Understanding Anxiety

A Practical Guide to Understanding Your Anxiety Patterns

FREE Educational Guide

By Maria Shkreli, LMHC

Educational Disclaimer

This guide is intended for education and self-reflection only. It is not a diagnostic tool and should not be used to diagnose an anxiety disorder or any other mental health condition. Completing this guide does not establish a therapist-client relationship.

Everyone experiences anxiety differently. If anxiety is significantly affecting your daily life, relationships, work, sleep, or overall well-being, consider speaking with a qualified mental health professional.

What Is Anxiety?

Anxiety is something all of us experience.

It is our body's way of recognizing that something may be wrong, uncertain, stressful, or potentially dangerous. In the right situation, anxiety can actually be helpful. It can make us more alert, help us prepare for something important, or push us to respond when something needs our attention.

The problem is when the anxiety doesn't seem to turn off.

You may know logically that everything is okay, but your mind continues searching for what could go wrong. You may replay a conversation from three days ago, worry about something that hasn't happened yet, or find yourself thinking about every possible outcome.

Sometimes anxiety is obvious.

Other times, people don't even realize how much anxiety is affecting them because they have lived with it for so long.

They may simply think:

"I'm an overthinker."

"I always worry."

"That's just how I am."

But sometimes those patterns are connected to anxiety.

Understanding anxiety isn't about eliminating every uncomfortable feeling. Some anxiety is part of life. The goal is to begin recognizing when anxiety is helping you and when it may be taking up more space in your life than you would like.

How Anxiety Can Show Up

Anxiety doesn't look the same in everyone.

For some people, anxiety happens mostly in their thoughts. For others, they feel it physically. And sometimes anxiety shows up through our behavior without us realizing that anxiety is what's driving it.

Anxiety in Your Thoughts

You may notice yourself:

- Thinking about the worst possible outcome
- Replaying conversations
- Constantly asking "what if?"
- Having difficulty making decisions
- Worrying about things that haven't happened
- Overanalyzing what someone said or did
- Having trouble concentrating because your mind won't slow down

You may even recognize that your worry is excessive and still have difficulty stopping it.

Anxiety in Your Body

Anxiety isn't only something that happens in your mind.

Your body can respond too.

You may experience:

- Muscle tension
- Headaches
- Racing heart
- Stomach discomfort
- Shakiness
- Restlessness
- Feeling unable to relax
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling physically exhausted after being anxious

Sometimes people notice the physical symptoms before they even recognize that they are anxious.

Anxiety in Your Behavior

Anxiety can also influence what we do.

You may avoid situations because you're worried about what could happen.

You may ask other people repeatedly if everything is okay.

You may procrastinate because you're afraid of making the wrong decision.

You may check something over and over because you don't trust yourself the first time.

Or you may try to control situations because uncertainty makes you uncomfortable.

These behaviors can bring temporary relief. The problem is that sometimes the relief doesn't last, and the worry comes right back.

The Anxiety Cycle

One of the more frustrating things about anxiety is how easily it can feed itself.

Something happens.

You have an anxious thought.

Your body reacts.

You become uncomfortable.

Then you do something to make the uncomfortable feeling go away.

For example:

Situation: Someone doesn't answer your text.

Thought: "Something is wrong. Maybe they're upset with me."

Feeling: Anxiety.

Behavior: You check your phone repeatedly, reread your messages, or send another text looking for reassurance.

You may feel better when the person finally responds.

But the next time someone doesn't answer, the same cycle can happen again.

This doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. It means your brain has learned that certain behaviors temporarily reduce the uncomfortable feeling.

That's why recognizing the pattern matters.

You can't change a pattern you don't know you're repeating.

Anxiety Self-Assessment

Instructions

Rate each statement based on how accurately it describes you.

Try to answer based on what you actually experience rather than what you think your answer *should* be.

