‘Too little’ anxiety

Wouldn’t it be lovely not to feel anxious or scared in life?! If I think about half of the things I would have done if it wasn’t for anxiety – applying for new jobs, meeting new people, chatting up someone I fancied in a bar or club! Wow – life would be different today. Anxiety – particularly high levels of anxiety – gets in the way of so much in life. So why would there be a problem with experiencing too little anxiety?

The problem with ‘too little’ anxiety

As much as it can hinder life, and certainly feel very unpleasant, not experiencing (or having a very low level) of anxiety and fear can create a variety of problems in life. As we’ve explored throughout the main book, anxiety is a core human emotion. It evolved to help protect us by making us vigilant and prepared to manage potentially difficult situations, often by avoiding or moving away from them. Imagine then what life would be like if you couldn’t access or experience fear or anxiety. Let’s try this with a thought experiment: imagine that I could take anxiety from you, so that you’d never experience this emotion again. Now imagine being in certain situations – for example, walking in an unfamiliar, poorly lit part of a city; being approached by strangers late at night; hearing a loud smashing noise – a bit like a window breaking – when trying to fall asleep in bed. As you might notice, without anxiety it could be quite challenging to navigate each of these situations, and in fact, they could end with us getting caught up in a variety of problems and even being hurt.

Having very low or blocked anxiety can also lead to recklessness. We might act impulsively, or do things without the ‘warning light’ coming on in our heads to tell us to reduce the speed we’re driving at, not to take a substance that’s been given to us in a club by a stranger, or not to approach a group of men late at night to ask for directions to the train station.

The lack of or the inability to experience appropriate anxiety can also cause devastating problems when it comes to our health. Many of us 'know' that eating lots of takeaways and sugary foods, drinking too much alcohol or caffeine, and smoking or taking certain drugs, can be bad for our health. But if we avoid or suppress the anxiety about the impact that these can have, it's like we're pressing 'mute' or removing the batteries from a smoke alarm. Ultimately, we can head down a path in which we cause ourselves (and others) great distress through the health problems that emerge.

So, fear and anxiety, when experienced at helpful levels, can be wonderful guides to our threat system, helping to orientate our actions in a way that maintains a balance between pleasure, excitement and wellbeing.

Do I have problems with 'too little' anxiety?

This is likely to be a difficult question to answer in any simple or categorical way. It's important to hold in mind context. For example, it might be that there isn't any reason for you to be experiencing anxiety in your life at the moment, but that if something suddenly happened (e.g. being told you had to give a public speech on something you knew very little about), anxiety would show up for you in an appropriate way. What we're exploring here instead is the type of blocked anxiety that is unhelpful for you – where anxiety is absent in situations where it actually might be helpful to experience it.

Let's look at an example of this with the help of Nathan. Nathan was in his late twenties when he came to see me. He described himself as a 'strong' person, who enjoyed life and who 'gets things done and enjoys things'. He had recently started a new job, and colleagues had been telling him that he was very aggressive, and at times, quite intimidating. On one recent occasion, he reacted with what he saw as a 'normal' response to being challenged in a meeting, but later was told by his boss that that type of response was inappropriate and would not be

