

FUTURE TENSE

Why Anxiety Is Good for You
(Even Though It Feels Bad)

Tracy Dennis-Tiwary, PhD



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For Vivek, Kavi, and Nandini



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Prologue

“Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way,” a famous philosopher once wrote, “has learned the ultimate.”

Hang on—there’s a right way and a wrong way to be anxious? That sounds to me like one more thing to be anxious about.

Yet Søren Kierkegaard, whom I like to think of as the Patron Saint of Anxiety, was onto something important.

You hate feeling anxious. I do, too. Everybody does. It’s an emotion that can be distressing, burdensome, and debilitating. And because of that we’re all missing the very thing Kierkegaard was getting at: anxiety wants to be our friend. It wants to be recognized and acknowledged and listened to and cherished and heeded. It feels terrible because it’s trying to tell us something important that we’d rather not hear—as a good friend often does. Because if we do listen, our lives will be infinitely better than if we do what we really want to do when anxiety pays us a visit: run away and hide.

What’s wrong with that? Isn’t anxiety a personal failure, a sign that something is wrong with us and with our life, something to be fixed and eradicated? Yet nobody in the history of time ever eradicated anxiety—thank goodness, because that would be a disaster.

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This book is the story of an emotion that is painful and powerful, terrible and funny, exhausting and energizing, and imperfect. It's like life. It's like being human. It *is* being human. If you read this book, I believe you will change the way you view anxiety. It's like the famous optical illusion Rubin's vase: look at it one way, and you see a vase, but relax your gaze and out pop two people in profile looking at each other across the vase-shaped space that separates them.

Making this paradigm shift, reclaiming anxiety as our friend and ally, isn't just going through a set of exercises and interventions. It's not just my telling you that anxiety sucks—although it really, really does at times—and describing twenty things you can do to feel better. Nor is it my telling you to glorify anxiety, or believe that you always need anxiety to be productive, creative, or to perform at your peak. You don't. Rather, it's creating a new mindset about anxiety—a fresh set of beliefs, insights, and expectations that allows you to explore anxiety, learn from it, and leverage it to your advantage. Achieving a new mindset will *not* fix anxiety itself—because the emotion of anxiety is not broken; it's how we cope with anxiety that's broken. Creating a new mindset is the best—and only way—we can repair that. This is the sole purpose of this book.

I hope Saint Søren would approve.

PART I

Why We Need Anxiety





What Anxiety Is (and Isn't)

Dr. Scott Parazynski and his space shuttle crewmates were speeding seventeen thousand five hundred miles an hour on their way out of Earth's atmosphere. Their destination was the International Space Station, a scientific hub, a stepping-stone for exploration of the solar system, and the largest structure humans have ever put into space. To many people, the ISS represents the pinnacle of human achievement.

By the time that mission took place in 2007, Scott was a veteran of four space shuttle flights and several extravehicular activities—space walks—in orbit. After retiring from NASA, he became the first person to have both flown in space and climbed to the summit of Mount Everest. This is a person who is comfortable with risk. But this mission carried an additional burden of significance. It had been delayed for three years after the space shuttle *Columbia* disaster, in which the spacecraft had disintegrated as it reentered the atmosphere, killing all seven crew members.

Yet for Scott and his team, the mission was worth the potential danger. They were to deliver and install a key component of the ISS that would connect and unify the US, European, and Japanese space labs within the station,



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providing additional power and life support and significantly expanding its size and capabilities.

After a week of new installations and routine repairs, things took an unexpected turn. Scott and a fellow crew member had just installed two huge power-generating solar cell panels. When the panels were opened and extended for the first time, a guide wire snagged, causing two large tears in them. That was a serious problem because the damage prevented the panels from expanding fully and generating enough energy to do their job.

For Scott to repair the torn solar cells, the team had to jury-rig an exceptionally long tether that would attach Scott to the end of a boom and then connect him—by his feet—to the end of the ISS's robotic arm. Dangling from the boom, it took him forty-five minutes to move ninety feet along the wing and reach the damaged panels. His skills as a surgeon were crucial as he painstakingly cut the snagged wire and installed stabilizers to reinforce the structure.

