

# **The Little Book of Anxiety**

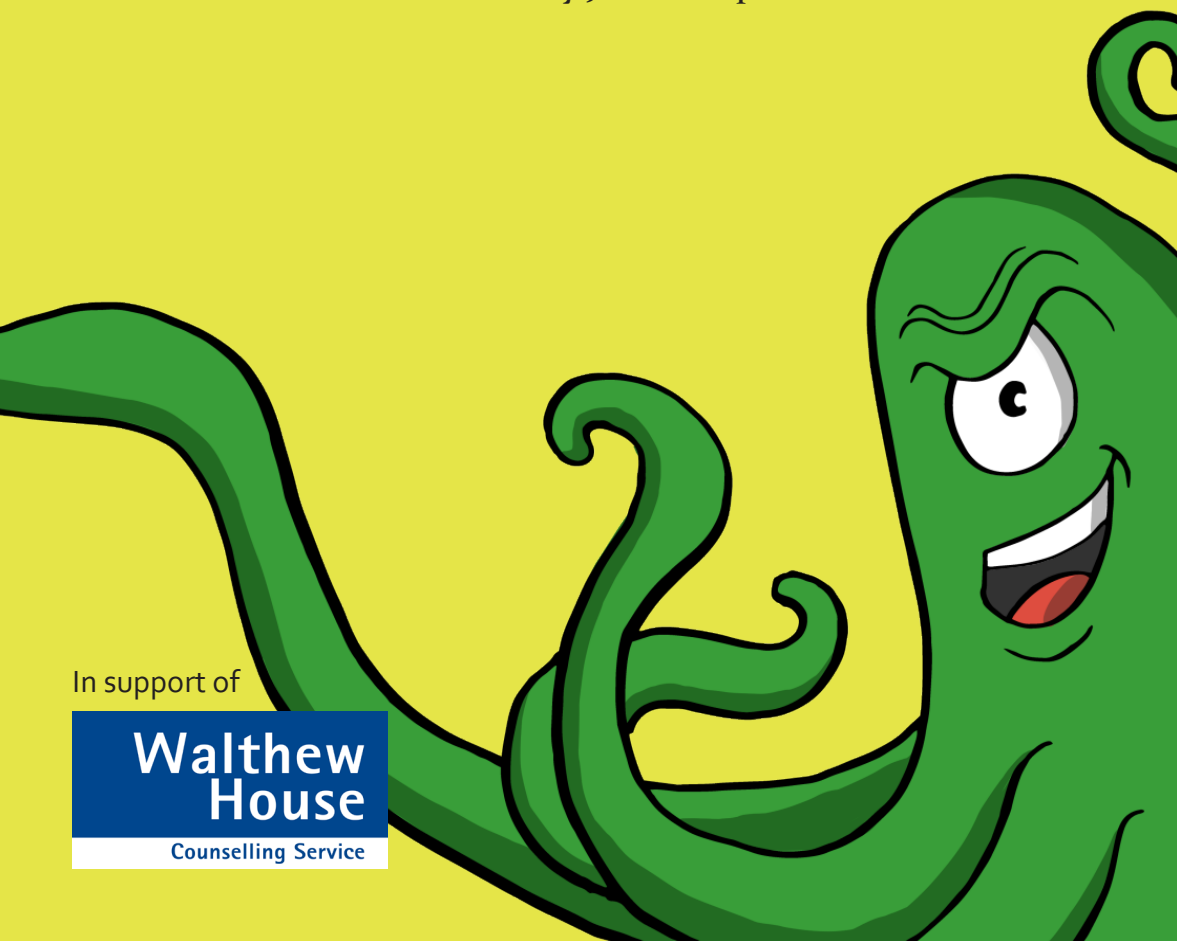
**Chris Taylor**

Illustrated by John Cooper

In support of

**Walthew  
House**

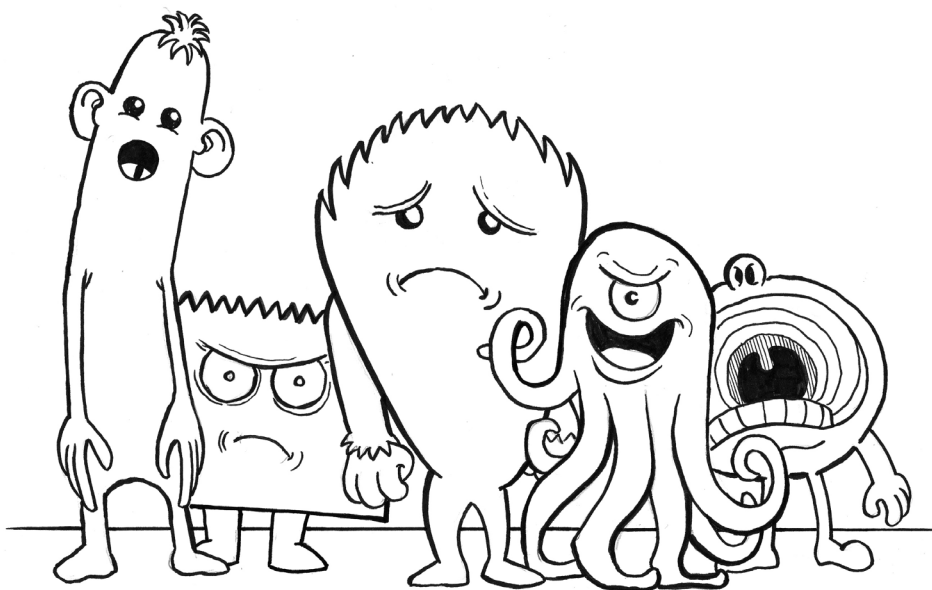
Counselling Service



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# Foreword

Let me introduce myself; my name is Chris Taylor and I have been a counsellor for longer than I care to remember. Over that time I have become increasingly aware of the massive impact anxiety has on our lives. I've also realised with the best will in the world I can only ever help a small fraction of that number. So I began wondering how could I help more people, and it was those thoughts that are the origin of this book.

If you have ever doubted the existence of anxiety in ourselves and the society we live in, go shopping on Christmas Eve. Anxiety is that feeling of discomfort all around us. It manages to turn enjoyment into at best a chore, at worst complete burnout.



## The Little Book of Anxiety

Franklin D. Roosevelt famously said, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself”, and in many ways he was right. Of course, (unfortunately) it is a bit more complicated than that. Anxiety can be debilitating and at its worst downright frightening, and it has the ability to play tricks on all of us. There was not enough space in this book to deal with all the other conditions closely associated with anxiety; Intrusive Thoughts, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Free Floating Anxiety to name but three. Please forgive me, maybe next time!