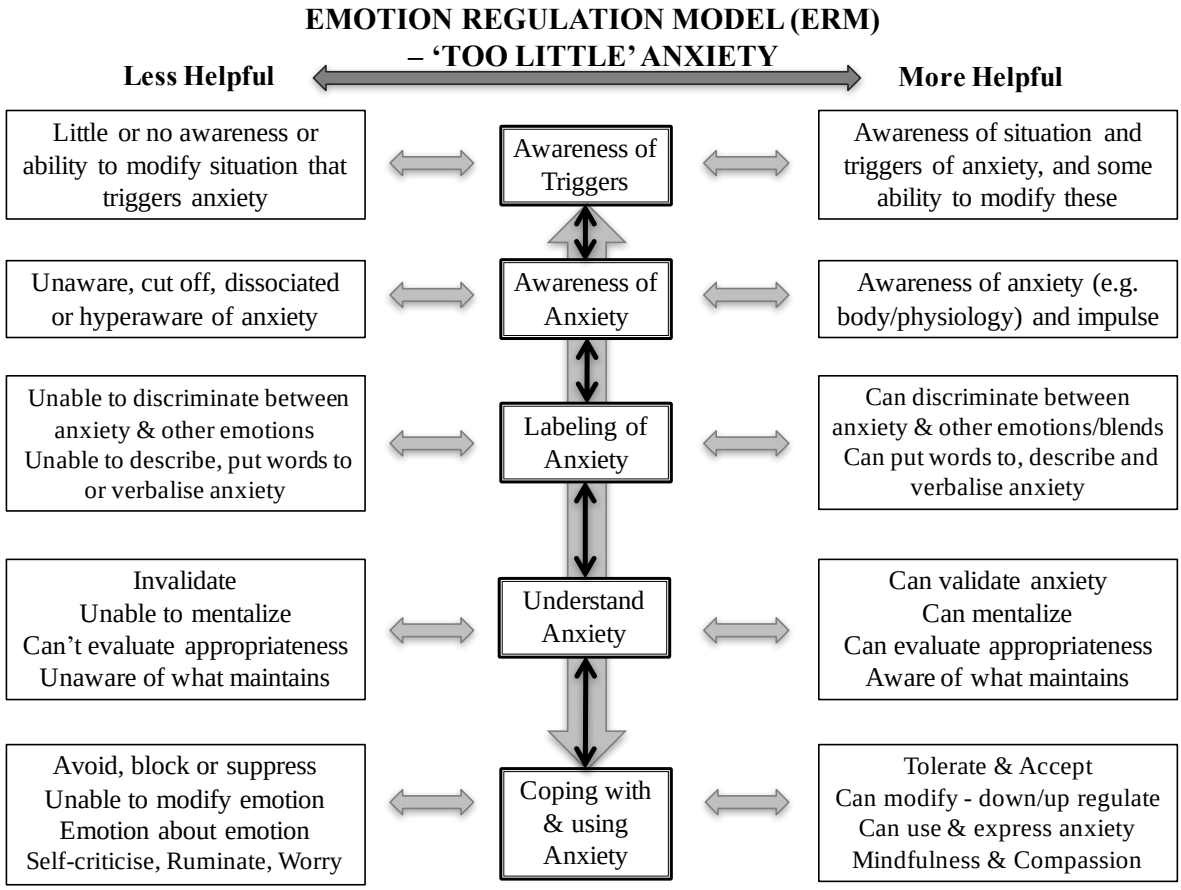
tolerated in the company. Nathan was confused as he felt he'd responded 'in the normal way I always do with people'. He said that although he could sometimes get quite angry, he was proud that he never became 'anxious or none of those weak feelings'. He grew up on an estate in a poor part of inner London, and witnessed a lot of crime, violence and conflict growing up, both in his own home, but also in the local neighbourhood. He described various situations – walking along dark streets at night, giving a speech to hundreds of people, finding out he might have terminal cancer – where he didn't experience anxiety and had just 'got on with things' as there was 'no point worrying about stuff'.

As we worked together in therapy, we explored what it was about anxiety that was troubling for him, and why it was associated with weakness, rather than as something that was potentially helpful to him. We learnt that Nathan had always been taught – by his parents, but also through experience growing up in 'a tough, rough place' as he described it – that showing signs of fear and anxiety got you picked on and bullied more. We began to explore the relationship between (blocked) anxiety and anger, and Nathan started to discover that he became angry in situations in which he was fearful that he might get challenged, criticised or exposed. It was with this recognition – that it was a fear of something that bounced him into anger – that he started to explore tuning in to, tolerating and accepting anxiety and fear as helpful signals to him.

As we explored at the introduction to this section on 'too little' emotion, there can be various fears, blocks and resistances to experiencing or expressing anxiety, and it's worth taking some time to consider what these might be for you. To help with this, let's turn back initially to the emotion regulation model that we explored in the book, and after that, see what other steps we can take to work with this difficulty.

Step 1: What is making anxiety difficult? Turning to the emotion regulation model

It's helpful when considering blocks or difficulties in experiencing anxiety and fear, to see if we can identify where on the emotion regulation model the problem occurs. Take a moment to look through the model below (and if needed, take some time to remind yourself of it in the book, Section IV). Notice areas of the emotion regulation model that may contribute to you struggling to experience anxiety. Are there particular steps of the model that you track on the left-hand side?



