

Chapter One

Yes, It's Painfully Real



What is anxiety? Do I have it? Many people find themselves wondering about this question. After all, at what point does being anxious cross into becoming a serious issue? Decades of misinformation passed on by mass media has not helped matters. Everyone can fall victim to anxiety; even I was not spared from it.

Perspiration was dripping from my armpits, slowly plunging to my waist as I waited for my eighth-grade schoolteacher to call out my name. Our class assignment was to deliver an oral book report. At least we were allowed to choose the type of book that interested us. That last thought helped me calm my heart down. However, there was something else throwing my mind into a whirlwind of emotions.

Although the book I had chosen was a fairly straightforward and easy one, there was a hard-to-swallow lump in my throat – as if my heart was stuck there. I detested speaking publicly to a group of any size, strangers or family, prepared or unprepared.

Usually, I was well prepared for all of my assignments. Unfortunately, this one time, rather ashamedly, I did not read the book. I just skimmed through random sections to get a gist of what the author was trying to say, and then developed a simple way to share it with my listeners. At the time, it had seemed like a brilliant idea. Now, I was not so sure anymore.

My original half-baked plan had been to present a “Cliffs Notes” style version of a report, hoping that no one would notice the lack of effort. Perhaps today, one might call it a WikiNotes version report. Now that my name had been called out, beads of sweat immediately appeared on my forehead. My limbs became cramped, and my stomach tied up in a tight knot. My heart was beating erratically, and I was perspiring profusely. I slowly stood up to walk to the front of the class to speak. My voice was shaking as were my hands. I knew all this, and that just made me even more nervous.

When I got to the front of the room, I slowly turned around to face my peers. All eyes stared at me, each pair feeling like a piping hot branding iron. My mouth opened, and words clumsily stuttered out, “When Mrs. Lewis asked us to give an oral book report on any subject that was of great interest to us, I chose Knute Rockne, who became a legendary football player and one of the greatest football coaches in American history...”

Mrs. Lewis immediately interjected and said, “Don, stop right there!”

Oh, no, my heart sank, and I was instantly frozen speechless. *She’s found me out*, I thought.

Mrs. Lewis announced, “Class, this is exactly the creativity that I wanted each one of you to follow... to present your report. Don, that’s

all that I need to hear, you get an A+ for originality. Go take your seat." I exhaled in disbelief and went back to my seat.

As I settled down, I thought, *I have been given a free ticket on this one. I won't be so lucky next time.* The anxiety I experienced that day was extreme. Creating the report, waiting for my name to be called on to present, and then standing up to speak in front of the whole class – all of it had sent me to an extreme level of anxiety. I was a sweaty mess, even after Mrs. Lewis had praised me. This incident always sticks out in my mind whenever I think about me being anxious.

I have a question for you. Has anyone ever told you that your anxiety is not real? That it is not valid? Maybe someone told you, "It's just in your head," and that you are overthinking things. You must have been annoyed at that, right? *Well, yeah, it's in my head. Where else would it be?* Sometimes, as the old saying goes, "It takes one to know one." Some people I have known completely reject the idea of a loved one or a friend having an anxiety disorder. This is very closed-minded of them as far as I am concerned.

When I was a child, and later in my young adult life, it appeared that prolonged anxiety was not taken seriously by most people. Indeed, there was a dearth of research about it compared to what we have today. Moreover, the culture was such that even admitting anxiety was socially unacceptable. Perhaps it was seen by many people as admitting that one had a weakness. Women were seen as being overdramatic, and men were worried about their masculinity being called into question – all of which are illogical reasons.

**INDEED, EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL DISORDERS
WERE A "HUSH-HUSH" THING WHERE I CAME FROM.**

Yes, anxiety is very real. It is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. In this book, I will share how anxiety disorders plagued my life as a child and beat me down. Misery followed me thereafter,

like a stalker. Anxiety was always lurking around the corners of my life as a young adult, as well as a mature man with family and business responsibilities. Delving into this is important for you to understand the complex dynamics of anxiety disorders.

What is the Difference Between Stress and Anxiety?

It is vital to understand the difference between stress and anxiety, so we will start there. It is easy to confuse the two. Stress and anxiety are not necessarily unrelated, yet it is essential to understand anxiety as something separate from stress. Hence, before we get to the fun stuff, let us talk about the difference between stress and anxiety.