After seven nail-biting hours, the mission was a success. The crew on the ISS and the team back on Earth erupted into cheers as the repaired panels successfully expanded to their full length. A photograph of Scott seeming to fly above the glowing orange solar wing is an iconic image of intrepid exploration in space. His achievement is said to have inspired the death-defying spacecraft repair depicted in the movie *Gravity*.

Almost eight years after his celebrated feat, I had the immense pleasure of speaking with Scott on the stage of the Rubin Museum of Art's Brainwave program in New York

City. Tall, blond, and rugged, he looks like a circa-1950s American hero. He has the manners of one, too, with his easy smile and sincere humility.

I asked Scott how he had kept his cool that day with nothing but a space suit between him and the void. With the fate of the mission resting on his shoulders, what had been the secret of his success?

The answer? Anxiety.

Anxiety and Fear

I probably don't need to tell you what anxiety is.

It is a fundamentally human emotion, our companion since *Homo sapiens* walked upright. Anxiety activates our nervous systems, making us jittery and on edge, with butterflies in our stomach, a pounding heart, and racing thoughts. The word, derived from the Latin and ancient Greek words for “to choke,” “painfully constricted,” and “uneasy,” suggests that it is both unpleasant and a combination of the physical and emotional—a lump in our throat, our body paralyzed with fear, our mind frozen with indecision. It wasn't until the seventeenth century that the word was commonly used in English to describe the range of thoughts and feelings we recognize today as anxiety: worry, dread, angst, and nervousness about situations with an uncertain outcome.

Often, you know why you are anxious: Your doctor calls, telling you she wants to schedule a biopsy. You are about to step out on stage to give a career-making speech before

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a crowd of five hundred strangers. You open a letter from the IRS informing you that it is auditing your tax return. Other times, our anxiety is more elusive, without any clear cause or focus. Like a maddeningly persistent alarm, this free-floating anxiety tells us that something is going wrong, but we can't find the source of the beeping.

Whether general or specific, anxiety is what we feel when something bad *could* happen but hasn't happened yet. It has two key ingredients: bodily sensations (unease, tension, agitation) and thoughts (apprehension, dread, worry that danger might be around the corner). Put the two together, and we see why choking gave anxiety its name. *Where should I go, what should I do? Will it be worse if I turn left or right? Maybe it's best if I just shut down or disappear altogether.*

Anxiety is experienced not only as a feeling in our bodies but also as a quality of our thoughts. When we're anxious, our attention narrows, we become more focused and detail oriented, and we tend to see the trees instead of the forest. Positive emotions do the opposite: they broaden our focus so that we get the gist of a situation rather than the details. Anxiety also tends to get our minds moving, worrying about and preparing for negative possibilities.

Though dread typically dominates our experience of anxiety, we are also anxious when we want something. I am anxious to board the plane that will take me to my much-overdue beach vacation, and no flight delays or rain better get in my way! This kind of anxiety is an excited *frisson* for a desired future. I am *not*, however, anxious to head to an annual holiday party, which is sure to feature the usual cast of

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characters drinking way too much. I already know I'll have a bad time there. But whether our anxiety is due to dread or excitement, we become anxious only when we anticipate and care about what the future holds.

So why isn't anxiety the same as fear? We often use the two words interchangeably, since both inspire unease and trigger "fight/flight" responses—the adrenaline rush, racing heart, and rapid breathing. Both anxiety and fear catapult our mind into similar states: laser focus, detail orientation, and readiness to react. Our brain is prepared, and our body is ready to snap into action. But there's a difference.

One day recently, I was rifling through an old box stored in the attic. My hand touched something warm and furry that moved. I jumped back faster than I would have thought possible and pushed the box away. Research on the human startle response shows that it took me only a couple hundred milliseconds to react. My heart was racing, I broke out in a sweat, and I was definitely more awake and alert than I had been moments before. It turned out that the creature in the box was a little field mouse.

My response to that mouse was fear.

