

The Part That Never Rests

A companion guide for anxiety that is trying to protect you

WHAT ANXIETY IS ACTUALLY DOING

1

Keeping watch

Scanning for danger on your behalf, without being asked, and without stopping.

2

Bracing

Holding the body ready for something that hasn't happened, and may not.

3

Protecting

Standing guard over something that once hurt, in case it happens again.

4

Repeating

Running a strategy learned early, in a situation that has since changed.

None of this is malfunction. It is protection that hasn't yet been told the danger has passed.

A word about the title

This guide doesn't treat anxiety as a fault to be corrected. It treats it as something in you that took on a job — early, and without much choice — and has been doing it faithfully ever since. The work isn't to overrule it. It's to understand what it's guarding, and to let it know it can rest.

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Welcome

This is a companion to *Coming Back to Safe*, which maps the states your nervous system moves through, and to *Two Minds About It*, which looks at what happens when part of you wants something and part of you doesn't. Anxiety sits where those two meet. It is a state in the body, and it is also, very often, a part of you doing a job it was given a long time ago.

Almost everyone knows some version of it — the mind that runs ahead, the body that won't quite settle, the sense of something wrong with no address to send it to. What follows won't tell you to think more positively, and won't ask you to argue with yourself. Anxiety rarely responds to argument. It responds to being understood, and to enough safety to stand down.

This is not irrational

Anxiety is a protective response. It made sense somewhere — usually earlier, usually elsewhere — even when it doesn't fit here.

This is not a character flaw

Watchfulness is learned, and often learned young, in circumstances nobody chose. It says something about what happened, not about what you're worth.

This is not something to override

Forcing your way through anxiety tends to make it louder. Understanding what it's protecting tends to settle it.

This is practice, not persuasion

Insight helps, but a nervous system doesn't change by being convinced. It changes through repetition, safety, and time.

How it links with *Coming Back to Safe*

That guide helps you recognise which state you're in — safe and connected, mobilised, or shut down. This one asks the next question: what is the state protecting, what did it learn, and what would help it stand down? Read them in either order.

A note on where anxiety comes from

Not all anxiety is rooted in the past. Sleep, caffeine, thyroid function, medication, hormonal change, ADHD and ordinary overload all play a part, and are worth ruling in or out with your GP. This guide is about the anxiety that persists once the obvious has been accounted for.

The Pattern — Protection, Not Malfunction

The question people usually arrive with is some version of *what is wrong with me?* It's an understandable question, and it contains an assumption: that anxiety is a fault in the machinery. Trauma-informed approaches ask something different — not what is wrong with you, but what happened to you, and what did you have to do to manage it.

That shift matters, because it changes what you do next. A fault gets corrected. An adaptation gets understood, thanked, and gradually made unnecessary.

A FAMILIAR VIEW	A PROTECTIVE VIEW
"This is irrational."	It was rational once. Protection doesn't update itself just because the situation has changed.
"The thoughts are the problem."	The state usually comes first. The thoughts arrive afterwards, to explain a body that has already braced.
"I should be able to override it."	Protection doesn't respond to instruction. It responds to evidence of safety, repeated.
"It needs to go."	It needs to be understood. Most protective responses ease once they're no longer working alone.
"Something is wrong with me."	Something happened, and this is what you learned to do about it.

The question that changes things

Gabor Maté describes the difference between asking "*what is wrong with you?*" and "*what happened to you?*" as the difference between a verdict and an understanding. The first invites shame. The second invites curiosity — and curiosity is the only one of the two that leads anywhere.

A useful reframe

"My anxiety isn't evidence that I'm broken. It's evidence that something once needed managing — and that a part of me stepped up to do it."

STEP 1

Notice the State Before the Story

Anxiety arrives in the body first. The reasons turn up afterwards, to explain it.

Stephen Porges uses the word *neuroception* for the way the nervous system appraises safety and threat below conscious awareness. It is fast, it is automatic, and it acts before you know it has acted. Which means the feeling can arrive with no reason attached — and the mind, disliking that, will supply one.

Deb Dana puts it plainly: story follows state. The thought “*something is wrong*” is often not the cause of the anxiety. It is the narration of a body that has already moved into protection.

