

*a n i n s t a n t h e l p b o o k f o r t e e n s*


# the mindfulness & acceptance workbook for teen anxiety

activities to help you overcome  
fears & worries using acceptance  
& commitment therapy

**\* cope with stress**

**\* deal with difficult  
thoughts & emotions**

**\* build resilience**



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FOREWORD BY LOUISE L. HAYES, PhD

*"The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Teen Anxiety* by Turrell, McCurry, and Bell is an excellent resource for anxious teens and the adults who want to help them. The book is divided into two main sections: Parts I and II, which provide psychoeducation; and Parts III through VII, which cover skills such as defusion, valuing, and more. Chapter layouts are consistent and aesthetically pleasing. Each chapter includes didactic information, stories, and activities that normalize and concretize difficult ideas. The acronyms used throughout the book (DOTS, LLAMA) are quite catchy and useful for adolescent readers. Links to audio files will benefit adolescents too! Highly recommended!"

—**Amy R. Murrell, PhD**, associate professor in the department of psychology at the University of North Texas, coauthor of *The Joy of Parenting*, and author of *I See Me*

"Rather than telling people what to think, this workbook encourages teens to try things and learn from their own experiences. Readers who give these exercises a go will gain so much and feel supported along the way."

—**Ben Sedley**, clinical psychologist, and author of *Stuff That Sucks*

"This is a truly excellent self-help book for teens struggling with anxiety—which, as far as I can see, means just about every teenager on the planet! In teen-friendly language, this book takes readers step-by-step through a wealth of powerful tools and strategies, to help them develop resilience, courage, and confidence to cope with the many challenges of this difficult phase of life. So, if you want to help teens live mindfully, be more self-compassionate, get on well with their peers, and act effectively guided by their own core values, this book will make it a whole lot easier for you to do that: a great resource both for parents to use with their kids, and for therapists to use with their clients."

—**Russ Harris**, author of *The Happiness Trap* and *ACT Made Simple*

"Turrell, McCurry, and Bell provide an extremely practical and extraordinary resource for helping teens who are struggling with anxiety, fears, and worries. Written by three very experienced acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) clinicians, *The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Teen Anxiety* is highly engaging, compassionate, and accessible. The book provides a step-by-step guide that really helps teens with anxiety to stop running away from anxiety and mindfully embrace the fullness of their values and lives. This book is a must-have that every teen and anyone who works with young people will treasure."

—**Emanuele Rossi, PsyD**, licensed clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, peer-reviewed ACT trainer, and ACT instructor at Scuola di Psicoterapia Cognitiva in Italy



“If you work with young people who struggle with worry or anxiety, I strongly recommend this book. It does an excellent job of helping young people accept themselves and their worries, whilst also encouraging them to build a life inside value and meaning. It has a lot of easy-to-use worksheets, which can be delivered flexibly in different stages of therapy. The exercises follow a nice progression. They start out by normalizing and raising awareness about anxiety, and then gradually shift to building skills and creating new patterns of behavior. Practitioners and the young people they work with will find this book extremely helpful.”

—**Joseph Ciarrochi**, professor at the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education at Australian Catholic University, and coauthor of *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life for Teens* and *The Thriving Adolescent*

“Every teen that struggles with anxiety needs to read this book! It’s based on a treatment that has strong scientific support, is written by experts, and is also jargon-free. However, the real jewels of this book are the many concrete exercises that help teens learn and explore that they’re more than anxiety, figure out what really matters to them, allow those anxious feelings ‘to be,’ and practice how to handle anxiety-provoking situations step-by-step. This is a fantastic book for teens, clinicians working with teens, and parents who want to get extra help for their kids!”

—**Patricia E. Zurita Ona, PsyD**, founder of East Bay Behavior Therapy Center, author of *Parenting a Troubled Teen* and *Escaping the Emotional Rollercoaster*, and coauthor of *Mind and Emotions*

“What a great book! As a clinician who specializes in anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) work with children, adolescents, and families, I’m happy to see a workbook specific to teens. This book will be a very useful tool for clinicians doing exposure-based work with adolescents. It is written in a down-to-earth style that will be easily consumed by teens. It’s also well structured to allow a gradual introduction to skills critical to facing fears. I’ll certainly be handing it out to my young clients.”

