

**ABC FOR ANXIETY AND  
STRESS RELIEF**

©2023 Tim van Rooijen  
*ABC for Anxiety and Stress Relief*

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**A B C**  
for  
**Anxiety**  
and  
**Stress Relief**

Life lessons

By  
**TIM VAN ROOIJEN**

ParisBooks 



To Dad  
*For helping me help myself*



## **Introduction**

*It is quite likely that you are living with anxiety if you purchased or got this book. Or perhaps you just want to learn how to cope with stress and how to reduce it.*

*I cannot claim to be an expert in psychology or mental health, therefore if you have serious anxiety or other mental problems, please seek the advice of a professional who can provide you with the necessary support.*

*However, in this book I would like to share with you my own experience and the lessons I have learned along the way. I hope that reading this will encourage you to reflect on your own self-development journey and to be more honest with yourself.*

*My name is Tim van Rooijen and at the time of writing this I am 26 years old and working as a financial analyst at an internationally well-known accounting firm.*

*Five years ago, I developed a social anxiety disorder which had a big impact on my day-to-day life. This disorder took over my life just when I was finishing college and starting to work full-time. I was no longer able to speak in groups or call clients or co-workers who I did not know very well, without suffering and fighting through a panic attack first.*

*Even worse, each time I experienced these intensely anxious feelings and thoughts, they almost always reappeared right after the event I had been worried about. I was unable to be proud of what I had done for very long as I would already be fixated on the next event and start feeling anxious again. Even if there was no such event coming up soon, I would be terrified that that could change at any minute. This meant that I was always on edge and my base level of anxiety only got higher, to the point where I was no longer able to fully relax.*

*After extensive conversations with psychologists and spending a lot of time on self-development, I gradually started to overcome my anxiety disorder. But just as I started to feel more in control, my father committed suicide. So, with a period of mourning and many depressing thoughts, my father's loss set me right back to the beginning. It was even worse than it had been before. I could not even get a haircut or go to the grocery store anymore without the risk of having a (minor) panic attack.*

*I had to start over from scratch, but this time I knew what was coming. With a new therapist, I set up a plan and started yet another protracted journey towards resolving my disorder. Even though I cannot say that it is completely in the past, I can say that I have rediscovered myself and am fairly comfortable with where I am now.*



*Writing this book has helped me take another look at all the lessons I have learned and reflect on the progress I have made over the last years. It is easy to lose track of everything you have learned, especially when so many things happen in your life.*

*I hope that after reading this book, you will be motivated to put some of these lessons into practice. They have helped me along the way, and I wish I had known about them sooner. I have written it in the hope that it will provide you with some insights – some tips and ideas to try out for yourself so you too can live the life you want.*

*Over the last years I have read many self-help books, participated in personal development courses, and had many therapy sessions. All of this, along with my own personal experience, has helped form the basis for this book. Perhaps you will perceive a certain bias at times, but you are free to form your own opinions and find what suits you. I trust that you will find something here to help you through your difficult times.*

*You might want to read some of the books in the reference list I have supplied at the end of the book. These books have certainly helped me along the way, some more than others. I hope they will help you as well.*

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# Anxiety

Heart pounding, hands sweating, the sudden urge to run away and a lump in my throat. These are the sensations I experienced way too often when I first started working after college. I had developed a social anxiety disorder.

These sensations were triggered when I had to introduce myself, had to call a new colleague or client, or if I thought there might be a slight chance I would be expected to speak during a meeting.

When I became aware of this, I became even more afraid of it happening again. I would lie awake at night, heart racing and feeling nauseous because I had a meeting the next day and I was afraid I would have another panic attack.

This led me to protect myself from the feelings by avoiding situations that could bring up these anxious thoughts. I did not realize that this caused even more anxiety as I no longer challenged myself to step out of my comfort zone.