However, I have included Panic Attacks; for the simple reason, I have rarely if ever worked with somebody experiencing anxiety who did not also experience panic attacks. So you could say panic, attacks, are included by popular demand. As for the rest of the book I hope my intentions are self-evident. I wanted to create a book that was easy for anyone to use and follow, no complicated theoretical debate, just solid practical help. Easy to follow particularly if you are feeling distressed at the time. Everything contained within this book, I have used in my work. So I know it works; all you have to do is decide what looks like the best fit for you. A word of warning; it's very tempting to charge straight ahead and go for possible solutions to your difficulties and ignore the importance of keeping safe. If you are not in a safe place when you start working on your anxiety it can very easily unravel and bite you on the bum so let's get safe first.

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I will leave you now with two important thoughts, if you are feeling particularly anxious or worry and self doubt are starting to dominate your life. Please, please talk to somebody about how you're feeling. Secondly and this is a point easily forgotten, we all possess the power to change things for the better.



# Introduction

Erma Bombeck described anxiety as a rocking chair, “it gives you something to do but it doesn’t get you very far.” If that sounds familiar then you probably need to read the rest of this book.

So why is anxiety such a big thing? That’s a very good question, and one I hope to go some way towards answering. Of course, anxiety isn’t new and it is definitely part of what it is to be human. In fact, my first tip is to recognise whether you are an anxious person or not.

By the way; if you’re not an anxious person you can leave now.



