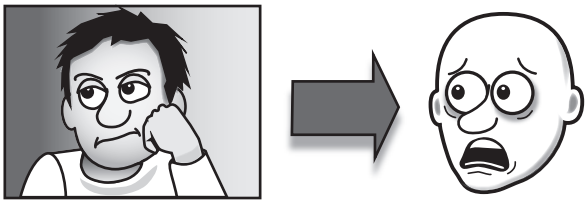

Expressions of boredom or disinterest can be painful if we care about the person making them, but they are not necessarily threatening and may not warrant the same kind of response we have to an angry expression. What causes us to make this kind of generalization? On the one hand, select *physical similarities* between the two expressions could promote generalization. For example, a slight frown can mean someone is starting to get angry or is focused intensely on thinking about something else. During the expression of both anger and boredom, one's eyebrows tend to be low on the eyes (whereas they tend to be rounded and high when one is happy). On the other hand, humans can also generalize their fear of one object or situation to another based on *conceptual similarities* between the two. Objects and situations develop conceptual similarities based on our learning. For example, milk, coffee, and lemonade are all liquids, and based on physical attributes milk and coffee are no more similar than lemonade and coffee. But through learning we have come to closely associate milk and coffee. So based on our unique life experiences, we can generalize the fear of one object or situation to another, even if the two are not linked to each other by physical characteristics.

This generalization of fear can be particularly strong when we have had traumatic, extremely distressing experiences. That kind of learning (being exposed to danger or humiliation) can lead to fear being triggered easily by a whole range of internal and external cues. This can make us feel like our fear is unreasonable or "crazy." Yet the evolutionary aspect of this fear learning remains—at times of significant danger, it makes sense that we learn fear very strongly and in a very broad way, so as to maximize protection and our own safety. Unfortunately, this very intense, generalized fear response can severely restrict our lives because we fear and avoid such a wide range of cues. Understanding how and why we have such strong emotional responses across so many situations when we have experienced trauma is a first step toward learning to respond differently when our fear response is triggered.

"Unlearning" Fear

Recently scientists discovered something new about how fear is learned and how people can come to approach things they used to fear and avoid. Surprisingly, once we learn to fear something, we actually can never "unlearn" this association. So if Anh watches her friend Bree get bitten by the class pet Harry the hamster, Anh will always have some connection in her brain between hamsters and danger.

The good news is that we can learn new associations. For example, if Anh works in a pet store throughout high school, handles hamsters all the time, and never gets bitten, she will also have some connections in her brain between hamsters and harmlessness.

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This means that to learn to be more comfortable around things, people, and activities we fear we have to do the *exact opposite* of what our emotions are telling us to do. The only way to become less fearful of something we value is to approach it and have some new experience with it that teaches us it is not threatening. We truly do have to dare to live the life we want—as developing the courage to approach the things we fear is the best way for us to change how we respond to them. And when we approach what we fear, we actually have to keep our minds open and present to the situation. If we are too frightened to pay attention and we distract ourselves, the new learning cannot occur.

Approaching what we fear is a daring act, but it's the best way to change how we respond to what scares us.

Spiders and Snakes

Interestingly, we are much more likely to learn to fear things that used to be a threat to human survival—even though those threats are no longer as dangerous as they used to be. For example, people are seven times more likely to have a fear of spiders than they are a fear of driving. Yet approximately 37,000 U.S. citizens die in car accidents every year, whereas about eight people a year living in the United States die as a result of a venomous spider bite. We are biologically hardwired to instinctively fear those things that were most dangerous to our ancestors, even though they may no longer pose a significant threat. That may explain why it is difficult to rationalize away a fear even when we logically know we are not in danger.

Although facing our fears may sound simple, in practice it can be extremely challenging. Many people live their whole lives avoiding people, situations, or activities that could elicit fear. Throughout the book we will introduce you to skills and strategies we hope will help you tap into your courage to live life fully and reduce your struggle with painful emotions.

Fear and anxiety are adaptive, natural responses that serve an important function in our lives. One reason we struggle with fear is that we think it can take control of our lives. Because we feel the urge to fight, flee, or freeze in the face of fear, it can seem like these emotions cause us to behave in ways that may interfere with what matters most to us. Throughout the book, we will help you develop the skills of noticing when these urges arise and then choosing whether to follow the urge or to engage in a different action. This is an important step toward daring to live the life you want, because often the things that matter to us involve moving toward things we fear, rather than away from them. For instance, if we want to develop an intimate relationship, we have to open up and be vulnerable, even though anxiety will naturally arise due to fear of rejection or hurt.