Stepping out of my comfort zone is what I have found makes me feel more comfortable. It has taken me many

years but there is a lot I can now do which I could not do a few years ago. Of course, there are still many situations that cause me anxiety, but I am more able to comfort myself in advance to take on the challenges and learn from them.

In this first chapter I would like to share some tips that have helped me prevent this feeling of anxiety and others that help reduce anxiety whenever it does occur. They have been a great help to me over the years, and I hope they will help you as well.

### **Exposure**

Exposure is about doing what causes you anxiety to experience that your thoughts are actually irrational. Even when they are not irrational, maybe you will experience that the outcome is not so bad as you initially thought.

It is of course quite difficult to force yourself to do these things, because it does bring up a lot of anxiety. And at first the exercises might feel a bit counter-intuitive, yet this is the most efficient way to prevent anxiety in the long run.

Start with the exercise which causes you the very least anxiety and when you have mastered that build up to further levels.

In the beginning I would think of an exercise and chicken out at the last minute. I would feel paralyzed by anxiety.

Then I had to reevaluate and think of something to do that would cause me less anxiety. When I had completed that exercise, I was able to work my way up from there.

At the time I first started experiencing these feelings, I was not able to introduce myself to new people or groups and I would cancel meetings and courses so I would not have to do that. But as I exposed myself to situations carefully, bit by bit, I discovered that I was able to do it. What helps me sometimes is to ask whether I can go first, and people always let me.

I continue to use this way of slowly exposing myself in situations. This has helped me to keep expanding my comfort zone and maybe one day I will even be comfortable with presenting again.

### **Therapy**

After I realized that I did have severe anxiety issues, I went into therapy and learned I had developed a ‘social anxiety disorder’. Therapy has helped me immensely to see that I needed to become more honest with myself. You need to reach this level of self-awareness before you can start working towards your goals.

These sessions also gave me the guidance I needed to do the exposure exercises as I would not have been able to do them on my own.

My first therapy sessions were with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and consisted of different exercises. This kind of therapy focuses on changing the way your thought patterns work and challenging your thoughts. Exposure exercises are a major part of this. I will explain this form of therapy further in the chapter Cognitive behavioral therapy.

### **Focus on your breathing**

It is likely that you are already familiar with breathing techniques. It is such a great way to reduce anxiety easily and quickly, so it is a good way to start.

When you are anxious both your respiratory rate and your heart rate rise. They are related, so if you can lower your respiratory rate this lowers your heart rate which helps you feel more relaxed.

To do this close your eyes (if you are OK with doing this) and focus your attention on how you are breathing. When you are anxious you often feel a tightness in your chest. Try to breathe down lower into your stomach which helps slow your respiratory rate.

The 4-7-8 method is also very good for this. Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds, hold it in for 7 seconds and breathe out through your mouth for 8 seconds. Repeat this as often as you like, and you will feel yourself getting more and more relaxed.



## **Meditation**

Another great way to reduce anxiety is by meditating. This exercise will help you become more conscious of all the thoughts running through your head so they won't take over so much and you can feel more relaxed. There are many ways to meditate. For me the best way to start is by focusing on my breathing or a certain sensation in my body. Whenever a thought pops up in my head, I acknowledge the thought as it is and then I can stop thinking about it. Even after quite some practice I still have a whole lot of thoughts popping up whenever I sit down to meditate. However, I keep on trying and afterwards I always feel more relaxed than I did before the session.

Here are some tips to get you started with meditation:

- Put on some classical music to focus on.
- Look outside your window and follow the clouds.
- Do a body scan. Starting with your feet, put your attention on each part of your body one by one, tensing and relaxing it and working your way up to your head until you have been through your whole body.
- Decide on a time to meditate, maybe starting with five minutes and slowly working your way up to twenty. Set an alarm so you do not have to check the clock during your session.

Try these methods out for yourself and find out what suits you best.