—**Lisa W. Coyne, PhD**, cofounder and director of the New England Center for OCD and Anxiety ([www.newenglandocd.org](http://www.newenglandocd.org)), founder and senior clinical consultant of the McLean OCD Institute for Children and Adolescents, and assistant professor at Harvard Medical School.

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# foreword

Young people are the future. We adults have a responsibility to help them reach their potential so they can create a future that is rich with vitality and meaning. Anxiety whispers quietly, “Be small, stay safe,” whereas the acceptance and mindfulness process found in this book gives a call to “Live boldly, try your best.” It is this latter message that we want young people to hear.

The activities inside this self-help book rest on two important premises.

The first is a message of compassion to young people: you are not broken. Anxiety has become such a problem that it has reached extraordinarily high levels. This tells us that it is not a problem just within the individual. It is bigger than that. Anxiety can be precipitated in young people through biological and developmental vulnerabilities, broader social and community factors, and even global threats of political and environmental change. For many young people, anxiety comes through a combination of these internal and external threats. This means our answers for them must also be embedded in a broad context, not only looking within a young person for what is wrong, but also firmly embedding the issue in their context of learning, society, and community.

The second premise is that anxiety is not your enemy; it is a message. For generations, the dominant culture has said the opposite, that anxiety must be controlled, ignored, turned off, and shut down. Research now shows us that control is often the problem, not the solution. When we give this control agenda to young people, we adults fail them. If anxiety begins as a message that something is wrong, feels unsafe or alarming, we should not be surprised when young people cannot merely turn this anxiety off. Our task is to help young people know how to listen to their internal messages and which ones need attending, learn not to be afraid of themselves, and develop the confidence to respond. When we do this, we can help young people understand anxiety, bring compassion to their struggle, and learn how to move forward in their lives.

This book uses acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) to bring these two premises together to help teens with anxiety. ACT is an approach that sets out to create

psychological flexibility, which is the ability to do what one cares about even when one's thoughts and feelings suggest it is too hard. When anxiety brings messages that our thoughts and feelings are dangerous, ACT counters this with strategies to help us listen, become aware, decide whether a message is what it purports to be, and turn to our values. ACT has a solid evidence base in treatment for anxiety at multiple levels, from generalized anxiety to panic disorder to obsessive compulsive disorder. This book turns that ACT research base into basic steps that will help young readers learn what is needed to turn away from anxiety, a life-narrowing phenomenon, and focus instead on a life well lived.

The authors are experienced clinicians who have spent their careers with young people, hoping to change their lives and help them live well. Young readers will find the basic steps clear and easy to understand. Adult helpers will also be able to use this book to provide support. Readers begin their journey by first learning what anxiety is, then follow a step-by-step path through acceptance, mindfulness, and valued actions.

It is a worthwhile journey to take.

—Louise L. Hayes, PhD

The University of Melbourne Centre for Youth Mental Health

# note to readers

So, here you are with *The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Teen Anxiety* in your hands. You may have picked it up yourself, or someone who cares about you may have handed it to you. Either way, we really hope it helps you in some important ways.

This book is for teens who struggle with anxiety. Typically, anxiety shows up as thoughts about some future event: *This is going to be bad*, or *They'll all laugh the minute I begin talking*. Anxiety often involves feelings (for example, worried and nervous, maybe even sad, angry, and ashamed) and body sensations (such as sweaty palms, restlessness, light-headedness, and stomachaches) that show up, too. When we experience a big burst of bodily sensations because of something dangerous happening *right now* (for example, we come close to getting into a car accident), that's called *fear*. Anxiety, on the other hand, is what we feel when we are stressed or scared, but when there is no immediate, actual danger.

Mental health professionals may talk about different types of anxiety, such as generalized anxiety (lots of worries about lots of things), social anxiety (worries that other people will think badly of you, worry about embarrassing yourself), panic attacks (sudden appearance of intense physical sensations with fears that you are dying or losing control), obsessive-compulsive disorder (repetitive, intrusive thoughts and rituals), and many others. We're less interested in these categories and more interested in how anxiety is showing up in your life *and how it might be getting in your way*.