Now, I'm not afraid of rodents. I think field mice are cute and an important part of the ecosystem. Yet my fear response didn't care that I don't expect mice to bite me. Fear wasn't interested in discussing the merits or cuteness of field mice and whether I really needed to jump back so quickly. And that's a good thing, because my automatic response would have come in handy had the critter in the box been a scorpion instead—just as reflexively pulling my

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hand away after touching a pot of boiling water protects me from getting burned further.

My fear was reflexive, much as it was for the little mouse as she darted around the box and then froze in the corner to avoid detection. At no point did I—or the mouse—feel anxiety about an uncertain future. Danger was in the certain present, and we both acted automatically and quickly to deal with it (although later I heeded my anxiety about letting a rodent run rampant in my house and relocated her to a neighboring field).

Of course, human emotional life is much more complicated than reflexive fear, anger, sadness, joy, and disgust. Emotion science identifies these as the basic, or primary, emotions. They're typically considered to be biological in origin and universal in expression. Animals share these emotions with us; that's how fundamental certain feelings are.

Then there are the complex emotions, including grief, regret, shame, hate—and anxiety. The basic emotions are the building blocks of the complex ones, which transcend instinct; they are less automatic and more amenable to our thinking our way out of them. I might feel anxious the next time I reach into a box in the attic, wondering whether I'll find another furry friend, but I can reassure myself that it is unlikely. Animals probably don't experience complex emotions such as anxiety in the way humans do; my little mouse doesn't have the capacity to vividly imagine a future in which giant hands might appear without warning to pluck her from the safety of her nest. If she did, that would make her the Jean-Paul Sartre of mice, complaining that

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Hell is other mice as she retreated to her solitary box and grappling with existential angst as she waits for the next hand to descend. Whatever the case, what we can know for sure is that she will have learned through her encounter with me to *fear* hands if she ever sees them again, and her fear will end once she escapes to a warm, safe corner.

Fear is the immediate, certain response to a real danger in the present moment that ends when the threat is over. Anxiety is apprehension about the uncertain, imagined future and the vigilance that keeps us on high alert. It occurs in the spaces in between—between learning that something bad could happen and its arrival; between making plans and being helpless to take any real action—like fighting or fleeing, as animals do—to escape the danger. I can only wait to receive my biopsy results, to learn if the IRS examiner found any irregularities, or to hear whether my speech is followed by enthusiastic applause or half-hearted slow clapping. Anxiety exists because we know we are being slowly and inexorably pulled into a future that is either potentially unhappy or potentially happy. It's that uncertainty that makes anxiety hard to bear.

The Spectrum

Everyday anxiety is nothing surprising; we all experience worries, concerns, even moments of panic sometimes. But anxiety isn't a binary proposition, like a light switch that's either on or off. Imagine instead a dimmer sliding up and

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down, sometimes quickly, other times hardly at all. Low-level anxiety is present in our lives so often, like the air we breathe, that we might not even notice it. It happens when we open the door to meet our new boss or when we look outside and see snow coming down as we're packing up for our drive home; suddenly we're paying close attention to something we'd really rather not think about, but the feeling doesn't last for more than a minute or two. Once I meet my new boss, I soon get a sense of what she's like and my anxiety subsides. As I start driving home, I see that the roads are still clear, so my worries ease. Once we sense how things will turn out, our mild anxiety fades away like morning mist burnt off by the sun's warmth.

As we move along the scale from left to right, our anxious feelings get stronger, our focus turns into tunnel vision, and our worries really kick in. Let's take that prehistoric bugaboo, fear of the dark. It's not fear; it's anxiety. Unlike nocturnal animals, humans respond to darkness with apprehension about the unseeable hazards that *could* lie in wait. The search for light in the darkness is one of the most basic metaphors across human history. Even in prehistory, we can imagine, night lights—in the form of little fires?—were probably a hot commodity because we are so anxious about the dangers that hide in the darkness.

As we continue along the spectrum, one of the most common forms of moderate anxiety is the social kind—fearing the judgment and negative evaluation of others. What will the audience think of my speech? Will my employee evaluation go well? Will people laugh at my terrible dancing?

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Even when we are confident in our abilities, many of us feel nervous before going out onto a stage. Sometimes, when we look out at our audience, all we can see is that one fellow falling asleep in the back. We don't even notice that everyone else is smiling and nodding in appreciation.

