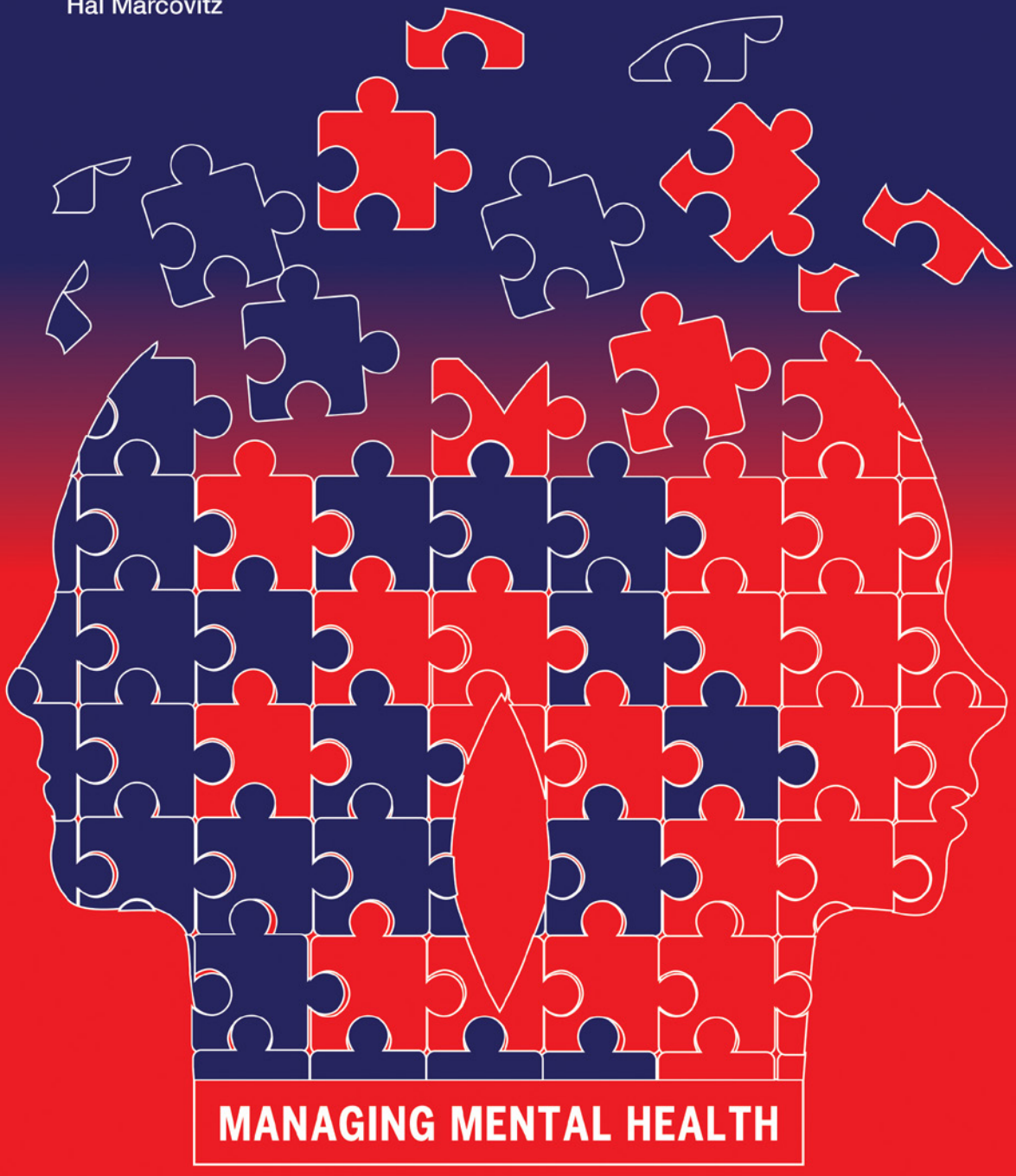
Managing ANXIETY

Hal Marcovitz



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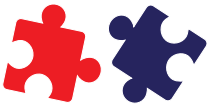


What Is Everyday Anxiety?