You and I both experience stress in various ways. You have anxiety at different points of your life, and so do I. I will also take the liberty to say that I do not know a single person that has not been impacted at some level, or in some capacity, by stress and anxiety.

The best way for us to differentiate between stress and anxiety is to think of them as *siblings*. I am the youngest child of four boys in my family, the baby of my large family. The reason I like to associate these two disorders as siblings is that they *share* symptoms. They are interrelated, but not the same. The physical and emotional symptoms are almost too numerous to list; however, there are several things these two relatives share: headaches, tightness in the neck, jaw, and back, loss of sleep, and hypertension.

This is not a textbook. Rather, it is a book about the anxiety that I have experienced during my life. So, you and I need to take a look and understand *stress*, after which we will look at *anxiety*. This way, we will be able to extract the two separately from the muddle of their shared symptoms. Let's keep it simple to avoid confusion. The following thoughts can bring about stress:

- *"I have four final exams this week."* Ouch, been there done that.
- *"My house payment is due next Monday, and I don't have all the money to make the payment."* Yikes, I have been in this situation also.

- *“My boss is really angry with me because I forgot to order hamburger buns.”* This would be stressful since you serve hamburgers at work this week.

Stress comes upon us from something that happens, outside or externally. It is an external experience and outside-inside force. Stress is very real, and we often do not like the way it makes us feel, even though some stress motivates us to achieve and keep working hard. Conversely, anxiety is quite different. Anxiety can attack us following our reaction to a stressful event. For instance:

- *“I have to take the first of four exams in five minutes.”*
- *“I missed my house payment, so I am calling the loan company to try to work out a new payment agreement.”*
- *“Since I forgot to order the hamburger buns, I am talking with a bakery to place a rush order on them.”*

Anxiety seems to last long after the stress of some outside factor that has been resolved. Sometimes, anxiety continues following a confrontation over the source of the stress. Anxiety comes from within or internally. In that respect, it is an inside-outside experience. Worst of all, anxiety can be like the Energizer Bunny – it just keeps going and going and going, making you feel the after-effects of the stress for a long time. The stress that brought on the anxiety is now over, yet instead of slowly declining, anxiety can be prone to escalating into a severe disorder.

This Is What Anxiety Feels Like

I frequently think, *Why does this have to be me?* or, *Why am I this way?* When I was a boy experiencing anxiety and panic attacks, I recall thinking that all five of my senses were in a war – against some unknown force, as well as each other. Because I have suffered from anxiety as far back as I can remember, I understand what someone enduring anxiety feels.

It is not a fun situation to be in. It can be terrifying and is sometimes debilitating, preventing people from making the most of their lives and talents. That is because anxiety is both a psychological (mind) sensation and a physiological (body) one. What does this mean?

First, Anxiety Is Psychological (Mind)

Severe anxiety affects the mind and reduces your ability to think rationally. As such, it has lasting consequences of victims' personal, social, and professional lives and may include effects such as:

- Inability to concentrate.
- Wanting to panic or escape.
- Thinking the worst is taking place.
- Feelings of there being no escape.
- Fear of what may happen.
- Fear of dying.
- Fear that you are losing control of yourself.
- Fear of choking.
- Fear of smothering.

All these feelings come together to leave the victim borderline dysfunctional. Although effects vary greatly, it is not uncommon for them to worsen over time.

Second, Anxiety Is Physiological (Body)

Anxiety equally and uniformly affects the body. Those who endure severe anxiety know the effect that it has on them physically firsthand. There are serious consequences to your health.

- Shortness of breath.

- Cold sweats.
- Armpits pouring with sweat.
- Pounding heart.
- Chest pain.
- Trembling.
- Dry mouth.
- No saliva to swallow or inability to swallow.
- Hot flashes or chills.

Considering how grave the symptoms are, anxiety is a recognized disorder with different classifications. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, there are five types of anxiety disorders.