Common signs the state has shifted

- Shallow, high breathing, or a held breath you didn't notice holding
- Tightness in the chest, throat, jaw, shoulders or stomach
- Scanning — faces, rooms, tone of voice, what someone meant by that
- A mind that generates possible problems at speed, and won't be talked out of them
- Restlessness, or an urge to leave without knowing where you'd go
- Dread with no address — a sense of something coming, unattached to anything specific

Notice without accusation

Try “my system has moved into protection” rather than “I'm being ridiculous.” Dan Siegel's phrase for this is *name it to tame it* — describing an internal state, rather than justifying or arguing with it, reliably takes some of the heat out of it. You are not agreeing with the story. You are noticing the state that produced it.

STEP 2

Meet the Part That Keeps Watch

Anxiety behaves less like a symptom and more like someone with a job to do.

In Internal Family Systems, Richard Schwartz describes protective parts: aspects of us that work to keep something more vulnerable from being touched. Some work ahead of time — planning, checking, rehearsing, pleasing, watching — and anxiety is usually that kind, on duty. The title of Schwartz's book is the point: *no bad parts*. Frank Anderson adds a caution worth taking seriously — moving past a protector too quickly, in a hurry to reach what's underneath, tends to backfire. Protectors are met first, and on their terms.

PROTECTIVE STYLE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	WHAT IT'S TRYING TO PREVENT
The planner	Rehearsing conversations, over-preparing, running through what could go wrong	Being caught out, unready, exposed as not coping
The watcher	Reading faces, tracking moods, monitoring tone for a change	A rupture arriving without warning
The pleaser	Anticipating what others need, agreeing quickly, smoothing things over	Being rejected, or being too much for someone
The escaper	Cancelling, leaving early, distracting, staying busy	The feeling itself becoming unbearable
The checker	Seeking reassurance, re-reading, going over it once more	Uncertainty being left unresolved

Questions for gentle exploration

- "If this anxiety had a job title, what would it be?"
- "How old does this part of me feel — and how old was I when it started?"
- "What is it afraid would happen if it stopped watching for a day?"
- "What has it protected me from that I've never once thanked it for?"

Unblending, not arguing

"I am anxious" leaves no one home. "A part of me is anxious" leaves someone to listen.

STEP 3

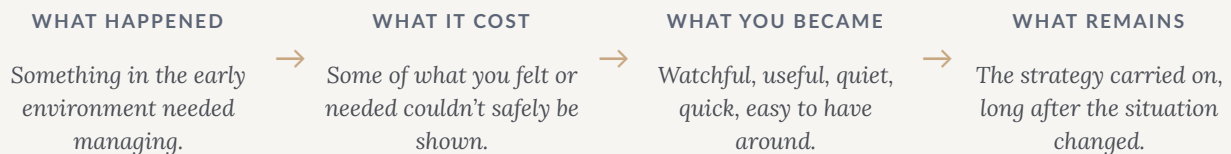
Ask What It Learned

Protection is trained. It's worth knowing something about what trained it.

Gabor Maté describes two needs every child has and cannot rank: attachment, and authenticity. We need connection with the people we depend on, and we need to be ourselves. Where those two come into conflict, attachment wins — it has to, because a child cannot survive alone. So some part of what you felt, needed or noticed gets set aside, and something more acceptable is offered in its place.

That adaptation is intelligent. It is also expensive, and it doesn't automatically end when the circumstances do. Bessel van der Kolk's point is that the body keeps its own record of all this, whether or not there is a clear story attached.

HOW AN ADAPTATION BECOMES A HABIT



A short practice

"When did being watchful start being useful? Who was I watching, and what was I watching for? What did I learn it wasn't safe to show? And is that still true — here, in this relationship, at this age?"

No single origin is required

You don't need one defining memory, and you may not have one. A nervous system is shaped as surely by ten thousand small moments — of not being met, of having to manage, of reading the room before speaking — as by any single event. Hold the origins lightly and tentatively.

STEP 4

Let the Body Finish What It Started

Much of what we call anxiety is mobilised energy with nowhere to go.