Whenever advertising copywriter Scott Muska meets a woman at a party or similar social occasion and decides he would like to ask her out on a date, he always takes the first step by sending her a text later that day or evening. He admits, though, that when he asks someone out on a date through a text, he finds himself filled with anxiety. "You get super panicky in the time between your sending of an important text message to a romantic interest and . . . [her] response," he says. "While you're waiting with bated breath, a slew of super-negative thoughts race through your head about why she hasn't answered yet and about what terrible response you might receive. . . . Does she hate me now? Did I come on too strong?"[6]

A generation ago, when few people carried mobile phones and texting was not common, Muska would likely have had to ask for a date face-to-face, often within a few minutes of meeting someone to whom he felt attracted. And if she turned him down, the drama would have been over quickly, and very likely, Muska would have been able to shrug off the experience and move on with his life. But in today's world, when so many people are connected to their phones and texting is a big part of virtually every-

one's life, Muska has found a way to make himself anxious and fretful over the simple act of asking a young woman for a date.

> **"You get super panicky in the time between your sending of an important text message to a romantic interest and . . . [her] response."[6]**
>
> —Scott Muska, who experiences texting anxiety

Muska is not alone. So-called texting anxiety has become a common part of life. With texting, a vacuum of uncertainty exists between the moment the text is sent and the moment a reply is received. Whether that vacuum of uncertainty lasts for a few seconds, a few minutes, a few hours, or a few days, the texter is likely to feel somewhat anxious or worried about whether the answer will be the one he or she hopes for. Psychologist Lucie Hemmen describes this common response:

> Let's say you were texting with a crush who suddenly drops off in the conversation. You text a question mark and wait . . . but nothing. You then wonder if you said something offensive so you re-read the text string searching for clues. You think you identified a problem, a comment you made that could have come off wrong. Now your thoughts (mental distress) stimulate a flood of worry (more mental distress), which causes your stomach to sink and your chest to tighten (physical distress). You feel irritable, nervous, scared, embarrassed (emotional distress), and you snap hard on your little sister when she comes into your room to ask an innocent question (behavioral distress). This is the head-to-toe work of anxiety in action.[7]

Anxiety Can Be Good

Texting anxiety is an example of "everyday anxiety"—a form of anxiety that is a routine part of life for many people. There are many reasons people lapse into moments of anxiety. Awaiting a text response is just one of these. Other reasons for anxious

feelings include concerns about paying bills or landing a job. Some people feel anxious in social situations, such as parties, school dances, or even sitting with friends around the table in the cafeteria. They are worried they will say or do something that will cause themselves to be embarrassed in front of others. Health issues can contribute to people's feelings of anxiety. Parents who worry about the health and well-being of their children can become consumed by anxiety. Even being late for an appointment can trigger an episode of anxiety. Young people can feel anxiety when they go out on a date with someone new. Others who may have to make an important presentation at a business meeting can suffer from anxiety as the date of the meeting approaches. Performers can feel anxious as they prepare to walk onstage, particularly on opening night. Finally, people can find themselves caught up in anxiety as they walk into an unfamiliar situation.

Virtually everybody feels anxious moments from time to time. In fact, minor feelings of anxiety can be beneficial. According to Zee Krstic, the health editor for *Good Housekeeping* magazine, "We all sometimes feel anxiety—a sense of unease or worry

Many people today experience texting anxiety. Once they have sent a text, they wait and worry about the reply—and, sometimes, whether there will even be a reply.

about something uncertain in the future—which is a good thing: A bit of performance anxiety, for example, which can manifest as apprehension or even dread, might motivate you to hunker down and prepare for a test or a speech."[8] In fact, people who are too at ease with difficult situations might not be fully considering the seriousness of their problems or challenges. Thus, their aloof attitudes could cause them to miss deadlines, turn in substandard work, or even forget their assignments are due. And so, as Krstic says, a little anxiety can actually work in people's favor.