There are some important things for you to know before you start to read this book. First, anxiety is a normal human emotion. Because you "have" anxiety, you are not abnormal, you are not broken, and you do not need to be fixed! How do we know? *Because anxiety is just too common for it to be something wrong*. We all experience anxiety at some time. Just like happiness, excitement, joy, pain, embarrassment, guilt, shame, and sadness, anxiety is one of those things you are going to feel because you are a real human being, living a life, and experiencing it intensely.

Yes, being human means you will feel anxious, *but it does not mean you have to let anxiety run your life*. Sometimes teens feel anxiety and just keep going, doing what they need to do. No one would even know they are anxious on the inside because, on the outside, they just look like they're taking care of business. At other times, they might feel anxiety coming on and automatically take big steps to avoid the anxious feelings or thoughts. Most of us do both, keep going or start avoiding, at one time or another. If you are one of those people who feels things very deeply, you may have found yourself avoiding people, places, or situations that make you feel anxious, and you may start to do things to avoid thinking anxious thoughts and feeling anxious sensations and emotions. These "coping mechanisms" may provide some short-term relief, but you may also find that you're giving up a lot of living in the bargain.

We are going to teach you to stop running from anxiety (a tiring race at best because anxiety is inside each of us, and it's hard to outrun ourselves)—to let the thoughts and feelings just be there and to take them along for the ride of your life! The approach we will use in this book is based on acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). This is work that involves accepting, or allowing, all of the thoughts and feelings you have, including any difficult ones, and challenging yourself every day to bring them along with you while you do what is important and meaningful in your life. This is difficult work that's worth doing. We know this because we've worked with hundreds of teens who have struggled with anxiety, used this approach, and put their lives back on track. With patience, practice, and support, you can do it, too! Opposite to how it may seem, taking an attitude of kindness toward yourself, your normal human feelings, and your normal human reactions to them really helps.

## how to use this book

Using this book is simple: read each activity and then do it! The skills in this book build on each other, so we strongly suggest you read the book from front to back, in order. Check out each activity, think about it, try it out, and then go to the next one. We want you to learn by doing the activities and noticing what changes. Try each activity before you go on to the next. If you forget something, please go back and review the section and try the activities as many times as you need to. The entire book may take you seven to twelve weeks to complete.

We have included voice recordings and other helpful materials on the website connected to this book—please check them out at <http://www.newharbinger.com/41153>. If you're working with a clinician, such as a psychologist or counselor, do let them know about this book and share the ideas and exercises with them. Also, you might want to let your parents know you are working with this book and, if you'd like, tell them about the activities you are doing. A note for parents follows below.

All right, let's get started!



# note to parents

This book will not make your teen's anxiety disappear overnight. Nothing will do that. What it will do is help your teen navigate life more fully, anxiety and all. If you find that working with a book is not enough and your teen is still struggling, therapy may be recommended for your teen and your family, or in some cases, medication for your teen's anxiety. If your teen is not making progress, please consider these other options seriously.

# note to clinicians

If you are working with a teen who struggles with anxiety, we hope the activities in this book can serve as an adjunct to your therapy, used either in-session or between sessions to augment learning. Each of the seven parts takes about a week to complete.

Part I

# The Basics of Anxiety

# 1 getting to know your anxiety

## for you to know

We'd like to start with some basic information about anxiety to help you recognize what your anxiety looks and feels like and to explore the ways you have tried so far to deal with it. Later, we'll ask you to consider some different approaches to anxiety.

Anxiety, sometimes described as nervousness, dread, or apprehension, is a normal human emotion. Other words for it are "stress," "worry," and, sometimes, "panic." Anxiety includes thoughts (in the form of words, pictures, or images), feelings, physical sensations, and behaviors. Thoughts are what would appear in the thought bubbles of a cartoon strip of you or, if people could read your mind, what they would hear you saying inside your head. Anxious feelings (emotions) that show up may be energetic (nervousness) or heavy (dread). Often, other strong feelings may show up, such as anger or sadness. Physical sensations can show up anywhere in your body and include things such as nausea, blushing, sweating, headaches, and a racing heart. Behavior is what you do with your hands or feet and what you say—it is what we'd see and hear you do if you were in a movie. It is important to notice and identify your thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviors that show up when you're anxious so you can work with them. And while you're at it, see if you can be a bit gentle with them and with yourself. Believe it or not, your human feelings are there to help you. We'll explain more about this later.

