



the healing anxiety workbook

**a guide to calm worry
and intrusive thoughts
at the root**

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SOUNDS TRUE INNER WORKBOOKS

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introduction

anxiety is one of the most distressing symptoms of our times. When I tell people that I work in the realm of anxiety, they invariably respond with some version of, “Well, you must be very busy.” Anxiety is, indeed, pervasive, and it’s on the rise: there has been a 50 percent increase in anxiety disorders over the last three decades and three hundred million people suffer from anxiety globally. Yet, this number only accounts for those who seek a diagnosis. The reality is the actual number of people who struggle with anxiety on a daily basis and never seek support is significantly higher.

In short, humans are anxious. And we have some good reasons to be. Anxiety is a healthy response to actual danger, and, while many of us are living in safer times in our day-to-day lives than ever before, we’re also aware of highly anxiety-provoking threats, from the climate crisis to gun violence to war. On a personal level there’s also more expectation on us to “succeed,” and our support systems have radically decreased, which increases the pressure on everyone. Furthermore, while technology connects us in some ways, it also disconnects us, creating more isolation and less community. These are all factors that contribute to the modern incarnation of anxiety.

Anxiety is, in a nutshell, a lack of safety. Sometimes the sense of danger originates from an external source, like the threat or reality

of war, insufficient resources, or school shootings, and sometimes it originates internally from a hypervigilant scanner that is constantly searching for danger. When there is real-and-present danger, anxiety serves us well; it can spur us to study harder for an upcoming test, and it can alert us to the presence of an immediate threat. But anxiety has a habit of snow-balling into pervasive worry and intrusive thoughts, even when there isn't an immediate or obvious threat. This is when anxiety stops serving us and instead becomes a different sort of messenger designed to alert us to internal places that need our attention.

Let me pause here to say that healing anxiety isn't entirely an internal job. If you can't pay your bills and you live in a country that doesn't take care of its citizens, this is inherently anxiety-provoking, and doing your inner work isn't going to change the outer situation. There are many broken systems in our world that, if fixed, would radically reduce anxiety. For anxiety, alongside the sense of being unsafe, is also the sense of not being taken care of. If you trusted that there were communities and structures in place to take care of your basic needs, these aspects of anxiety would naturally abate. When I talk about anxiety as a lack of safety in this book, I'm referring to inner safety. I want to be clear at the outset that by referring to inner safety I am by no means invalidating or simplifying the very real external systems that need a radical overhaul so that all people feel taken care of, have their basic needs met, and feel safe.

Anxiety that isn't centered around our basic human needs often shifts into the territory of worry and intrusive thoughts. While many therapeutic approaches seek to reduce symptoms by changing our thoughts and behavior, my work is informed by the depth psychological tradition, which aims to not only shift our thoughts and behavior but also heal our symptoms at the root. Symptom reduction is essential, and for many people it's an effective approach to working with anxiety. Yet, for others, once the intensity of the symptoms has been reduced, they're left with what the symptoms

were covering over, which can be anything from unhealed trauma to grief to the pervasive sense of disconnection that permeates our modern lives.

The Power of Connection

In my previous book, *The Wisdom of Anxiety*, I addressed many of the underlying root causes of anxiety, focusing specifically on anxiety as a messenger alerting us to inner places that are off-kilter in our four realms of self: physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual. This workbook addresses these elements as well but through the lens of connection. For among the many roots causes of anxiety, one of the most pervasive is our disconnection in three primary directions: from self, others, and the unseen realms. When we reverse engineer this root cause, we can begin to repair the ruptures by asking: what creates connection? When we're connected in all sphere—when we belong to ourselves, to others, and to the unseen realm (nature, ancestors, creativity)—we feel securely attached, a fullness of being emerges, anxiety is edged out, and we trust in the goodness of life and our place in the order of things. Life no longer feels quite so fragmented and tenuous, and we're able to move forward in each moment with more presence, purpose, trust, and joy.