"A bit of performance anxiety, for example, which can manifest as apprehension or even dread, might motivate you to hunker down and prepare for a test or a speech."[8]

—Zee Krstic, health editor for *Good Housekeeping* magazine

Fight or Flight

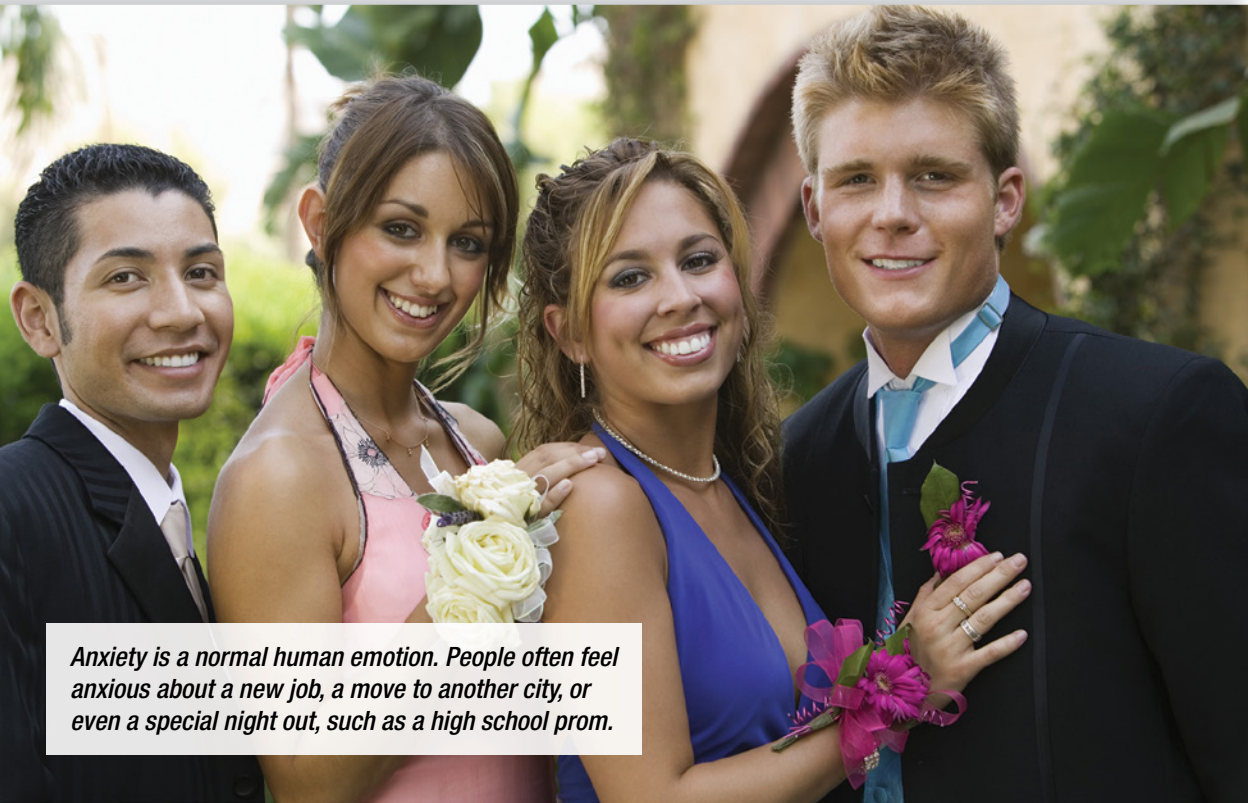
Everyone has uniquely personal reasons for letting feelings of fear or worry bubble to the surface. And although anxiety may be caused by these individual reasons, people are generally able to confront their fears and find ways to cope. As authors David Mellinger, a clinical social worker, and Steven Jay Lynn, a psychologist, write,

