

Introduction

Are you reading this book because anxiety has become a constant companion? Is it with you everywhere, all the time? Or hits you unexpectedly? Does it feel like the worst feeling ever? Do you feel like a victim losing? Or like an empowered warrior? When you feel anxiety, it feels like you are fighting it. Yet somehow anxiety can be a gift, an opportunity. A battle that does not have violent casualties; however, the casualties are the layers of causes that alert us to anxiety. The battle then is to overcome and to manage these causes.

In the following pages I share what I have learned from years of research and practice about managing anxiety. I also introduce you to brilliant contributors — writers, speakers, teachers, and facilitators who offer unique insights and perspectives. They are passionate about their topics and live them. By applying the thoughts, ideas, and strategies in this book that resonate with you, you will be able to better manage your anxiety, and enjoy more fully all the good things in your life.

I know from my own personal, and professional experience that we *can* lower our levels of anxiety.

Today I manage my anxiety.

I have had anxiety all my life, but I did not always know it. As a child I had migraines, tummy aches, and flu-ish feelings, so often that I had to miss school. My mom believed me, however; my dad did not think that I was truly sick. Often I would be sick before a test or presentation. I also would cry easily in class if teachers raised their voice, even when it was not directed at me. I remember as a teen feeling angry, hopeless, misunderstood, and very alone, until I met two very special teachers, Mrs. Yeo, my Creative English teacher, and Mr. Hodwitz, my Drama teacher. They saved my life. After their classes I felt I could be okay in the world.

In my 20s at times I would feel 'out of myself'. At the time, I could not recall how or why it came on. An urgent feeling would hijack me

and I felt a need to run away, usually to a nearby meadow. I felt I had to hide. Usually, I would run along the beach and curl up in a fetal position beside a dune until the feeling subsided and I felt safe and could breathe normally again. At that time I thought I was 'crazy'. It was my secret. As I write here, it is the first time I have ever told anyone this. I know now that it was trauma and anxiety related. That is another story.

Twenty years ago I went through periods when I had trouble getting out of bed. I would send my son off to school and then go back to bed until he came home. Sometimes I would get dressed, sometimes not. When out of bed, I would sit and stare at my work or sit outside and stare. I had no idea that I might be anxious or depressed. I felt immobilized and had no idea about how to get out and be different. I denigrated myself. I had gone to see one counsellor and she said I was 'my own worst enemy'. I really did not know what she meant by that, and I was too vulnerable to risk asking. That comment only made me feel worse. Looking back, I see that she did not give me strategies or direction so that I could learn how to be my own best friend.

Fifteen years ago, I didn't sleep for two years. I would not fight it and instead lay awake and rested as best I could so I could work and carry on. Friends encouraged me to go to the doctor because I could get very sick. I decided to go for a spa weekend of Turkish sauna, hot tub, and massage. My body was exhausted, I could barely walk and get ready for bed, yet I stared awake at the ceiling all night. I knew then that I needed to see my doctor. In tears I told her that I could not sleep and wondered if I had anxiety? She said yes, and that she had been waiting for me to come to her so I could hear her.

My good doctor would not give me sleeping pills unless I promised her that I would go to therapy. I was affronted, as I didn't think that I needed therapy. However, I agreed since I needed so badly to sleep. This began a journey of discovery that shaped my personal and professional life.

I do remember some key points of change and awareness.

Twenty years ago, I remember driving my silver Ford station wagon to a workshop. It was a fine sunny day, traffic was good and I felt good. About 20 minutes later I felt sad and my mood dropped. I felt sick. Nothing had changed except that I was further down the highway. I noticed this, changed channels in my mind and thought of a fun happy fantasy. At the time I did not fully realize what I had done.

Twelve years ago, I remember very clearly driving in my van down Manitoba Street in Bracebridge, on another sunny day, thinking *I have all my fingers and toes, I can see, hear, I have a lovely home, I am*

able, healthy, and have two great kids, so why am I not dancing in the streets celebrating? Instead, I felt horrible. I was determined to change.

Have you ever met those people who, when you ask how they are, say “SUPER! GREAT!” And they mean it. I wanted to be one of those people.

I was determined to change channels. And so, I began this journey of discovery.

I’m sharing my personal and professional experiences with you because every week half a million Canadians will miss work due to stress/anxiety.¹ About 30% of girls and 20% of boys have had an anxiety disorder, according to data from the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health,² and most people who come to my private clinic suffer from anxiety. The success that my clients have achieved and the positive response to my talks on anxiety have fuelled my passion about lowering levels of anxiety in an approachable way and making it easy and accessible for everyone who needs it.

Can you imagine a life without anxiety? Is it reasonable to think one could not ever have anxiety again? That is not likely. Anxiety is part of the human spectrum of feelings. Anxiety can be a gift or a clue, notifying us that we need to pay attention to something, that perhaps something is amiss. However, we can have a life where anxiety does not control our lives, our decisions, and our choices.

When I wake up with anxiety, I go through a mental checklist (more about the checklist on page 37). Within 10 to 30 minutes, the anxiety is usually gone. This is just one of the ways in which I have learned that a life managing anxiety is attainable.

What does a life managing anxiety feel like?

It feels empowering. It feels like I have a choice. It feels like I can. It feels like I have a right to be happy. It feels like I am able. And it feels like I am worthy of thriving.

Now imagine a life in which you’re telling people you feel “GREAT,” and you mean it!

Notes

1. Insurance Journal 2003, as cited by the Government of Canada in *The Human Face of Mental Health and Mental Illness in Canada*, 2006, pg. 41.
2. Cited in “Teen Depression and Anxiety: Why the Kids Are Not Alright,” an article by Susanna Schrobsdorff for *Time Magazine*, posted October 27, 2016; <http://time.com/4547322/american-teens-anxious-depressed-overwhelmed/>.