Let’s try not to think of anxiety like the enemy within, it is not some alien inhabiting our body, it is very much part of who and what we are. Anxiety is something we all share there is some of it in every single one of us. By acknowledging this about ourselves we are getting off to a very good start, believe me!

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It's all too easy to think about anxiety as an entirely negative thing but it's not! It has its uses or we wouldn't have it in the first place. First and foremost, like fear it is there to protect us. Also like fear it can energise us into action and to do things we wouldn't normally do, solve problems and mobilise us to take the fight to where it needs to go.



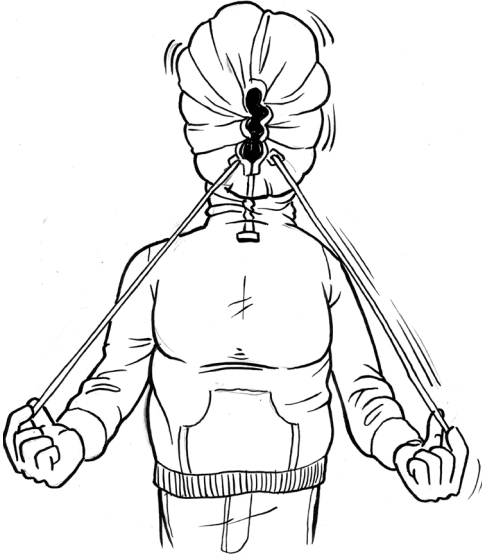
That's the good stuff; what about the not so good stuff? One thing is for certain, worrying about worry never helped anybody. Second tip let's not worry about it, let's do something about it.

Here comes the government health warning, the dark stuff and why we all need to work with our own anxieties.

We all have anxieties, usually they developed from some incident in our past that we found either traumatic or in some way disturbing and for whatever reason was not dealt with at the time. However, if we don't recognise the event or possible

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series of events for what they are and do nothing about them, there is a very real possibility they can grow into something quite ugly and increasingly difficult to deal with.



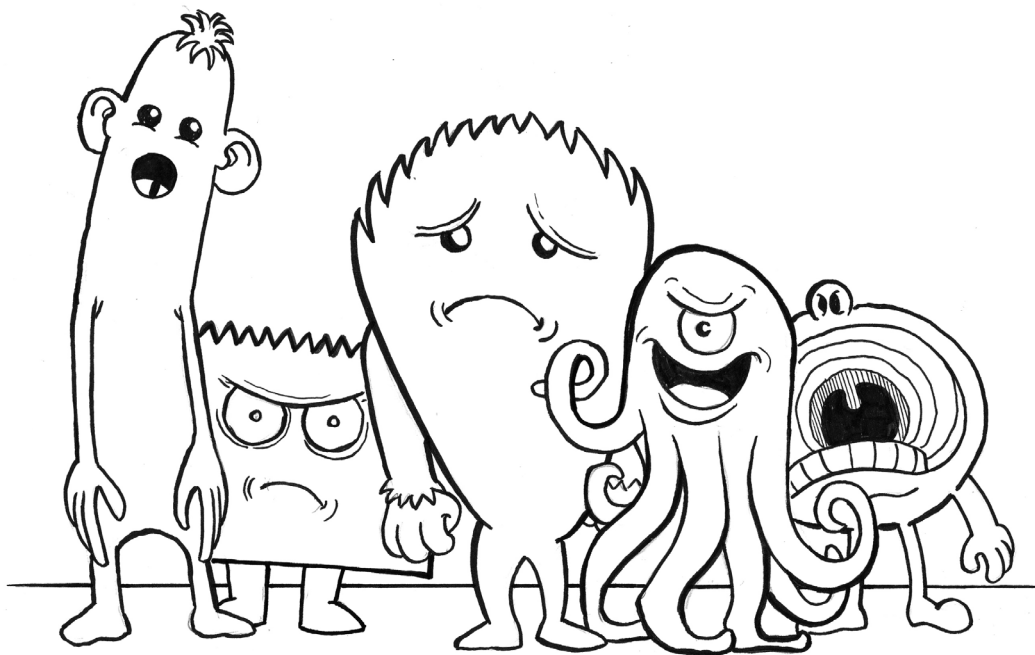
It's always worth remembering anxiety is an empire builder, if it sees any chink in our emotional armour it will quickly occupy its newfound territory, particularly if we don't recognise it for what it is.