> "Normal" means of relieving and controlling anxiety often work well enough to ease nervousness, fearfulness, and tension. Many people are satisfied with the calming, heartening effects of prayer or affirmation or the rejuvenating power of healthy exercise, or else they successfully "white-knuckle" their way through anxiety-provoking events and relationships. And many people are capable of problem-solving and toning down episodes of stress and can somehow transform excessive anxiety into creativity, energy, and good works.[9]

How well people handle their own anxieties often depends on how they react to a mental and physical function known as the

fight-or-flight response. When people encounter unfamiliar situations, the fight-or-flight response guides their reaction. If they find themselves willing to confront the situation, they are likely to experience the fight response. That does not necessarily mean they will ball their hands into fists and throw a punch. Rather, it means they are prepared to deal with the stress and offer rational responses to the situation they are facing. On the other hand, if they are overcome with anxiety, it is likely they will experience the flight response, meaning they will do whatever they can to avoid confronting the issue that sparked the flight response.

When people are first confronted by unfamiliar situations, their initial reactions are tripped by a component of the human brain known as the amygdala, which is a tiny almond-shaped organ that sparks a person's emotional responses. The amygdala sends a message of distress to a second component of the brain, the hypothalamus, which acts as a command center, sending signals to the rest of the body. Based on the message transmitted by the amygdala, the hypothalamus may respond by quickening a person's heartbeat, increasing blood pressure, or making the person



Anxiety is a normal human emotion. People often feel anxious about a new job, a move to another city, or even a special night out, such as a high school prom.

take short, quick breaths. All of these physical reactions reflect the degree of anxiety the person is experiencing.

A third component of the brain, the hippocampus, also participates in the response. The hippocampus is the storehouse for a person's long-term memories. As such, the hippocampus may serve to moderate the signals sent by the amygdala. If the person has experienced the situation before, the hippocampus will help guide his or her response. The hippocampus may, for example, remind the person that he or she had similar experiences in the past and there is no danger.

Conversely, the hippocampus might remind a person that there could be very real or imagined danger ahead. Mellinger and Lynn recall the story of a young woman named Lisa. After returning home from a Halloween party where she and others had watched a horror movie, Lisa found her anxiety growing after hearing an unusual knocking sound coming from her back door. Since the most recent memory stored in her hippocampus included images of a cinematic ax murderer stalking his victims, her fight-or-flight response kicked in the moment she heard the unusual sound. As Mellinger and Lynn explain,

> A mere instant after the knock on the door triggered her emotional response, Lisa's hippocampus provided her with relevant memories as well as the "emergency response cards" or automatic thoughts. More precisely, if she were not too jumpy, Lisa might think, "Oh, that's just my oddball neighbor," but when Lisa is truly wired, her hippocampus boosts her uneasiness with mental images of deranged prowlers breaking into her house.[10]

Anxiety in Young People

Of course, people react differently to different situations. Someone else who attended that party and saw the same film may have had a far different response to a knocking sound than Lisa experienced. In other words, an event that triggers the fight-or-flight

Social Media Anxiety

Social media has engaged millions of people in online forums where they share their interests, give feedback to one another, and stay connected with friends who may be separated from them by long distances. But social media can also spark anxiety among its users.

The network news program *Today* surveyed seven thousand American mothers and found that 42 percent suffered from what it referred to as "Pinterest stress": stress caused by not being creative enough to merit the admiration of others on the social media platform. Pinterest posts are devoted to recipes, sewing patterns, designs for household knickknacks, and similar creative pursuits. According to *Today*, "Symptoms include staying up until 3 a.m. clicking through photos of exquisite hand-made birthday party favors even though you'll end up buying yours at the dollar store, or sobbing quietly into a burnt mess of expensive ingredients that were supposed to be adorable bunny cookies for the school bake sale."

Moreover, a 2015 study of 1,095 Facebook users by psychologists in Denmark found that people's anxieties decrease when they stop using Facebook. "It was demonstrated that taking a break from Facebook has positive effects on the two dimensions of well-being: our life satisfaction increases and our emotions become more positive," the study found.