Over a matter of hours, even minutes, we might go from feeling mildly worried, then shifting up into high-intensity dread, before sliding back down the scale until we reach relief or even Zen-like calm. Even though high anxiety can feel out of our control, it's still just a point on a spectrum, so we can usually dial it back and return to our comfort zone.

That is because anxiety itself—the worry, dread, and nervousness; the distress over uncertainties; even the overwhelming panic—is not the problem. The problem is that the thoughts and behaviors we use to cope with anxiety can make it worse. When this happens more often than not, anxiety can start to lead us down the path toward an anxiety disorder. But the two—anxiety and anxiety disorders—are not the same.

The most crucial distinction between anxiety and an anxiety disorder is termed *functional impairment*—in short, when anxiety gets in the way of living life. The emotion of anxiety ebbs and flows, sometimes barely noticeable and sometimes distressing. But the disorder, by definition, involves more than temporary distress. For a person with an anxiety disorder, these feelings last for weeks, months, even years, and they tend to get worse over time. Most important, such feelings very often interfere with pursuing the things we treasure

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most, such as home life, work, and time with friends. This long-term impairment of our day-to-day activities and well-being is the sine qua non of anxiety disorders.

Take Nina. At thirty, she has built a career as a photographer, doing weddings and portraits. She has long known that she feels more comfortable watching people than being watched and being behind the camera instead of in front of it. Recently, however, her natural shyness has become hard to manage and has kept her from taking on new clients. She has started to believe that she appears bumbling, shaking, sweaty, and stupid to the world—and she wonders if that is indeed what she is. When she started failing to show up for work and struggling financially as a result, she decided to try therapy. As part of her treatment, the therapist asked her to take part in an experiment, which the therapist would record on camera.

First, Nina would pretend that the therapist was a potential client who was looking for a wedding photographer. She would talk with the woman as she would with any new client. During the conversation, she would also consciously do the things she typically does during interviews to handle her anxiety: look down and avoid eye contact while tightly clutching her camera or some other object to stop herself from shaking.

Then Nina and her therapist would reenact the interview with a key change: instead of looking down, Nina would consistently make eye contact and place her hands in her lap instead of clutching something.

Before starting the experiment, Nina's therapist asked

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her, on a scale of 0 to 100, how much did she think she would shake? Nina thought 90. How sweaty would she appear, and how stupid would she sound? Again, Nina thought 90 on both for sure. She anticipated that she would be a nervous wreck, someone no one would ever want to hire to document a special day.

After acting out both versions of the conversation and viewing the recording, the therapist asked Nina: On a scale of 0 to 100, how did she actually look on camera—was she as shaky, sweaty, and stupid as she had anticipated? Nina was surprised to see that although she did seem nervous during the first part of the experiment, she didn't shake at all or seem to be sweating, and she sounded fine—maybe not brilliant but certainly not stupid. When Nina watched the second half of the experiment, when she made eye contact and wasn't clutching her camera, she couldn't help but notice that she suddenly appeared every inch the confident professional. She smiled, was well spoken, and offered good ideas and suggestions.

It's not that Nina wasn't feeling nervous. She was. But once she stopped acting like a wreck—looking away and holding on to the camera for dear life—she felt much less like one. That was because she stopped relying on ways of coping that unintentionally made her anxiety worse.

If changing a few key behaviors and perceptions can indeed help to alleviate painful, even debilitating anxiety, why are anxiety disorders the single most common mental health problem today? Why are they arguably on the rise, fast becoming the public health crisis of our era?

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If that sounds like an overstatement, consider the statistics. A large epidemiological study conducted at Harvard, using a combination of diagnostic interviews and assessment of life impairment, showed that almost 20 percent of adults in the United States—more than 60 million people—suffer from an anxiety disorder every year. About 17 million people each year suffer from depression, the second most common mental health problem, and nearly half of them are also diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Over a lifetime, the number of Americans who will suffer from one or more anxiety disorders jumps to a shocking 31 percent—more than 100 million of us, including teenagers and kids. Many seek therapy, but fewer than half show lasting change, even when receiving gold-standard treatments such as cognitive behavioral therapy. Women are disproportionately affected; almost twice as many women as men will be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder in their lifetimes.