## **Exercise**

One of the quickest and best ways to reduce anxiety is by exercising. A work-out gives you something to focus on and gets your mind off things. For me the best sports to do are swimming, paddle or bouldering<sup>1</sup> as I am engaged all the time. Bouldering has been my favorite way to relax for a long time as it gets my mind off work and is not too taxing on the body. It also releases a lot of dopamine when I reach the top of multiple routes during a session. However, there are certainly easier forms of exercise which work just as well, especially if you do not want to get off the ground!

I hope some of these tips will help you to cope with your anxiety as they have helped me. Of course, there are a lot of other methods, but these have helped me the most.

Feel free to send me your own tips as I could certainly still use the help. My contact details are at the end of this book.

<sup>1</sup> Bouldering is a discipline within the climbing sport and means climbing a short route on an often close to the ground real or artificial rock without the use of a rope or other form of restraint, other than a crash mat. (Wikipedia)





## **Being brave**

Somebody once told me that the bravest people are not the ones that can do anything without fear. The bravest people are the ones who experience a lot of fear but are still able to do what they are afraid of.

Over the past years I have been in many situations where I experienced a lot of fear. These situations tested me because I was always trying to avoid them. However, I knew that I had to face them so that eventually I could overcome my fear. Being able to go through with something that frightens you is a very empowering feeling. Even though I still experience a lot of fear in new situations, there are now also a lot of things I can do again with little to no fear. I am aware of how brave I had to be to go through with it and am also aware of what it has brought me.

### **Review your achievements**

Whenever I am afraid to do something now, I reflect on everything I have accomplished in the past. I sometimes make a list of everything I have achieved in the last few years. This can be something I am proud of, like my job or my degree. But it is generally composed of situations in

which I was (irrationally) afraid and which actually went well. These lists remind me of times I felt the same amount of fear but was brave enough to go through my fears and prove to myself that I could do more than I thought. This in turn helps me face new fears and overcome them and add them to the list.

### **Acknowledge your perseverance**

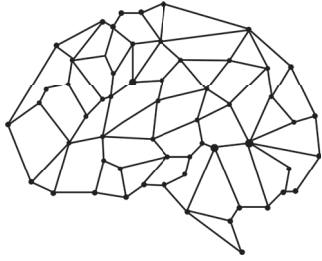
Besides focusing on past achievements, it may help you to reflect on how often you have faced your fears. Being able to go through with something that scares you is something to be proud of. Often, we forget about these struggles, or we take them for granted. It is no easy thing to do, and this level of perseverance should be celebrated. By consciously feeling proud of what you have achieved, you may notice the desire to feel this again. This might help overcome the next challenge that awaits you.

### **Do not let fear dictate your life**

If you are anything like me, you do not want fear to take control of your life. I sometimes imagine myself being old and looking back on my life. I then think of the way I want my life to look like in hindsight and what I want to feel about it. The life I want to have lived looks joyful, thankful, and quite challenging. I do not want to think I always took the easy way out or avoided every challenge that came my way. Of course, it is okay to take a step back occasionally, as I will describe in the chapter Downtime. However, I

am convinced that happiness and feelings of pride, power and gratitude are found in facing my fears and taking on challenges. By doing so I point myself in the direction of achievement and pride in the way I live my life.

Overcoming anxiety is not easy. But working at it and bravely taking up the challenge gives you much in return for your efforts. I am now able to look back on my life so far and feel a great amount of pride and gratitude for my perseverance. I hope one day you will too.





## **Cognitive behavioral therapy**

My psychologists mainly used cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) during my therapy sessions. This type of therapy is not only directed at changing how you think, but also challenging your thoughts to eventually change your behavior. This may be the best way to overcome your anxiety as it is mainly driven by irrational thoughts. If you can change those thought patterns, you will also be able to change the way your thoughts make you feel.

In this chapter I would like to explain some of the techniques and exercises involved in CBT as they have helped me a lot to look carefully at the way I think.