Peter Levine's observation is that a threat response which couldn't complete doesn't simply switch off. The body mobilised for something — to push back, to get away, to speak — and the movement never happened. What remains is activation still looking for its ending, which from the inside feels remarkably like anxiety. The way through is not force; it is going slowly enough that the body can finish rather than flood.

GOING SLOWLY ENOUGH TO WORK

Titration

A little at a time. Enough sensation to feel it clearly, not enough to be swamped by it.

Pendulation

Towards the difficult sensation, then deliberately back to something steady. Then back again.

Completion

Letting the movement the body never got to make — pushing, turning away, walking out, saying the thing — happen now, in some small and deliberate form.

PRINCIPLE

ONE WAY TO PRACTISE IT

Titration

"Can I stay with the edge of this for ten seconds, rather than all of it for ten minutes?"

Pendulation

"Where in my body is there no anxiety at all right now? Can I go there, and then come back?"

Completion

"What does this energy want to do — and what is the smallest safe version of that?"

Pacing matters more than progress

This is the part most easily overdone. Small doses, frequent returns to steadiness, company where possible. If it floods, that's information about pace — not failure.

STEP 5

Widen the Window

The aim isn't calm. It's a wider range in which you still feel like yourself.

Dan Siegel's *window of tolerance* describes the band of arousal within which you can feel things and still think, still choose, still stay in the room. Above it is too much — braced, racing, overwhelmed. Below it is too little — flat, distant, shut down. Anxiety usually lives at the upper edge, or in the exhausting oscillation between the two.

Deb Dana's contribution is practical: with a reliable anchor in the settled state, you can visit the others without being carried off by them. The work is less about staying calm than about being able to come back.

COMING BACK, DELIBERATELY

NOTICE

Where am I —
braced, or shut
down?



NAME

Say it plainly. No
justification
needed.



ANCHOR

One thing that
reliably steadies
you.



STAY

A little longer
than comfortable.
Not longer than
bearable.



RETURN

Come back on
purpose, and
notice that you
did.

Anchors and glimmers — things to try

- Orient to the room: look slowly around and name five things you can actually see
- Lengthen the out-breath — longer out than in, a few times, without forcing
- Move. Walk, stretch, push against a wall. Mobilised energy responds better to movement than to stillness
- Collect glimmers: the small, reliable moments that settle you. A view, a voice, a piece of music, the dog
- Know your anchors before you need them, and write them down while you're steady

Widening, not eliminating

Progress often looks like coming back sooner rather than activating less. Being able to recover in ten minutes rather than three days is the change, even when the anxiety itself hasn't lessened yet.

STEP 6

Come Back Through Relationship

Nervous systems settle in company. That isn't a weakness in the design — it is the design.

- 1 **Co-regulation comes first.** We are built to settle in the presence of another settled nervous system. Long before we can steady ourselves, we are steadied by someone else — and that route never fully closes.
- 2 **Being met matters more than being fixed.** Dan Siegel's phrase is *feeling felt*. Most anxiety eases less through good advice than through the experience of someone staying, understanding, and not being alarmed by you.
- 3 **Choose carefully.** This only works with people who can hold it. Bringing anxiety to someone dismissive, anxious themselves, or likely to use it later will confirm the protector's case rather than ease it.
- 4 **Say the smaller true thing.** You don't have to explain the whole of it. "I'm finding this week hard" is enough to begin with, and far more likely to be said.
- 5 **Notice the body, not just the conversation.** When you're believed, something in the chest or shoulders usually changes. That change is the point — it is the evidence your protector is waiting for.
- 6 **Let it be repeated.** One good conversation doesn't retrain a nervous system that spent years learning otherwise. Many of them, unremarkable and ordinary, will.

A distinction to carry

"I can be steadied by someone else without being dependent on them. That is how this was built to work."

Practice Page — When Anxiety Arrives

Use this after a moment of anxiety, bracing, or the urge to escape. There are no right answers, and you don't have to fill it all in.

What was happening? The plain, observable situation.

Where did I feel it in my body, and what did it feel like?

What did the anxiety say was about to happen?

If this part of me had a job, what was it trying to protect me from?

How old does this feeling seem — and where might I have learned it?

What actually happened in the end?

What steadied me, even slightly?