### À *Althea's Story* À

Althea was struggling to finish her last year of high school. Overwhelmed and worried most of the time, she stayed up late studying, hardly slept, and woke up every morning nauseous and exhausted. She was scared she wouldn't graduate or get into university. She dreaded having to stay at home another year and falling behind her friends, who were all doing well.

## for you explore

Look at the following list, and decide whether each item is a thought, feeling, physical sensation, or behavior. It is important to know the difference as you go through the activities in this book because the most helpful way of handling each is sometimes different. So, let's get started. Read the description in the first column in the table below; decide whether it is a thought, a feeling, a sensation, or a behavior; and make a checkmark in the corresponding column.

	Thought	Feeling	Sensation	Behavior
1. Butterflies in your stomach				
2. People think I'm boring.				
3. Heart is pounding				
4. Leaving school before you had to give your presentation				
5. I feel like such a loser.				
6. Anger about missing out on things				
7. Worry				
8. If I'm anxious, there must be something wrong with me.				
9. Feeling really light-headed and kind of disconnected				
10. Turning down a friend's request to hang out				

Compare your answers to the answers listed in the back of the book to be sure you understand thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviors as you read on.



# more to explore

Over the next few days, think about moments when you have felt anxious, and make some notes about what you were thinking, what feelings you had, and the physical sensations that showed up. Add a note about what you did (your behavior) in reaction to these. Here’s an example from Althea.

- Situation:** Trying to do homework
- Thoughts:** I’m going to fail. My friends will think I’m stupid.
- Feelings:** Worried, sad, hopeless, angry
- Physical Sensations:** Nauseous and exhausted
- Behavior:** Staying up late

**Situation:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Thoughts:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Feelings:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Physical Sensations:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Behavior:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Situation:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Thoughts:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Feelings:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Physical Sensations:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Behavior:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Situation:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Thoughts:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Feelings:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Physical Sensations:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Behavior:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Now that you know what your anxiety looks like, you are ready to move on to the next activity and get curious about trying to control or get rid of symptoms of anxiety.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# 2

## trying to control your anxiety

### for you to know

Let's face it, we live in a world where we are taught that certain feelings are bad, happiness is the preferred way to feel, and if we aren't happy, we should fix this. So, when we feel anxious (or stressed, overwhelmed, or nervous), we're often mad at ourselves for having these feelings—quite unfairly, as you'll learn later—and we try to make them go away. We might avoid people, places, or situations to prevent the thoughts and feelings from showing up in the first place, and once they do show up, we might distract ourselves so we don't really notice them. We might even hear other people tell us, "Calm down," or "Take your mind off it." The things we do to prevent or try to get rid of thoughts and feelings are called "control strategies" because they are about controlling, or getting rid of, what we are feeling inside. Sometimes control strategies are helpful. They make us feel better for a while, which is what makes it so tempting to use them over and over again. We use the term DOTS—which stands for distracting, opting out or avoiding, thinking, self-harm—to categorize the control strategies that are commonly used by teens to avoid feeling anxious or to get rid of anxiety once it starts.

### À *Tania's Story* À

Tania really, really wanted to be one of the popular kids in school. But just being around people made her nervous and worried that she'd say or do the wrong thing. For days before any party, dance, or even just certain classes (the ones with popular kids in them), she'd anticipate everything anyone might say and how she'd reply. She would rehearse every word she might say and even how she might laugh. But when the actual situations came up, Tania found that all her planning and rehearsing didn't fit with what people actually did. Then Tania felt completely lost and scared, unable to speak, and worried that she was laughing the wrong way at all the wrong times.

## for you to explore

The acronym DOTS can help you remember and recognize the control strategies you use (Harris 2009).

### **D** = Distraction

This includes any activity done with the intent of distracting you from anxious thoughts and feelings, such as watching TV, playing on the computer, looking at social media, reading, cleaning, and so forth.

### **O** = Opting out

These are the people, places, and situations that you avoid, or opt out of, to prevent anxious thoughts and feelings from showing up. This might include making excuses or saying no to things you actually want to do. Avoiding homework, social events, school, and job interviews are examples of opting out.