### **Worst and best-case scenario**

Whenever you feel anxious or insecure about doing something, try to imagine both the best and the worst-case scenario for the upcoming event. Give both situations a probability rating based on how anxious you are right now. Then try to rationalize what you think will actually happen.

After the event has taken place, review these probability ratings. Most likely you will feel that you gave a rating to

the worst-case scenario which was too high. This will make you feel more confident in the best-case scenario the next time around. And as time progresses you will notice that your probability rating for the worst-case scenario gradually decreases.

When I wanted to say something in my next team meeting, I would get quite anxious. So, I used this method to write down the worst-case scenario which was not being able to get my words out and feeling utterly ashamed. Then I wrote down the best-case scenario which was being able to tell my team what I wanted to say in a confident manner.

Then I gave both scenarios a probability rating. The worst-case scenario would have the highest rating as I would be anxious about it. My entire body would be aware of the potential of that happening.

After I had the team meeting, I would review this and often I found out how irrational my fears were. I would usually have been able to say what I wanted to say. I might have felt a bit uncomfortable, or I could even have said something wrong or weird. Yet, I would have been able to do it and next time around I would feel more confident.

### **Arguments for and against**

Most of the time when you are very anxious about something, the probability of the worst-case scenario will feel

close to 100%. To lower this probability rating and help you relax, list all the arguments why that scenario will indeed happen and all of those why it will not happen.

Usually, the arguments for the worst-case scenario are formed by your feelings and emotions, whereas the arguments for the best-case scenario are based on your rational thoughts.

That is why it may be easier to think of more arguments for the best-case scenario than for the worst-case scenario. Just doing this will help you reduce your level of anxiety.

You could even use these arguments to review your probability rating for both the best and the worst-case scenario from the first exercise. If you are not yet content with the outcome, you can always add more arguments against it and review the ratings again.

### **Predetermining feelings and sensations**

Another great way to challenge your anxious thoughts is by writing down your expectations of the upcoming event. You must first identify the scenario and record your initial fearful thoughts related to the situation. Also, list any feelings and sensations you anticipate having during the experience and give them a rating for their likelihood.

When I was at my worst, I would be anxious about getting

my hair cut. I would write down what I was afraid of, in this case having a panic attack in the middle of the haircut, or not being able to tell the hairdresser how I wanted it cut. I would also list any sensations I expected to feel prior to and during the actual haircut such as sweatiness and nausea, along with their probability.

After getting the haircut I would review these sensations, their probability and the initial fear and see if they were grounded. Spoiler alert: they never actually were!

The key to the exercise is to review this breakdown after the situation has happened. Most likely the thoughts, feelings and sensations were not as bad as you had initially expected them to be. And even if they were, the reactions of those around you were probably not as bad as you thought they would be.

For any of these exercises I would recommend writing them down for future reference. This has made it simpler for me to refer back to these moments as needed.

Whenever I feel very anxious now, I review these past and somewhat similar events and reflect on how irrational my fears were at that time. This way my fear somewhat subsides, and I become more confident about the upcoming event.

## **Fear pyramids**

As I described in the first chapter, exposure exercises are a great way to battle your anxiety. You can build your own fear pyramid to help you get started.

A fear pyramid is a way of ranking your fears in levels of anxiety. At the base of your pyramid, list actions or events that make you feel a bit anxious, but which you know you would be able to handle and go through with. For me this involved me calling a colleague who I did not know well.

The next layer should be a bit more difficult, and that way you build up to the top, where the last layer is the action you fear most at this time. This is something you would not be able to do now due to the panic and anxiety it would cause. For me this was presenting in front of my entire department.

Build a pyramid with six to ten layers. That way it is large enough to have multiple steps to work with but not too large to lose sight of the bigger picture.

The bottom layers will be a great help for your exposure exercises because starting at the top with something that really stresses you out can be a step too far.

The exercises will help you become familiar and comfortable with the anxiety they cause. After a while they will be-

come more comfortable, and you will then be able to work towards the next layer.