When we feel bone-and-soul safe—the type of safety that cannot be taken away—intrusive thoughts, obsessions, anxiety, worry, and compulsions quiet down, even when life feels uncertain.

The basic equation is: Attachment = Safety.

When you are healthfully attached in all directions, meaning you feel connected, you feel filled up and safe, and anxiety is less likely to seep in. On the other hand, when there are breaks in attachment,

anxiety is more likely to trickle into the gaps. Again, anxiety is, at the core, a lack of safety, so when we create safety, *which is also deep trust*, in all directions, anxiety quiets down.

When we're connected, we're tapped into the flow of the world. This warm energy of goodness and light enters our soul and possibly our bloodstream, filling us with positive energy. For those of you who are more scientifically minded, we now have evidence that regular practices like meditation and prayer flood our brains, and then our bodies, with many positive neurotransmitters, most significantly serotonin. When serotonin increases, anxiety and depression decrease. This is good medicine. When we engage enough with the actions and mindsets that fill us, we replace the negative habits of anxiety and rumination with the positive actions that lead to more well-being. This workbook offers tangible ways to help you find your own pathways back to reconnection so you can feel more securely attached and, thus, safer.

Intention

When we're approaching a new project or pathway of healing, intention is key. When you're feeling anxious, the default response is to try to get rid of or fix the anxiety. All beings are wired to avoid pain or discomfort and seek pleasure or comfort, and humans are no different. However, when we seek to banish any parts of ourselves they tend to grow louder and more powerful, for all parts of us need to be seen and heard, and that includes our pain. When we try to banish anxiety, it finds its way back in another form.

My work with anxiety has primarily focused on listening closely to anxiety's emissaries of symptoms—intrusive thoughts, worry, obsessions, compulsions, insomnia—to address what is needed at the root. This workbook, while addressing the root cause of disconnection, seeks to widen the container of who we are so that anxiety plays a smaller part in our lives. We aren't seeking to get rid of anxiety so much as growing the goodness of the spheres of

connection, which will overpower the anxiety. As we become more spacious through the process of re-connection, anxiety is absorbed. Salt in a cup of water is undrinkable, but the same amount of salt in a lake is unnoticeable. If anxiety is the salt, let's become the lake.

 **Just as love is stronger than fear, connection is stronger than anxiety.**

Do not underestimate the power of connection to dissolve anxiety. Connection fuels our hearts and our world, and when it's lacking, things fall apart and anxiety ramps up in response. Just as trees communicate through a complex underground mycelium network—named by German forester Peter Wohlleben as the “woodwide web”—we, too, are connected in ways that are often unseen and forgotten. It's time to remember.

Connection is safety.

Connection is trust.

When you are held in trust, you feel safe.

Since anxiety is fundamentally the sense of feeling unsafe, connection is the remedy.

The Tree of Life

The foundational connective image for this workbook is the Tree of Life. From Celtic, Norse, Mesopotamian, Zulu, and Mayan mythology to the Kabbalah and the Book of Genesis, the Tree of Life has been an archetypal symbol of connection, groundedness, family and ancestry, and personal growth for thousands of years.

The ancient resonance of the Tree of Life indicates that humans have long known what scientists are now proving: trees live in a complex network of connection. As forest ecologist Suzanne Simard wrote in her book, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*, “I discovered that [the trees] are in a web of interdependence, linked by a system of underground channels, where they perceive and connect and relate with an ancient intricacy and wisdom that can no longer be denied.”

We, too, live in a complex network of connection. Connection is key to our well-being. Connection to our root systems, both literally and metaphorically, brings us into our true places of belonging. “As above so below” is a common phrase in Jungian and mystical worlds: when we are connected to the world above us (the sky, the spiritual realm, clear ideas, creativity,

ancestors) and to the world below (the unconscious realm of dreams, our bodies, the ground beneath our feet, human connection), there’s a natural flow of energy that creates inner harmony. And when we’re in harmony and equanimity—when we trust in our places of belonging—anxiety is edged out.

Belonging is more powerful than anxiety.