What would I like to bring to counselling?

A Week of Practice — Small Repetitions, Not a Test

Choose one thing only. A nervous system learns from repetition far more readily than from insight, and there is no falling behind here.

DAY	A SMALL EXPERIMENT	WHAT TO NOTICE
Day 1	Catch one anxious moment and name the state: “my system has moved into protection.”	Whether the body signal came before the reason did.
Day 2	Name your protective style — planner, watcher, pleaser, escaper, checker.	Whether you can name it without judging yourself for having it.
Day 3	Ask one protective part what it’s afraid would happen if it stopped.	How old the answer sounds when it comes.
Day 4	Find where in your body there is no anxiety at all. Go there, then come back.	That both can be true in you at the same time.
Day 5	Move with the energy rather than sitting still in it — walk, stretch, push.	Any shift in the ten minutes afterwards.
Day 6	Say one smaller true thing to someone safe.	What changes in your chest or shoulders when you’re met.
Day 7	Review kindly. What was hard, and what shifted, even slightly?	Whether you came back sooner than you used to.

If a day goes badly

That is information about pace, not evidence about you. Protective parts often push back when they sense they’re being managed rather than understood. Slow down, and go back to whichever day felt most possible.

Quick Reference — Five Questions for an Anxious Moment

Keep this to hand for the moments when anxiety arrives faster than any of the rest of it can be remembered.

1. WHERE AM I?	Braced and mobilised, or flat and shut down? Name the state before the story.
2. WHO IS DOING THIS?	Is a part of me on duty here? What is it watching for?
3. HOW OLD IS THIS?	Does this belong to now, or to something that happened a long time ago?
4. WHAT DOES MY BODY WANT TO DO?	Push, leave, speak, curl up? What is the smallest safe version of that?
5. WHAT IS MY ANCHOR?	One reliable thing, or one safe person. Then come back on purpose.

Remember

Anxiety is not a message about your worth or your competence. It is a protective system doing an old job with real diligence, using information it hasn't been able to update. It doesn't need defeating. It needs to be understood well enough, and to feel safe enough, to finally put something down.

And when nothing works

"Some days the practice is simply getting through, and that counts."

Evidence & Notes — What Informed This Companion Guide

The language here is deliberately practical and non-diagnostic. It supports counselling; it does not replace individual formulation or clinical judgement.

Key learning from the work behind it

- Anxiety is better understood as protection than as malfunction — a defensive response running on old information rather than a fault in thinking.
- The nervous system appraises safety and danger below conscious awareness and responds before conscious appraisal, which is why anxiety can arrive with no reason attached, and why narrative tends to follow state rather than cause it.
- In parts-based approaches, anxiety typically functions as a protector with an aim. Meeting and befriending it is consistently described as safer and more effective than attempting to override or bypass it.
- Somatic approaches understand persistent anxiety partly as survival energy that was mobilised but never able to complete, and work by titrating attention to sensation rather than confronting fear wholesale.
- Early adaptation matters. Where authenticity had to be traded for attachment, watchfulness and self-suppression become durable habits, with a physiological cost that outlasts the circumstances that required them.
- Regulation is relational before it is individual. Settling in the presence of a steady other is a primary route, not a lesser one.

Important limits

- Not all anxiety is trauma-related. Sleep, caffeine, thyroid function, medication, hormonal change, ADHD, and straightforward overload all contribute, and are worth reviewing with your GP.
- This is not a self-directed trauma treatment. Working alone with strong activation can overwhelm rather than resolve; pacing and support matter more than progress.
- Origins should be held tentatively. A present pattern does not prove a particular history, diagnosis, or personality trait.
- If anxiety involves panic attacks, flashbacks, dissociation, or thoughts of harming yourself, please seek support rather than working through this alone. Your GP, 111, or the Samaritans on 116 123 are all reasonable first steps.

Sources — Further Reading

Selected sources that shaped this guide, and good places to read further.

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Using this alongside the other guides

Read with *Coming Back to Safe* for the states themselves, *Two Minds About It* for the pull between changing and staying put, and *Untangling Shame* for what often sits underneath the watching. Bring whatever comes up — especially the parts you're least sure about — to counselling.