Don't worry help is at hand.

So let's recap; what have we learnt so far? It's not a good idea to think about anxiety as a bad thing, it is very much part of who we are. The important thing is to recognise it and do something about it, if we think it's getting out of hand. Perhaps the most important thing is to remember You Are Not Alone. This is something that affects all of us, it's what we do about it that important.



# What does Anxiety Look Like?



Anxiety can be tricky to identify especially in ourselves. Anger for example is often confused with anxiety and that is probably not surprising because in most cultures anxiety is more acceptable than expressions of anger. However, if you are feeling desperate, nervous, shocked, or threatened these are all emotions closely associated with fear and where there's fear there is usually anxiety.

**Some physical things to look out for:**

- rapid and/or irregular heartbeat
- fast breathing
- weakened or tense muscles
- sweating
- churning stomach or loose bowels
- dizziness
- dry mouth

**Some psychological things to look out for:**

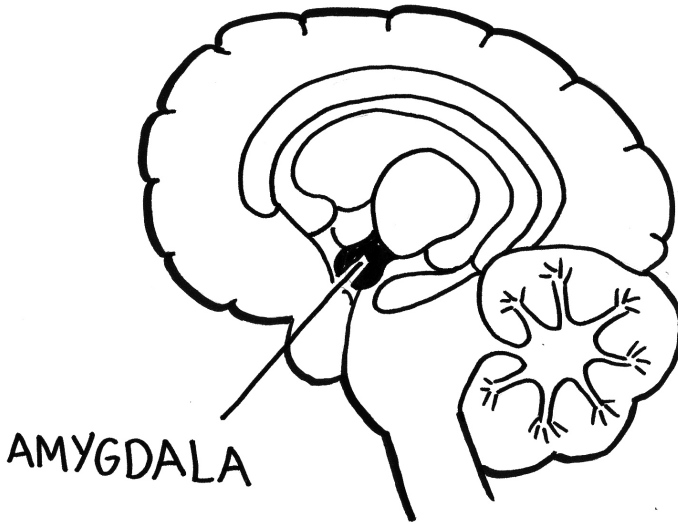
- trouble sleeping
- lack of concentration
- feeling irritable
- feeling depressed
- loss of self-confidence

Please forgive me I will have to get a little bit technical here.

The part of our brain responsible for learning and memory (the Amygdala) is also interestingly responsible for our behaviour and response to fear. Now you're not telling me there isn't some connection there!

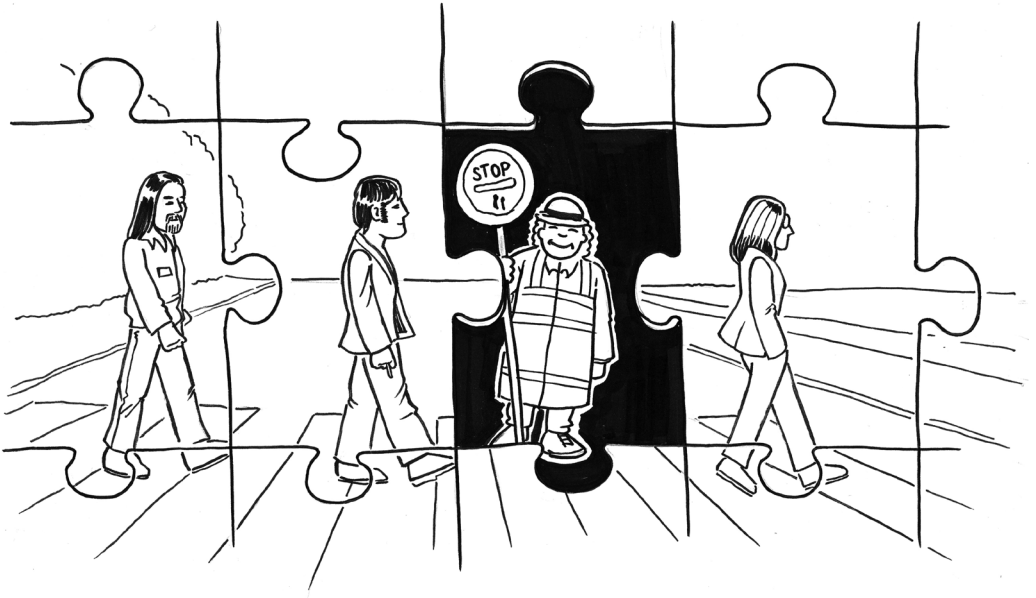
The amygdala is usually tightly controlled by the Prefrontal Cortex and it will decide if the information it is receiving is threatening or not. However, it appears if we have issues