After you have worked with this pyramid for a while, you can review it and build yourself a new one. Hopefully you will notice that the base of your first pyramid is no longer included in your new one as you have become comfortable in completing that action and it no longer brings you any, or as much, anxiety.

If you are experiencing anxiety or insecurity, I hope these basic CBT exercises can be of assistance. Please do not underestimate the help a professional therapist could give to guide you in this process.







# Downtime

I would like to address the importance of downtime. Downtime is about taking a moment, or even a day or longer, to step away from the pressure of continuously having to move forward in life.

When I started my journey of self-development, I noticed I felt guilty whenever I was not doing something productive. If I was sitting on the couch on a Sunday after a late night, I would feel the urge to go do something so as not to waste the day. However, when you go on and on and never take a break to relax and recharge you will eventually burn out.

Now that I am aware of this I can feel in my body and in my mind when I need to take some time off. Unfortunately, I do not always catch this in time, which causes me to be cranky and extremely tired until I take the break I so desperately need.

I will elaborate on some methods I personally like to use for downtime. These are of course not the only methods to use, but they are some of the ways that have worked for me, and perhaps they are an inspiration for you as well.

## **Meditation**

I have already addressed meditation to battle anxiety, and it is also a good way to create some downtime. The key here is to focus on the fact that you do not have to do anything now. Set the alarm at 15 to 30 minutes and then just sit down and relax.

Usually, I turn on some classical music to focus on and just acknowledge that I can create some time for myself whenever I choose to do so.

## **Going for a long walk**

Whenever I feel rushed or down, I go for a (long) walk, preferably a walk with some pleasant scenery, as that will be extra soothing. You will also benefit from getting some exercise, which will make you feel even better. I try to focus on what I can hear and see around me, or I put on an audio book or some (classical) music.

Sometimes I plan a day in the weekend where I go on a very long hike. I like to drive somewhere first, away from my hometown. This way I get the feeling I am taking care of myself and feel grateful for making the decision to grant myself some longer downtime.

I often think of one or two questions to reflect on during these longer hikes before I set off. Last time the questions were: “Is my current job still working for me?” and “What

have I done in the past years that I can be proud of?”

These hikes need to be long enough to give you the downtime you need, besides providing you with the reflection I mentioned above. This makes you feel productive even though the effort is relatively minimal.

### **Reading a book**

A lot of people watch television to relax, which I also do sometimes. However, it has been proven that the impulses you receive from watching television cause even more brain activity and therefore it is not so relaxing as you might think. Your brain is constantly working to process these impulses.

That does not take away from the fact that it can be fun and exciting to watch a good movie or a series, which distracts you and can be relaxing in some way. But keep in mind that watching too much television won't necessarily make you feel as relaxed as you would like.

I have found that reading a book soothes me. Since downtime is a moment to step away from moving forward, I suggest that you read a fiction book. Self-help books and educational books are amazing, and I have read my fair share as well, but they do not relax me as much as a good story that I can dream away with.

## **Cooking**

Cooking is a pastime of mine that helps me unwind. I love to cook, but due to my busy schedule I do not always make the time to do so, or I rush doing it.

Whenever I do take the time to prepare a proper meal, it gives me a lot of pleasure and I enjoy the meal even more. It works even better when I prepare a meal for other people as I try harder to make it a good meal and therefore am more engaged with the cooking.

Hopefully I have been able to convince you of the importance of downtime and provide you with some inspiration to do this for yourself. It is great to want to grow and develop yourself as much as possible but occasionally taking the time to rest and recharge will get you further in the long run.





## **Embrace yourself**

Four years after my initial diagnosis, I went into therapy again because I wanted to develop further and get rid of my anxiety. During this therapy we focused on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). This has helped me to somewhat silence my inner critic.

Here I will share the important lessons I have learned from ACT. I think anybody can benefit from ACT in some way as most of us know something we would like to change about ourselves. ACT helps you to accept yourself for who you are instead of trying to change everything.