### **T** = Thinking

This refers to thinking in other “time zones,” like getting stuck in wishing the past was different or worrying about the future. Sometimes worrying seems to promise some relief from anxiety. Most of the time, it just keeps us looped into worry thoughts without a solution. Examples include, *What if I get sick?*, *Something bad might happen*, and *I’ll fail*.

### **S** = Self-harm

This includes anything that is harmful to your body, such as eating, exercising, or sleeping too much or too little; drugs; alcohol; gambling; cutting; burning; and thoughts about trying to kill yourself. Shopping and sex can be included here too if they are done for the purpose of making anxious thoughts and feelings go away.

What control strategies, or DOTS, do you use to try to manage your anxiety? For example, Tania uses a lot of unhelpful thinking in the form of *time traveling* into an imagined future and planning what to say. Use the table below to track the control strategies that you notice yourself using over the next three days.

activity 2 ➔ trying to control your anxiety

	D	O	T	S
Day 1				
Day 2				
Day 3				

Using control strategies like DOTS to get rid of anxiety some of the time is just fine. But when you rely on your control strategies too often, it can actually make things worse for you. So, it's important to begin to notice your behavior and be aware of your "go-to" DOTS.



## more to explore

Think about the strategies you have used over the past few days to try to control your anxious thoughts and feelings and ask yourself how well your DOTS are actually helping you control your anxiety. In the table above, put a checkmark beside any DOTS that helped you feel better for a little while. Next, circle any of your DOTS that helped you get rid of thoughts and feelings permanently, meaning they never came back. Many people notice that DOTS work well for a little while, but DOTS don't get rid of anxiety permanently.

We're all likely to find ourselves using control strategies at times. But it's a problem when they get in the way of what we want out of life. Learning to notice when we're using them is an important first step in finding new and better ways of coping with anxiety.

# 3

## the cost of controlling anxiety

### for you to know

Using control strategies to reduce your anxiety once in a while is just fine—we all do it. This includes things like distracting, avoiding, and ruminating (thinking on and on about the same thing with no solution). In this activity, we'd like you to investigate how well your control strategies are working for you. It's important to notice the long-term consequences of your control strategies.

Many people notice that when they do things to try to control their anxiety, anxiety is still there, somewhere, running in the background of their mind and body. And to make it more complicated, they might notice that the control strategies they are using to reduce anxiety actually create new problems and more anxiety, for example, falling behind in school after avoiding school for a few days in an attempt to control anxiety. Often, we use control strategies without even knowing it, and that can feel like we have no choice. As you notice what you do and how it works out, you will start to have a sense that you have a choice about what you do.

#### À *Frankie's Story* À

Frankie noticed that it was taking longer and longer to fall asleep each night. Instead of watching a few videos, he was now watching movies until he couldn't keep his eyes open, which meant he was staying up later and later. Frankie usually didn't get much sleep as a result of this control strategy. Once he got to school, he would start thinking about his lack of sleep, and his anxiety would build up again as he worried about how to get through the day. Frankie needed something at school to help him feel less anxious during the day, and eventually he started smoking to find a sense of relaxation. Frankie was now stuck in what seemed like a vicious cycle to get control over his anxiety, which was really getting in his way of doing well at school.

# for you to explore

Over the next few days, think about the control strategies you used when you were anxious and think about the benefits and costs of those control strategies. Use the table below to record your findings. We’ve filled out a line from Frankie to get you started.

Control Strategy	Benefits	Costs
Watching videos until asleep	Didn’t notice anxiety when watching videos	Tired at school, can’t study Failed test, breath bad from smoking

### activity 3 → the cost of controlling anxiety

Teens often report that their control strategies have a tremendous cost in terms of consequences. For example, although keeping really busy may help you quiet down your fears of failure for a little while, later you may realize you've run out of energy for things that matter, that you've put all your energy in the wrong places.

## more to explore

Go back over the list you made above, and this time, add in what happened with your emotions in terms of the benefit or cost when you used each control strategy. Did anxiety go away or come back? Was it more or less intense? Did other emotions show up? Add these into your answers. Frankie would have added in the benefit of "less anxiety" when watching videos, and under costs, he would add "anxiety came back the next day and was worse because I was tired and had a test, and now I'm angry and ashamed."

If your control strategies are costing you a lot, being aware of what you do and the consequences can help you make different choices.