around anxiety, the brain can make an incorrect decision about what to fear and the amygdala will then put the whole body in fight, flight or freeze mode.



Now I suspect you're asking **why does it do that?**

As the politicians say; that's a very good question; the truth is we don't really know! One theory that makes some sense to me goes like this. The brain doesn't like gaps; if it hasn't got all the information it needs it will fill in the gaps, with what seems to fit but this might not be right because it didn't have all the information in the first place. It's rather like seeing something out of the corner of your eye and deciding what it is without turning to look at it properly and then decide.



The amygdala plays an important role in processing our emotions but it can also match identities, for example, facial recognition, sight, sounds and smells. This is known as a “Pattern Matching” if the amygdala recognises a situation that caused us distress in the past, it will automatically identify any similar situation in the future and this can be a source of anxiety. It seems all these functions are closely linked to our survival and keeping us safe. So if we encounter something that proved dangerous in the past, the amygdala reminds us of that danger even though everything else may now be different. So its warning maybe no longer necessary but we will still get the message and the emotional response.

One thing is for certain anxiety can and does affect our perception of the world around us. At the risk of getting a

bit metaphysical, I think there is a very real possibility that if we could take in everything at the same time our brains would have simply be overwhelmed by information we could not process. So perhaps that is the true nature of anxiety is a focusing mechanism. By excluding and concentrating on certain information, it could be argued anxiety helps to keep us safe.

# Panic Attacks

## **So what is a panic attack?**

If you have ever experienced a sudden episode of intense fear and anxiety without any obvious reason, you have probably experienced a panic attack. One thing everybody agrees on is that they are terrifying, extremely frightening and physically and emotionally exhausting experiences.

## **Some physical things you might notice if you're having a panic attack:**

- Rapid shallow breathing
- Your heart racing
- Tightness in the chest
- Trembling and shaking
- A choking feeling
- Sweating
- Feeling sick
- Blurred sight.

## **Some emotional things you might notice when having a panic attack.**

- Fear of dying
- Feeling detached from your surroundings
- Confused and disoriented.

## **How long does a panic attack last?**

The official figures go like this; a panic attack will peak within 10 minutes, then begin to subside. This period can last up to an hour but more usually somewhere between 20 to 30 minutes. Personally having worked a lot with people experiencing panic attacks, I suspect the come down period is much shorter, somewhere in the region of six minutes on average. Is also possible to have a series of panic attacks and this clearly makes it more difficult to work out any exact timings.

## **So why do I think that?**

I think what people are feeling is the after effects of a panic attack, if you like the emotional and physical fallout. I know for anyone experiencing a panic attack it feels so much longer but I strongly suspect it's not.



### **I can hear you asking why?**

For one simple and very straightforward reason, I believe the body cannot stand a sustained physical and emotional attack for anything up to an hour. I suspect the body recognises threat to our wellbeing and shuts the attack down relatively quickly.

### **So can you die from a panic attack?**

The good news is, no one has ever died of a panic attack.

### **So what can we do?**

I feel getting to know your panic attack and how it works is quite simply the best way to start.

A good question to ask yourself; is there any particular situation, person or event that happens before you have a panic attack? This is known as a '**trigger**'.