### **Which of yourselves is in control?**

Before we began with ACT, we started with schema therapy, which is mainly used for people with personality disorders. Even though I was not diagnosed with such a disorder, it helped me recognize the behavior patterns that had developed throughout my life. These are patterns that are constantly present or patterns that can be triggered by certain people or situations.

The schema of ‘unyielding standards’, and the schema of

‘seeking acceptance’ and/or ‘recognition’ are both highly relevant for me. I could understand the origins of several of my behaviors better because of this. For instance, I can be overly critical of myself, and I can feel disappointed when I am not being explicitly complimented about something I have struggled with. Being aware of this happening has helped me to recognize these situations and rationalize my thought patterns.

In addition to schema patterns there are also multiple ‘schema modes’ that arise. This is like a state of being, an emotion or even like one of your personalities. The idea of this form of therapy is that we adjust our personality for different occasions to better fit in or adapt. However, we are not always aware of this happening, or which of our various personalities we are currently in.

Everyone has these schema modes, and they can be beneficial as they help you adapt to certain situations. Yet when one or two are over developed, there is no balance, and you lose control over your behavior. For me the ‘vulnerable child’ and ‘punitive parent’ are overdeveloped and feed my anxiety and drive to perfection.

The healthy parent is the mode which considers all values and feelings and helps us take responsible decisions.

Knowing this helps you recognize which mode is in control



or which schema has been triggered. This in turn helps you be more conscious of your behavior and feelings. Being aware of these patterns also makes it possible to receive constructive criticism as well as questioning whether the patterns are useful. In time you will be able to consider the different modes and reason with them. I have found myself visualizing stepping in as the healthy parent, listening to both modes, giving it some thought, and then making a decision about how I want to react to something.

Try it out sometime and you too may find yourself acting out such a conversation with your inner self/selves.

Consider requesting the assistance of a professional if you think this form of therapy will be beneficial for you as this will definitely improve your progress.

### **Identify your core values**

A main part of ACT is about getting to know your core values and checking whether you live according to them. The core values I have identified relate to being open and personal, being helpful, being positive and providing humor. After I identified my values, I had to reflect on the actions I took according to these values. This meant I had to reflect on my daily life and check if I am being open, helpful and positive. I had to be honest and consider the moments when I was not living according to my values. Afterwards I was able to think of actions or rules I could

incorporate into my daily life to be more in line with my core values.

Doing so has helped me feel more like myself. Now I can reflect on situations that have had an impact on me and consider my values. Usually if I have been open, helpful, and/or positive, I deem the situation to be more positive. Even if the outcome was not what I had initially hoped, I feel proud that I have stayed true to myself during the event.

If I did not stick to my values, I am able to focus on that aspect. Focusing on this helps me set a goal for the next time a similar event occurs so I can develop further.

### **How do you spend your energy?**

After identifying your core values, you are ready to act. You can reflect on the actions you are able to take to live according to your values. At the same time, you can review how you generally spend your energy. Here I am referring to mental energy, such as expanding your comfort zone. Yet you can also reflect on how you spend your physical energy.

For me, determining whether an issue I was concerned about was in line with my values has been quite helpful. If I want to be able to do something, I will want to spend the energy and commit to trying my best. If I do not want

to be able to do something I can either decide not to do it, or not to care so much as to how it is done. This is a really freeing insight and has helped me feel less anxious about situations.

At the same time there can be situations that are not according to your interests and values, yet you have to do them. Perhaps it is socially required, such as situations with family (in-laws) or perhaps you personally believe it is necessary. The latter can occur if you want to advance in your career or want to prove to yourself you are capable of doing something. It is important to understand that in these instances every outcome is okay. Since you are not fully committed to doing it according to your values, you can be proud of trying your best, no matter the outcome.