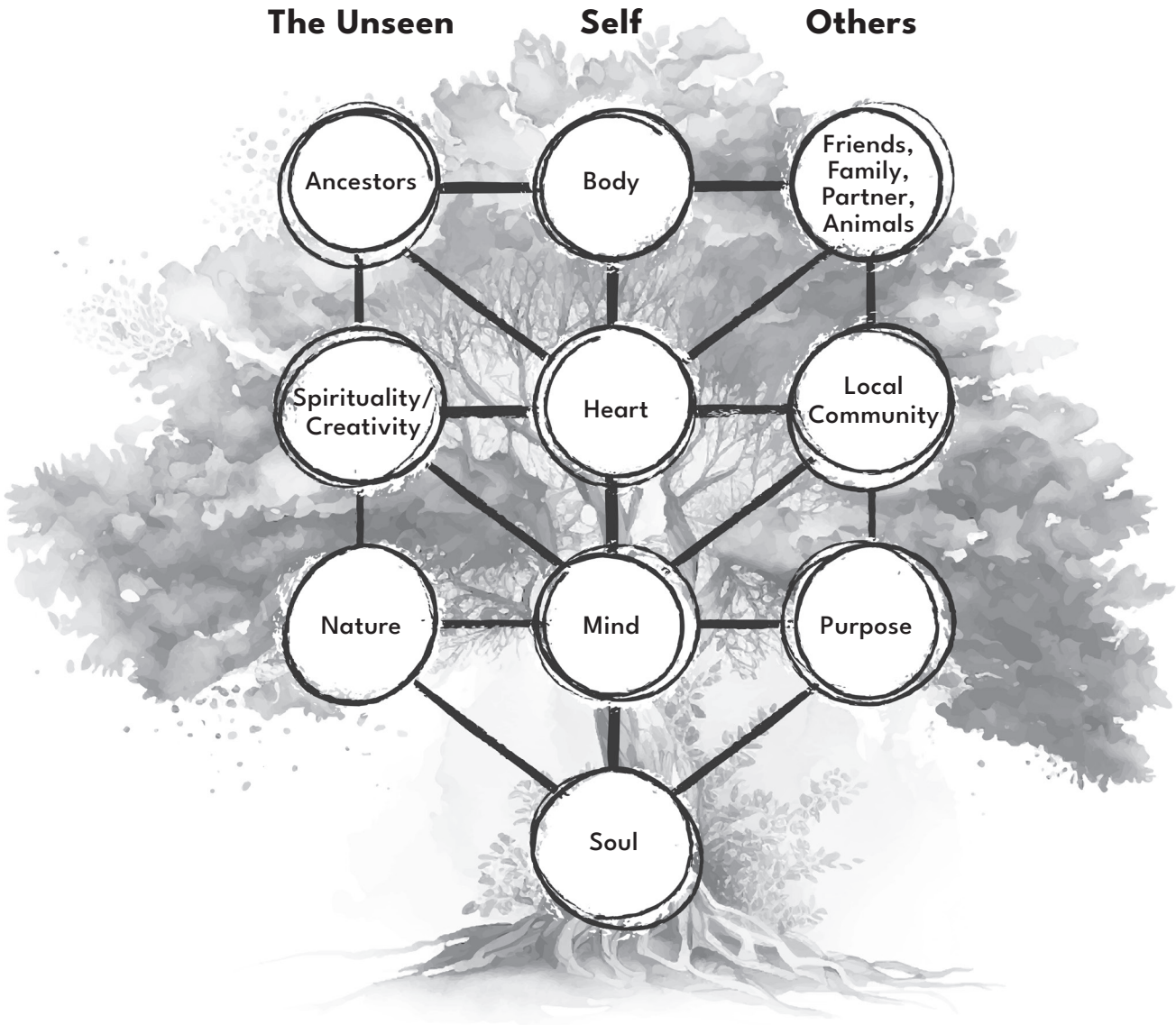
As you can see in the Tree of Life image, I’ve divided the tree into three sections to represent the three elements of connection we’ll be working with in this book: the trunk is our connection to **Self** (body, mind, heart, soul), the right branches are our connection to **others** (friends, family, partner, animals, local community, purpose), and the left branches are our connection to the **unseen** realm (creativity, ancestors, nature). When we’re connected in all three realms and all ten spheres, we feel attached, safe, and grounded, and anxiety naturally recedes.