0 = Never
1 = Rarely
2 = Sometimes
3 = Often
4 = Always

1. I worry about situations that may never happen. _____
2. I find it difficult to stop worrying once my thoughts begin. _____
3. I often expect the worst-case scenario. _____
4. I have trouble relaxing, even when everything seems fine. _____
5. I feel restless, on edge, or unable to sit still. _____
6. Anxiety affects my sleep or ability to rest. _____
7. I avoid certain situations because they make me feel anxious. _____
8. I frequently seek reassurance from others. _____
9. I replay conversations or events repeatedly in my mind. _____
10. I notice physical symptoms such as muscle tension, headaches, stomach discomfort, or a racing heart when I feel anxious. _____
11. My anxiety makes it difficult to concentrate. _____
12. I would like to feel calmer and more in control of my thoughts. _____

Understanding Your Score

Total Score: _____ /48

0–12

Your responses suggest that anxiety is generally manageable and may not be interfering very much with your daily life.

That doesn't mean you never experience anxiety. Pay attention to the situations that do make you anxious and what helps you manage those moments.

13–24

You may experience anxiety more strongly during certain situations or periods of stress.

It may be helpful to start noticing your triggers. What tends to happen right before your anxiety increases? What thoughts come up? What do you usually do next?

Recognizing these patterns can tell you a lot.

25–36

Your responses suggest that anxiety may be showing up fairly often in your thoughts, emotions, behaviors, or daily life.

You may already recognize some of these patterns, while others may become easier to see once you start paying closer attention to them.

Consider looking at which questions you scored highest on. Those responses may give you a better idea of where anxiety is affecting you most.

37–48

Your responses suggest that anxiety may be affecting several areas of your life or causing you a significant amount of distress.

Take some time to look at where anxiety is showing up most—your thoughts, your body, your sleep, your relationships, your decisions, or the things you avoid.

If these patterns are persistent or are making it difficult to function the way you would like, consider speaking with a qualified mental health professional.

Reflection

Your total score gives you some information, but the number isn't the most important part.

What you notice about yourself is.

Take a few minutes to think about your responses.

What situations tend to trigger my anxiety the most?

What happens in my body when I become anxious?

What does my mind usually do when I'm anxious? Do I overthink, expect the worst, replay things, or look for reassurance?

Is there anything I avoid because of anxiety, even though part of me would like to do it?

When I'm anxious, what do I usually do to make myself feel better? Does it actually help me long-term, or only for the moment?

Final Thoughts

Anxiety can be exhausting.

Especially when your mind keeps telling you that you need to figure something out, prepare for something, prevent something, or make absolutely sure everything is okay.

But not every thought requires an answer.

And not every uncomfortable feeling means something bad is about to happen.

Part of understanding anxiety is learning to notice the difference between **what is actually happening** and **what anxiety is telling you might happen**.

That takes time.

You may start noticing how often you jump to the worst-case scenario. You may realize how much reassurance you look for from other people. You may notice that you avoid certain situations because avoiding them feels easier than sitting with the anxiety.

None of this is about criticizing yourself.

It's about recognizing the pattern.

Because once you can recognize what your anxiety tends to do, you can begin responding to it differently.

You don't have to believe every anxious thought simply because your mind produced it.

And you don't have to completely eliminate anxiety in order to have more control over how you respond to it.

Sometimes the first step is simply being able to say:

"This is my anxiety talking. Let me look at what is actually happening."

Continue Your Learning

If this guide helped you recognize some of your own anxiety patterns, you can continue your learning with the complete workbook:

Understanding Anxiety: Educational Workbook & Self-Assessment

The full workbook takes a deeper look at how anxiety develops, common triggers and thinking patterns, physical and emotional symptoms, and the ways anxiety can influence everyday behavior.

It also includes a more comprehensive self-assessment and additional exercises designed to help you better understand your own anxiety patterns.

Thank you for downloading this educational guide. I hope it helped you recognize some of the ways anxiety may be showing up in your life and gave you a place to start understanding those patterns.

Maria Shkreli, LMHC