# Friends

The saying, “You cannot choose your family, but you can choose your friends”, makes more sense the older you get. I used to have a large group of friends. But some of them were friends of friends (of friends) and although we all just got along well we were not really friends ourselves.

As you get older or when certain events impact your life, you become more aware of your core values. Then you start to notice which of your friends align with these core values and which do not.

Of course, you cannot find friends that totally agree with all your values and opinions, and maybe you should not want to. But you can find friends who think alike and put in as much effort as you do.

I do not want to say that you should discard all the friends who do not agree with you. Yet in this chapter I would like to provide you with some questions which might help you to reflect on which friends are a positive and which are a negative influence on your life.

### **Are my friends supportive?**

This is one of the most important questions I have asked myself regarding friendship. Sometimes it is good to check in and reflect on whether your friends are there to help you or are just there to be helped themselves.

People always claim to be supportive towards friends, however some are only there to help if they have something to gain. I noticed this when I told my friends about my anxiety disorder. Most of them were supportive and understanding. They discussed my issues with me and helped me look at them from another perspective. Yet there were others who did not want to be bothered by such serious topics.

Those altruistic friends who are supportive without asking for anything in return are the friends you can always count on. The best relationships and friendships are based on the idea that when you care enough about each other you would do almost anything to support one another.

### **Do my friends have a positive mindset?**

Moods are infectious and therefore it is beneficial to surround yourself with people who are essentially positive.

I do not mean you have to ignore friends that are feeling down. Feeling down is (hopefully) a temporary state and these friends should be supported. The difference here is

that these friends are generally positive towards ideas and activities, yet due to certain reasons they are not as happy or energetic as they could be.

Obviously, nobody can be positive all the time, yet we all know people who are more pessimistic and judgmental than others. Maybe they never agree with your ideas, or maybe they do not want to do exciting things with you.

It helps to spend most of your time with positive people. Then you yourself become more positive and you can return the favor by being more positive towards others and helping them as well.

### **Do my friends strive to better themselves?**

Just like moods, goals are also infectious. If someone tells you about what goals they want to achieve in their career or in their life, you are more likely to reflect or work on your own goals. Being around people who are trying to better themselves most of the time will make you keener to do so as well.

Of course, you must be careful not to overdo this and create too much of a competitive environment among your friends. But stimulating and supporting each other's goals makes the whole group more productive and ambitious.

### **Do my friends listen to and respect my opinion?**

The capacity to listen to each other is another crucial component of friendship. Sometimes all we need to do to clear our head is to vent to someone else. Then it helps if the other person can listen to what you have to say and respond appropriately and help you out.

Being able to listen to each other also means being able to value each other's opinions. If you do not feel heard by your friends, you might feel looked down upon. This creates an unhealthy relationship where one person feels better or less than the other. Then that person might be less inclined to express their opinions.

Again, this does not mean you should ditch all the friends who do not meet these requirements. Your friends are still your friends for a magnitude of reasons. But I suggest you use these questions to reflect on which friends have a positive influence on your personal development. These are the friends you should talk to more frequently and discuss your personal growth with.

I have found that I have ignored some 'friends' in the past. We grew apart and I did not put in the effort to rekindle our relationship as I was convinced it would not be worth the effort nor would it be returned.







## Grief

In September 2018, I got woken up by a call from my mother. She told me that my uncle would pick my sister and me up and bring us to her. Something had happened that night. However, instead of taking us to our parents' house he took us to the police station. There, we learned that my father had committed suicide the night before.

My world collided that day. When I heard the news, I was first lost for words, and then I felt a consuming anger. The next month or so went by in a daze. Even though I went back to work after a week and everybody kept telling me I was doing so well, I was devastated. I went into relapse; my anxiety disorder came back, and I gained a lot of weight over a few months. When I look back, I can say that I was depressed.

Nowadays, it does not affect me as much anymore. I still have spells of sadness and depressed thoughts. Even after all this time it can suddenly hit me like a wave, and I need to take a moment to gather myself. But it no longer affects me every day like it did when it had just happened. And after a lot of processing, I have been able to rekindle the joy in my life.