The Five Major Types of Anxiety Disorders

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) – Some call this chronic anxiety, which is when someone carries tension, fear, or worry when nothing is provoking it. GAD can be very complicated because most of life is experienced as anxiety, and it gradually becomes a relatively expected feeling – something that the victim is comfortable with. Our world is easily anxiety-provoking, so a person with GAD tends to have a painful view of life.
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) – This is when obsessions or compulsions (repetitive behaviors) seem to rule over our common sense. These behaviors can be as simple as repetitive cleaning, washing hands, and constantly rearranging things. All of these only satisfy temporarily,

which is why an OCD person must keep on doing them. Anxiety will increase if one attempts to stop the ritual.

- Panic Disorder – This anxiety disorder is represented by often irrational fears that lead to unexpected panic attacks. Symptoms associated with this can be hyperventilation, rapid heartbeats, abdominal pain, dizziness, sweaty hands, and chest pain. These episodes of panic are unexpected and may occasionally repeat themselves.
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – Traumatic events such as military combat, accidents, personal assaults, disasters that were life-threatening, or physical harm can bring about this type of disorder. Certain events that occur long after the original traumatic event can “trigger” PTSD symptoms.
- Social Phobia (or Social Anxiety Disorder) – An overwhelming anxiety of self-consciousness can occur daily in social activities when a person has this disorder. This phobia can be limited to fears of one certain activity, such as eating in public, talking in public, or public speaking. Otherwise, it can be as severe as just being around people in public anywhere.

ANXIETY IS REAL. PANIC DISORDERS HAVE BEEN SOME OF THE GREATEST CHALLENGES OF MY LIFE.

I still deal with them quite frequently. Overcoming them is a lengthy process, but it is certainly an achievable goal. I habitually find myself saying, “Life gets very lived in” – and brother, that is no joke. We will walk through various situations in this book to help you understand why I say this. I will share with you not just how I have been plagued with anxiety with my own stories, but also how to conquer the anxiety that continues to haunt you.

Anxiety: Friend or Foe?

Asking whether anxiety is your *friend* or *foe* is almost like asking if money is good or bad. Both anxiety and money need to be respected and controlled. Reducing them to kissing cousins may enhance our ability to grasp them. Over my lifetime, anxiety has been both, my *friend* as well as my *foe*. Anxiety over a paper or a project that is due soon can motivate me to accomplish and succeed in it. In this instance, I would say that anxiety is appropriate, healthy, and has been my *friend*. Whereas anxiety becomes my *foe* when I fail to work through the anxiety properly. I am not beating up on myself. I am simply saying that each of us is responsible for allowing anxiety to take its course with our minds and bodies.

Together, we are going to examine strategies to mobilize ourselves and become adaptive in the middle of an anxiety or panic attack. These are things that you and I can learn from each other. We can win when it appears that anxiety is our foe. We cannot do much about the genetic aspects of the effects of stress, fear, or worry. They are all a big part of anxiety. However, we can learn to be more in control of anxiety when it strikes off-guard.

The Practice of Mindfulness Will Place Anxiety in the Right Perspective

I have always had a fear of public speaking. Little did I know that I would spend most of my life as a public speaker. When I began public speaking as a young man, I spoke about my fear of public speaking to a man I love and admire. This gentleman, Frank Johnson, has been a successful public speaker for the majority of his life. He told me something that I have remembered and embraced repeatedly. He stated, "Don, remember, when you are speaking publicly, no one in your audience is more prepared to speak at the moment, on that subject than you." This taught me a great lesson that I have recalled on so many occasions to help calm my nerves.

Google defines mindfulness as, "A mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique." I have had to learn to

shift my awareness to positive things and realize there is really nothing to fear. I tell my mind what to think by keeping it under control. It is vital to our health and success to be mindful of the various ways to manage our anxiety. This is a skill that is fundamental to our contemporary lifestyles so we can keep pace with the dynamics of our modern world.

Tips on Managing Your Anxiety

- Understand the difference between stress and anxiety.
- Accept that what is happening in you is either an outward circumstance (stress) that is occurring to you and that an inward emotion (anxiety) exists when the outward circumstance is no longer a threat.
- Do not try to minimize the stress; admit the emotion.
- Be open and humble – accept your anxiety.
- Learn to participate in your anxiety. Do not try to run. We will discuss how to do this.
- Practice mindfulness.
- Confront the anxiety by breathing slowly and purposely through your nose. Anxiety has its way of making us forget that we need air.
- Be willing to seek help if the emotions continue. Your life matters!