Nine different anxiety disorders are diagnosed in the United States, not including trauma-related disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and compulsive disorders such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Some anxiety disorders, such as phobias, primarily involve avoiding feared objects and situations, such as hemophobia, fear of blood, and claustrophobia, fear of being in a closed space. Other types of anxiety disorders involve intense bodily signs of fear, such as a panic attack, when a sudden outbreak of shaking, sweating, shortness of breath, chest pains, and a feeling of impending doom mimic what many

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of us think a heart attack probably feels like. In other types, such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), worries consume time and attention, causing people to avoid situations they used to enjoy and making it difficult for them to focus and perform at work.

Imagine the experience of Kabir, who first showed signs of intense anxiety when he was fifteen. At first, he feared only speaking in class. For days before a presentation he worried constantly, didn't sleep, and refused to eat. He made himself sick with worry. As a result, as time went on, he missed more and more days of school and his grades suffered. Soon, this extreme and constant worry emerged even about nonschool situations, such as when he was invited to a party or when he was to participate in a swim meet. Within months, he stopped doing both and broke off the few friendships he had. By the end of the year, he was having full-blown panic attacks, with heart palpitations and feelings of suffocation so extreme that he was convinced that he was having a heart attack.

By diagnostic standards, Kabir went from feeling highly anxious to developing social anxiety, GAD, *and* panic disorder. Whatever the labels, he was diagnosed *not* because he felt intensely anxious and worried but because he could no longer go to school, participate in activities, or keep friends. His way of coping with worry and anxiety had gotten in the way of his ability to live his life.

The key problem for people diagnosed with an anxiety disorder is not just that they experience intense anxiety; it's that the tools they have at their disposal to turn down the

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dial on those feelings are not effective—as was the case with Kabir, who coped with anxiety by eating and sleeping poorly, staying home from school, dropping out of sports, and isolating himself from his friends. Such attempted solutions serve only to avoid or suppress anxiety and just end up making it worse. In other words, although anxiety is fundamentally a useful emotion, the symptoms of anxiety disorders are worse than useless; they actively get in the way.

So it's not that we're in the midst of a public health anxiety crisis; we're in a crisis of the way we cope with anxiety.

Think of anxiety like a smoke alarm, warning that our house is on fire. What if instead of running out of the house and calling the fire department we just ignored the alarm, removed the battery, or avoided the places in the house where the alarm was loudest. Instead of listening to the critical information the alarm is giving—where there's smoke, there might be fire!—we imagine that it's not there. So instead of benefiting from the alarm and putting out the fire, we just hope and pray that the house doesn't burn down. That's not to say it's always easy to listen to anxiety. Intense, enduring anxiety can overwhelm our ability to perceive the useful information it might hold for us. Or, conversely, we fail to listen to it because we've decided that the only way to get things done in life is to suffer through regular, anxiety-fueled adrenaline rushes. Yet, when we believe that our anxiety is worth listening to, when we investigate it rather than revile it, we break such unhealthy cycles and come to realize that some ways of responding to anxiety turn down

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the dial on the continuum, whereas other ways—especially ignoring it—rev us up to unmanageable levels. Before we know it, our house *is* ablaze.

Of course, it's not just difficulties with coping that lead to debilitating anxiety. In many cases, experiences of chronic and unrelenting stress and adversity play a huge role. Sometimes life just doesn't let up, and any of us in such a situation would feel intense and overwhelming anxiety. Yet to say we're in the midst of a crisis of how we cope with anxiety does not negate that fact, because no matter what the cause, being able to cope with anxiety differently is part of the solution. And listening to our anxiety—believing that there can be wisdom in what it tells us—is the first step toward finding that solution.

Believing that our anxiety is worth listening to might be easier than we think. Imagine that you are running for president of a political organization. Your task is to give a campaign speech. You have three minutes to prepare your remarks, after which you will deliver a three-minute speech. You will be speaking in front of a panel of judges, and your performance will be videotaped and compared to videos of other candidates' talks.