When Nathan looked at the emotion regulation model, he realised he was on the left-hand side of the model for all five steps. He really struggled to recognise which situations (such as having to give an important speech to new colleagues, and having some of his ideas questioned – which was the situation that his boss had admonished him about) could be anxiety provoking. Moreover, he found it difficult to notice anxious feelings, put words to them, or

validate or understand them. Finally (step 5), he recognised that he had powerful, negative feelings (such as anger and shame) about anxiety.

If you recognise that there are particular steps of the emotion regulation model that you struggle with, take your time to work through the chapters that help to build skills in that area (Chapters 12 to 16), practising the exercises and your skills in regulating experiences of anxiety. When you're done with this, move on to the following steps.

Step 2: Empathy and insight into your struggles to experience or express anxiety

It may also be helpful to take some time to reflect on Chapter 16b, and consider whether there are reasons why it's difficult to experience or express anxiety. For example, Nathan recognised that given his upbringing (in which he witnessed a lot of violence) it was not 'safe' to show anxiety or fear. He realised that you had to 'man up', never back down, and respond in aggressive and angry ways to challenges. Similarly, it might be that you can discern reasons for why you might struggle to experience and express fear and anxiety. As we discussed in Chapter 4, our emotions are shaped by our experiences, and it can be helpful to try and see any difficulties that we have with them in the context of our lives. At times, this can 'open' the door for empathy, compassion and the desire for things to be different, as we can see with clarity that it's not our fault that we're struggling with our feelings, and practise how to relate to this in a different, more supportive and helpful way. For example, as time progressed, Nathan recognised that given all the years he spent growing up in such a threatening environment, it made sense that he had learnt other ways of managing threat (e.g. through anger and hiding vulnerability), and crucially, that this was not his fault. He could see why he acted as he had done in the meeting, as he'd learnt that it wasn't safe to experience, show or express anxiety or vulnerability (which would be understandable given new colleagues, a high-pressure situation and getting constructive feedback), and automatically bounced to self-protective anger instead.

Step 3: Motivation and courage to experience anxiety

If we're going to work on experiencing *more* anxiety in life, it's helpful to have a good reason for doing so! And the type of empathic connection discussed in Step 2 can give rise to this. For Nathan, his empathy and understanding for why he struggled with anxiety – and why he turned to anger instead – gave rise to a broader recognition and motivation that while this fitted the hostile environment he grew up in, his angry responses were not the appropriate ones for a work context. He realised that allowing this pattern to continue unabated was causing other people – such as friends and colleagues – distress. However, he also began to see that it was also causing him distress, as it pushed people away from him, blocked him from forming better working relationships, and ultimately, stopped him from progressing in his career.

These insights led to Nathan recognising something important – that the most courageous thing he could do would be to try and turn towards his anxiety, allow it to 'breathe', and to try and slow down and step back from his usual angry responses. This wasn't easy – but over time and with the development of his compassionate mind skills, he learnt to tolerate feeling anxiety without bouncing into (self-protective) anger. So, while our work involved him having to down-regulate anger (see the 'Too much' anger chapter of these online materials: https://overcoming.co.uk/715/resources-to-download), it also involved helping him to upregulate anxiety (we'll look at how to do this in the coming steps).

Given this, it can be useful to take some time to consider your motivation to allow more anxiety/fear into your life. Like Nathan, consider how not being able to experience, tolerate or express anxiety may be harming yourself or other people in your life. Is this causing problems? As your compassionate self, how would you like this to be different? Ideally, how would you want things to be for yourself and other people, in terms of being able to show and express your fear and anxiety?

Step 4: Compassionate courage: connecting with, experiencing and expressing anxiety

Given that experiencing fear or anxiety can be unpleasant and leave us feeling on edge and vulnerable, it's important that we use the strength and courage of our compassionate self to support ourselves in this next step. Let's look at how we can do this:

i. Take some time to connect with your compassionate self, and it's wisdom, strength and commitment to work with the difficulties you have in experiencing anxiety. Hold in mind, if you can, a motivation to bring change to this. It's likely that you're pulling in the quality of wisdom here to guide this. For example, it might be that you remind yourself of why it's useful to try to experience this emotion. When I discussed this with Nathan, he had a sense that 'It's important to me that I have a full range of emotions, like a good tennis player or golfer who can play lots of different shots when the situation requires it'. It might be that you can also hold in mind what you might be missing out on by not experiencing or expressing anxiety, such as receiving support and help when you are stressed or worried about something.