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TRY THIS

Fear and anxiety are strong habits for all of us, meaning that we respond to them without really noticing what we're doing. To make meaningful changes in our lives, the first step is to start noticing what is unfolding in the present moment. This will help us pause and consider

new ways of responding. One way to learn to do this is to practice noticing even the most simple and automatic actions we take. Try Mindful Walking and see what you notice:

Take 5 minutes each day and walk with awareness. Inhale as you lift one foot, exhale as you place it on the ground, inhale as you lift the other foot, and exhale as you place it on the ground. Notice what it feels like to lift a foot and what it feels like as you place it on the ground. Notice your posture and the sensations of your breath. As your mind wanders, bring it back to your steps. Be gentle with your mind—it will naturally wander, and you may suddenly find that you sped up or started to do something else. Just return each time you notice to paying attention to what it feels like to walk. Some people do this in a circle, which you can try if you have room. If the weather permits, you can do it outside and possibly notice other sounds and smells while you're walking. Or you can do it in a very small space in your home or simply walk up and down a hallway or a room. There is no right or wrong way to practice. Just set aside some time to pay attention on purpose while you walk and see what it's like to be aware of this very habitual behavior. You might write down any observations and return to them later in the book when we talk more about building this awareness muscle.

Part II will visit awareness exercises in more depth, and Chapter 8 will describe mindfulness to you. But you can do practices without reading any of that first and just see what you notice.

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Fear Is Learned

- Fear helps us avoid real physical dangers.
  - These are natural, human responses and are helpful to us.
- Fear is easy to learn.
  - Our nervous system has evolved so that we can readily detect and learn danger, to keep us safe.
- Fear and anxiety can easily spread to other things.
  - We easily learn to fear things that are similar to, or associated with, objects or situations that we perceive as threatening.
- Fear cannot be unlearned.
  - The only way we come to be less afraid of an object or an activity is to have lots of experience with it that teaches us we are safe.
- Some fears are biologically inherited.
  - We are more likely to fear things that threatened our ancestors' survival. We are "hardwired" to very quickly learn to fear and avoid snakes and spiders.

Questions You May Have at This Point

Q: *I feel like I am more anxious than other people I know—is this just how my personality is and it can never change?*

A: Some people certainly experience more intense anxiety or respond more quickly to situations with anxiety. This can happen for a number of reasons. Some people are genetically predisposed to be more anxious. Others have experiences in their lives, like trauma, stressful life events, difficult family relationships, the absence of a strong social support system, discrimination, or limited financial resources, that lead them to learn to feel unsafe more easily in a wide variety of situations. And then, telling yourself that you are an "anxious person" can maintain this style of responding, as well as limit your life, all of which further feeds the cycle of anxiety. However, none of this means that it cannot change. It may take more practice and more patience to make changes in very well-worn patterns of responding. And some of us may continue to have an anxious response more easily. Yet we can still make substantial changes in the ways we respond to our anxious reactions by understanding them more fully, learning how to respond to them differently, and choosing actions that bring meaning to our lives. These changes can all change the intensity and duration of our cycles of anxiety.

See Chapter 3 for a more in-depth discussion of understandable responses to anxiety and distress and an introduction to strategies to help us change them; Chapter 12 presents a more expanded discussion of strategies.

Q: *I've had very painful, traumatic experiences in my life. Is there really a way to address the anxiety that comes from those kinds of experiences?*

A: Unfortunately, many of us have real-life experiences of threat, danger, humiliation, injustice, and/or violence that naturally lead to feeling unsafe in the world. Often recovery from these kinds of experiences requires processing them directly in some way, such as through therapy or a supportive network or affinity group. If you've done these things and still feel the very natural sense of anxiety and it is triggered easily by cues in the environment, you may find the strategies in this book helpful. A very important part of changing our relationship to these kinds of responses from traumatic or other harmful experiences is understanding that our reactions are natural given what we've been through. Having compassion for ourselves and these reactions can help us choose how we respond so that we can broaden our lives again and have new, rewarding experiences despite past or ongoing stressors.

Developing understanding and compassion is challenging—we address this in more depth in Chapters 7 and 12.

Q: *You keep talking about needing to be more aware of the process of anxiety—I am painfully aware of my anxiety. Maybe this isn't the approach for me.*

A: This is the paradox of anxiety—on the one hand, anxiety leads us to be extremely aware of every anxious thought and

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sensation we have. So it makes sense to think the solution is to pay less attention or get it out of our minds. Unfortunately, as we discuss later, we can't actually completely avoid these sensations. Another option, therefore, is to broaden our awareness. Doing so can help us gain a broader perspective on the situation. We may also notice habits that increase our fear and find opportunities to respond differently. Making these changes can diminish our anxiety and help us lead a more fulfilling life.

In Chapter 4 we will explore the complexities and costs involved in trying to completely avoid painful emotions.

We examine the subtle but critical differences between accepting and tolerating painful emotions in Chapters 7 and 12.

Q: *Are you saying that I have to tolerate anxiety because it won't go away?*

A: Although we are saying that fear and anxiety are a natural part of life, we are not suggesting that you "grin and bear it." We have found that by understanding anxiety, noticing its many components as it evolves, learning to relate to anxiety differently (with curiosity and compassion rather than self-criticism), and clarifying what is important, people can make significant changes in their lives, which are accompanied by less intense, less long-lasting experiences of anxiety, as well as increased feelings of joy and satisfaction.

Q: *I'm not sure that I really experience anxiety. My heart doesn't race, and I don't feel scared very often. I just feel that my mind is very busy. I am always preparing for what comes next and what might go wrong, and I can't easily turn my attention to other things. Is that anxiety?*

A: You are describing worry, a common cognitive component of anxiety. We address worry in more depth in Chapter 2.

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