If you are diagnosed with social anxiety, you live in fear of how other people will judge you. You're already very tough on yourself; even trying to think of your positive qualities makes you uncomfortable. So this entire experience sounds like torture.

As the judges watch you, they do nothing but frown, cross

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their arms, shake their heads, and display other discouraging nonverbal feedback. After what feels like an eternity, your speech finally ends. Certainly, you've earned a break. But your trials are not over yet.

Now you are told to perform a tricky math problem in front of the same panel of judges: you must count backward from 1,999 by 13, out loud, as fast as you can. The evaluators call you out every time you pause, saying "You're counting too slowly. Please speed up. You still have some time left. Please continue." Every time you fail, someone says, "Incorrect. Please begin again from 1,999." Even those of us who are confident in our math skills would be rattled.

This mini-torture session is actually a famous research task called the Trier Social Stress Test, or TSST. The experiment was developed more than forty years ago; it creates stress and anxiety in almost everyone but is an especially painful experience if you struggle with social anxiety—your heart will pound, you will breathe faster, you will feel butterflies in your stomach, and you will stumble over your words. It would be reasonable to assume that these signs show that you are not coping with the challenge very well.

But what if before doing the TSST, you were taught to anticipate your anxious responses and were informed that they are, in fact, signs that you are energized and preparing to face the challenge ahead. You're informed that anxiety evolved to help our ancestors survive by delivering blood and oxygen to our muscles, organs, and brains, so that they work at peak capacity. And just in case you're not convinced,

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you read some impressive scientific studies that document proof of the numerous positive aspects of anxiety.

If you had learned all this before you underwent the dreaded TSST, would it have made a difference in how you handled it?

In 2013, researchers at Harvard answered that question. Their work showed that if socially anxious participants got the lesson about the benefits of anxiety, they reported feeling less anxious and more confident. The difference in their physiological response to anxiety was even more striking. Typically, when we experience high anxiety and stress levels, our heart rates increase and our blood vessels constrict. Once the research participants perceived their anxious bodily reactions as beneficial, however, their blood vessels were more relaxed and their heart rates were steadier. Their hearts were still pounding—the TSST is a strain no matter what you do in advance—but their cardiac patterns were more similar to healthy patterns when we are focused and engaged—when we are bravely meeting challenges.

This study showed that just by changing what we believe about anxiety—that it is a benefit rather than a burden—our bodies follow suit and believe it, too.

The Problem and the Solution

In this era of pandemic, political polarization, and catastrophic climate change, many of us feel overwhelmed by anxiety for our future. To cope, we have learned to think of

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the emotion as we do any other ailment: we want to prevent it, avoid it, and stamp it out at all costs.

As scientists become more aware of anxiety than ever before, why aren't the prevention and treatment of debilitating anxiety—anxiety disorders—keeping pace with those of physical diseases? Clearly, hundreds of books, thousands of rigorous scientific studies, and thirty different antianxiety medications are not helping enough. Why have we mental health professionals failed so spectacularly?

The fact is, we have it backward. The problem isn't anxiety; the problem is that our beliefs about anxiety stop us from believing we can manage it and even use it to our advantage—just as the participants in the TSST experiment learned. And when our beliefs make our anxiety worse, we are at greater risk of traveling down the path toward debilitating anxiety and even anxiety disorders.

When Scott Parazynski walked out into the void of space, laser focused and determined, it was anxiety that readied him for the worst. It enabled him, even before the mission began, to prepare for a perilous moment that he didn't know for sure was even coming. But he knew that an unhappy outcome was possible, as was a triumphant one, and so he trained for months, sharpened his skills, and cemented the trust he shared with his team.

Anxiety can be hard, disruptive, sometimes terrifying. At the same time, it can be an ally, a benefit, and a source of ingenuity. But to shift our perspective, we'll have to break down and rebuild our story of this emotion. This will re-

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quire a journey, from the halls of academia to the theaters of the world, from medieval sermons of hellfire and brimstone to life during lockdown, from the infinite scroll of our cell phones to our kitchen tables.

If anxiety is such a great thing, why does it feel so bad?