Quoted in Maureen O'Connor, "The Six Major Anxieties of Social Media," *The Cut* (blog), *New York*, May 14, 2013. www.thecut.com.

Morten Tromholt, "The Facebook Experiment: Quitting Facebook Leads to Higher Levels of Well-Being," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, November 1, 2016. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.

response in one person might not do so in another person. Courtenay Hameister, who formerly hosted a nationally broadcast radio show, believes she experienced her first fight-or-flight response at the age of eight when she ventured out to the end of a diving board over a public pool. Looking down at the surface of the pool, 16 feet (5 m) below, Hameister says she suddenly felt a deep sense of anxiety about making the jump. But also, she says, the other young swimmers on the ladder behind her were growing impatient, taunting her to jump. Therefore, whereas Hameister's brain was prompting her to run away, many young people behind her were more than willing to dash off the end of the diving board.

In this case, though, Hameister's anxiety was intensified because she knew she would have to endure the stares and

Source Notes

Introduction: Even Superheroes Suffer from Anxiety

1. Peter Travers, "*Deadpool*: Ryan Reynolds Brings Back His 'Merc with a Mouth' Superhero for Maximum (and Meta) Chaos," *Rolling Stone*, February 11, 2016. www.rollingstone.com.
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4. Quoted in ScienceDaily, "Even a Single Mindfulness Meditation Session Can Reduce Anxiety," April 23, 2018. www.sciencedaily.com.
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Chapter One: What Is Everyday Anxiety?

6. Scott Muska, "Real Guys Describe the Anxiety of Waiting for Girls to Text Them Back," *Women's Health*, October 2, 2015. www.womenshealthmag.com.
7. Lucie Hemmen, *The Teen Girl's Anxiety Survival Guide*: *Ten Ways to Conquer Anxiety and Feel Your Best.* Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2021, p. 6.
8. Zee Krstic, "How to Help Someone Struggling with Anxiety," *Good Housekeeping*, April 23, 2020. www.goodhousekeeping.com.
9. David Mellinger and Steven Jay Lynn, *The Monster in the Cave: How to Face Your Fear and Anxiety and Live Your Life*. New York: Berkley, 2003, p. 5.
10. Mellinger and Lynn, *The Monster in the Cave*, p. 50.
11. Courtenay Hameister, *Okay Fine Whatever: The Year I Went from Being Afraid of Everything to Only Being Afraid of Most Things*. New York: Little, Brown, 2018, p. 4.
12. Katie Hurley, "6 Hidden Signs of Teen Anxiety," Psycom, February 25, 2021. www.psycom.net.

Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA)
https://adaa.org

The ADAA provides many resources for people experiencing anxiety as well as students who are studying the causes of anxiety. By accessing the "For the Public" link, visitors can find articles defining the different anxiety disorders, among them generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and others.

Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety (CTSA)
www.med.upenn.edu/ctsa

A department of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in Philadelphia, the CTSA's website provides many resources on anxiety, including articles on how to recognize symptoms of various anxiety disorders as well as an overview of the training involved for students who may be considering pursuing careers in psychology and the treatment of anxiety disorders.

Lisa Damour, PhD
www.drlisadamour.com

Psychologist Lisa Damour specializes in treating anxiety in teen girls and lists many resources about anxiety on her website. By accessing the "Articles" link, visitors can find dozens of news articles she has written on the topic that have appeared in publications such as *Your Teen Magazine*, the *New York Times*, and *Time* magazine.

For Further Research

Books

Lisa Damour, *Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls*. New York: Ballantine, 2019.

Courtenay Hameister, *Okay Fine Whatever: The Year I Went from Being Afraid of Everything to Only Being Afraid of Most Things*. New York: Little, Brown, 2018.

Lucie Hemmen, *The Teen Girl's Anxiety Survival Guide*: *Ten Ways to Conquer Anxiety and Feel Your Best.* Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2021.

Eva Holland, *Nerve: Adventures in the Science of Fear*. New York: The Experiment, 2020.

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