ii. We now need to bring to mind a situation that might help you connect with anxiety. If you're particularly adept at staying away from anxiety, it can sometimes be tricky to find an example here, but it may help to consider if there are certain things that you avoid doing or engaging with. It might be that you need to take some time to bring ideas to mind, particularly if you've been blocked to or have been avoiding anxiety-provoking situations for a long time. First up, it can be useful to consider situations that commonly evoke an anxious response in people. For example, this might be public speaking (particularly in front of large groups, or to people who are very knowledgeable or critical), or a type of social situation (such as going to a party where you don't know anyone). It might be an interview for a job you really want or trying out for a sports

team. It might be going on a date, asking someone out, or telling someone that you like them. Of course, not all of these will resonate, but once you've selected a situation that you could imagine would be anxiety stimulating *for you*, we're going to use this to help us with beginning to expose you to these feelings.

iii. Once you have a situation in mind that may be associated with anxiety, let's use this to help you move into and explore this feeling. We can do this initially by using imagery:

Bring to mind a situation that has an anxious aspect to it. Try to imagine stepping into this scenario. It might be that you use a memory of a time when you did experience this, or you could imagine this situation. Think about where you are, who else is there, what is happening. With this in mind, try to bring to mind or imagine the following:

- Body – see if you can notice where anxiety shows up in your body. The stomach, chest, throat or legs? Imagine what that anxious sensation feels like
- Mind – given this anxious feeling, see if you can notice what starts to happen to your thinking and attention in this scene? Maybe you notice worries entering your mind, or are aware that your attention is being dragged to a specific person or concern
- Urge – see if you can tune into what your body wants to do, given this anxious feeling? This might be to freeze and not move, to become smaller or unseen, or to get out or run away from the situation you're in

When you feel ready, allow this situation to fade from your mind. If it's useful to ground yourself, spend a few minutes connecting to your breathing rhythm and upright body posture.

Take a few moments to reflect on this exercise. What was it like to experience anxiety deliberately? Were you able to tolerate this, or did it feel a bit overwhelming? The point here is not to overwhelm yourself, but to help your body and mind acclimatise to the experience of an emotion – allowing you to 'rediscover' its shape, texture and colour. If the exercise was too much, try and find another situation that you could use that may be less activating. However, it's worth practising this on a number of occasions so that you get the opportunity really to begin to experience and 'feel' anxious.

iv. Compassionate courage – it's important to move from imagery and memory, and step into experiencing and expressing anxiety in the 'real world'. Of course, if we're going to do this, it's likely to be tricky. There are often good reasons why people avoid this emotion – and let's be honest, anxiety tends not to feel very pleasant. To engage in experiencing and expressing more anxiety, it's likely you're going to need your compassionate self – and in particular, it's qualities of strength, tolerance, stability and courage. It might be that you pick the situation that you used in the previous imagery exercise, or you may want to select another one that you can try out. Make a plan for when you're going to engage in this anxiety-provoking situation, and hold on to your wise, compassionate intention – that is, not to 'not' feel anxious while doing it, but rather, to allow yourself to feel the fear and continue anyway. So, it's useful here to remember that courage is not the absence of fear, but rather, the ability to engage in something that is important to you while experiencing fear.

Step 5: Turning to others

Once you feel more able to understand and ‘stay with’ your anxiety, it can be useful to think about what else might help it. In particular, it can be helpful to consider if there is someone in your life that you feel safe with, who you can start to practise sharing some of these feelings with? Someone who might have various qualities of compassion (e.g. sensitivity, kindness, good listening skills) who you might be able to approach and share your feelings of anxiety, fear or vulnerability with? If there is, think about when you might speak to them, and crucially, how you would do this – what you would say, what your intention would be, what you want to get out of sharing your anxiety and vulnerability with them, what you will do (with the support of your compassionate self) to get your needs met. If it helps, take some time to read through Chapter 16c (Coping with emotions – expressing emotions and assertiveness), as this may help you with this process.

Key reflections

- Blocked or very low levels of anxiety may sound like a positive thing but can make it difficult for us to recognise difficult or potentially dangerous situations
- Being vulnerable can play an important role in connecting with people and flourishing
- Your compassionate mind can support you in connecting with anxiety, tolerating it, and finding helpful ways to express and have it supported