Connection is more powerful than anxiety.

The Unseen

Self

Others



The Tree of Life

The Power of Action

This workbook, like all workbooks, is action-based. You can read and listen and learn for years, but unless you take actions that create more well-being, you will remain stuck. While accurate information is important and often transformative, it's the compassionate actions we take on our own behalf that create long-lasting, deep-rooted, sustainable change.

In order to take action, we must be able to access our Inner Parent/Loving Adult/Wise Self (these are interchangeable terms; use whichever one resonates with you). This is the part of us that is willing to do some work in order to create change. We all have an inner teen that would much rather sit around all day on our phones instead of taking loving action. While rest is essential, if inaction becomes our primary default mode, we will remain stuck and anxiety will continue to take root and fester. This is why we'll be starting with the Foundational Action of connecting with your Wise Self/Inner Parent, which you'll find at the end of the introduction. This is an important exercise, especially if you struggle with resistance.

Playing with this Workbook

Although this is a *workbook*, I encourage you to approach it with a sense of *play*. While there is no doubt that anxiety can be debilitating and excruciating, when we focus on the connective elements of the Tree of Life, we begin to notice some nourishment and life-affirming qualities entering through our roots, branches, and leaves. As I often say, whatever we water will grow; if we water anxiety, we will feel more anxious, as anxiety is fundamentally an experience of being disconnected. But if we shift the focus of our attention onto places of connection, we re-enter the stream of vitality that is waiting to receive us. We are meant to be connected. We are meant to feel fully alive. We often think of inner work

as hard work, but I encourage you to approach this book from a different place inside of you.

There is, of course, a time and a place to do the hard work of healing trauma and excavating the most painful places of our stories. That's what therapy is for because when we address our deepest layers of pain, which often take root in childhood, it can be very helpful to have a wise, loving, and skilled therapist facilitating the process. Once we've addressed those layers of inner healing, this book can help fill in the gaps, the ruptures of attachment that are a result of growing up in a culture that, overall, teaches us to disconnect. We all have gateways back to our places of belonging. This workbook will help you find your personal pathways back to connection.

This book is meant to be a place of free creative expression. Get out your markers, crayons, watercolors, scissors, glue, and tape! Let it be fun. As I've been teaching for years, sensitivity is at the core of anxiety. When this core of sensitivity isn't honored, it often morphs into anxiety. But when sensitivity receives the attunement it needs, it channels into spirituality and creativity. This work(play)book is an opportunity to re-parent yourself by pouring attention into the ten spheres in the Tree of Life in loving ways so you can re-attach to yourself, others, and the invisible realm. Remember the equation: Attachment = Safety. When you feel safe, anxiety diminishes.

Filled with your reflections, meaningful documents, and possibly some poetry and art, this can also serve as a keepsake that you can refer to when you're feeling off-kilter. As a document of connection, it will be a reminder of all of the ways you are already connected. Sometimes all we need is a simple reminder of the places of connection—one poem or family recipe—to tap us back in.



Gold Star Practices

Throughout the book, certain exercises are labeled as Gold Star Practices, which are exercises that touch on multiple spheres of the Tree of Life at once. In the Western world, we tend to parse and divide ourselves and our lives into disparate sections: the body separate from the mind, the mind separate from the soul. In school we divide up subjects, as if history has nothing to do with psychology and math stands on an island of its own. For organizational purposes, it's convenient to divide into parts—just as I've done for this book—but in reality nothing is as separate as we think. While many of the exercises in this book touch on multiple spheres, the Gold Star Practices do so with particular potency. If you only incorporate a few exercises into your life, I recommend choosing the Gold Stars.