I don't think anything happens without a reason. Now this might be historical, something buried deep in our past, something we have forgotten or chosen to forget.

### Submerged

memories like this can be triggered by sights, smells, sounds and even taste. Any one of our senses can trigger memories both good and bad

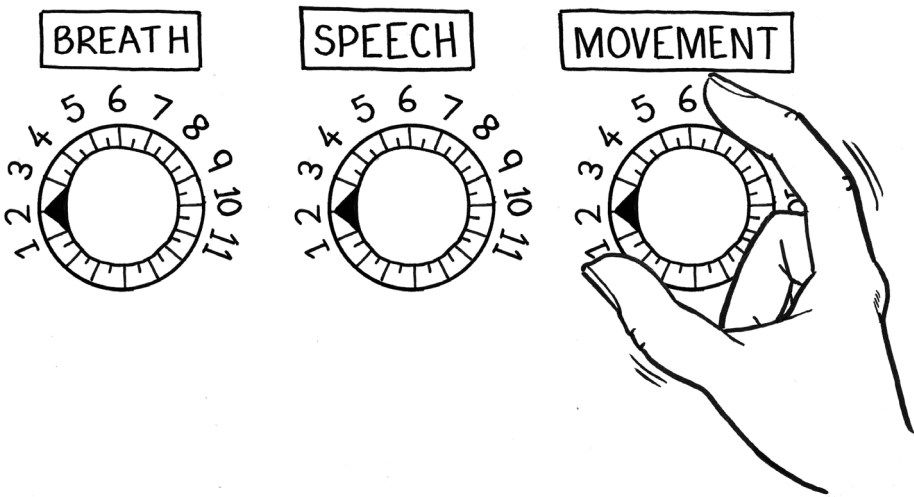


Panic attacks can also be triggered by phobias, particularly negative emotions and genetic factors can also play their part. If you are depressed or are bipolar for example, chances are you're more likely to experience panic attacks.

## So can we stop a panic attack?

I think the short answer is yes; if we know the origin of our panic attacks we are in a much better position to do something about them. That's why it's so important to work out what triggers the attack.

Next thing have a plan in place, so knowing what lies at the heart of your panic attack will be extremely helpful here. For example, you could know what situations, people, things to avoid or at least be cautious of.



Slow everything down; remember our old friend the amygdala? Well slowing things down allows the frontal cortex time to examine what is going on and if it decides there is no threat it will shut the amygdala down, So you will not experience any fight, flight or freeze reactions.

One way of doing this is to practice deep breathing, this makes sense on two counts. Firstly you don't require any equipment and secondly one of the most common features of a panic attack is shallowness of breathing or "hyperventilating" if you prefer! By focusing on your breathing you refocus attention away from the attack and give you and your brain time to realise you are not under attack in any way.

Alternatively you could find an object to focus on, you could notice its colour, shape or even texture. This works in a very similar way by focusing your attention away from the attack and giving your brain time to realise there is no threat present .

In a similar way you could also try Visualisation, this technique engages with our creativity and I suspect that is why it can be so powerful and so effective. It also turns us into the objective observer, without judgement we can safely leave fear behind. Try and imagine yourself in some place where you were happy and felt entirely safe, for example on a beautiful beach somewhere, try to think of every detail of your surroundings and that moment in time.

Visualisation can be used in a variety of different ways, remember the last time you felt anxious and frightened, what did it feel like? Did it perhaps feel like something tightening into a knot in the pit of your stomach. If this sounds familiar visualisation can be very helpful. Start to turn the abstract

fear into something concrete something you can work with by asking it series of questions:

- How big is it?
- How heavy is it?
- What does it look like?
- What colour is it?

Remarkably the abstract fear that was overwhelming you has become more manageable, even more understandable. By turning the abstract into the concrete we can start to control our fears rather than letting our fears control us.

To sum up; you know how to identify a panic attack, also it's not going to kill you. You have an idea of how to work with your panic attacks and some strategies that might help you keep on the right side of a panic attack. I think a panic attack is like falling off a cliff, the idea is to slow things down and stop you from falling over the edge.