In this chapter I would like to share some of the lessons I have learned from this, as well as share some of the ways I used to cope with the grief that followed. Everybody deals with grief in their own way, but these tips were given to me by others and have helped me immensely and I hope they can help you too should it be necessary.

### **Do not take everything for granted**

Most of the time we enjoy things in our life without being consciously grateful for them. Your parents and friends are always there, until they are not. You grow apart from friends, you lose them, or you lose your parents. Even holidays are over before you know it, or perhaps you lose something you value – like your favorite watch or necklace.

One thing I have learnt since my father passed away is to take some time to think back on all the things in my life for which I am grateful, and the accomplishments I am most proud of. Not only does this let me enjoy those things more, it also makes me happier and a more positive person.

Before going to bed, I would spend some time writing down the three things I had to be thankful for, or proud of, that day. I had often heard of this before I did it myself. Eventually I bought a small notebook which I keep next to my bed for this sole purpose. Now I still try to do it every day, and it helps me feel grateful for my day and enjoy the little things more.

### **Do what you love, not what you must do**

My father did not like his job, sometimes he even hated it. But he did not want to quit because he felt we needed the money. Even though my mother often urged him to change profession, he continued to do what he felt he had to do.

Losing my father made me realize that sometimes it helps to ask yourself if you really want to do something or not. Of course, there are some things that we ought to do, like attending funerals, going to work, or visiting family. But there are many other things we get to choose to do.

Try to say no to something you would rather not do and see how that makes you feel.

### **Open yourself up**

A few months before my father passed away, we went on a weekend trip to Dublin together. We had a great time and bonded as father and son, but I never caught a glimpse of his depression. He did not open up to me or reach out for help. I do not blame him for this, after all I am his son. I think he felt I had enough problems of my own and he did not want to burden me with his as well. But in hindsight I would have been more than willing to try to help him in any way I possibly could. It may even have helped us both to talk about it.

His passing has made me more open to other people and in

return most people have become more open towards me. I have noticed that people are generally very careful about sharing when or why they are feeling down. I used to be careful also out of fear of being judged.

But after my father died, I came to the conclusion that it is better to share your problems with those you trust than it is to hold them in. If they do not want you to share, it is up to them to tell you. In the meantime, you will be relieved of a bit of the burden.

These were the most important lessons my father's passing brought me that I wanted to share with you.

Next, I would like to give you some tips on how to cope with grief. Sadly, everyone will require this advice at some point in their lives.

### **Do not run away from grief**

Many people experience the impulse to run away from their grief. I did the same thing the first few weeks, I can assure you that it is not advantageous in the long run. Sooner or later, you will have to deal with your emotions, and acknowledging your feelings helps you to process them. It is not a bad thing to grieve or to feel sad, it is an essential part of the process.

If you are having trouble feeling your grief, you can trigger

it by listening to one of the songs he or she liked, or go somewhere you spent time together. Some people like to look at a photo every day or think of a fond memory.

A bit of distraction is good for you, so do not feel bad when you catch yourself doing this. Instead, try to use this knowledge to take a moment and let yourself feel what you feel.

### **Write a goodbye letter**

Depending on how someone has died you may or may not have been able to say goodbye. I was not able to do this and neither did my father leave us a goodbye letter.

In one of my therapy sessions I talked about how I still had a lot of unprocessed grief. My therapist asked me to write a goodbye letter to my father and read it out to him in our next session.

This was one of the hardest, yet most beautiful and rewarding exercises I have ever had to do in my whole life. It literally felt like the closure I was longing for so desperately. Of course, this did not completely stop me grieving. There are times when I still experience a lot of grief, but it has helped me understand a little more what I was dealing with and what questions remain.

You might not have a therapist to read it to like I did. So, I

would encourage you to read the letter to a trusted friend or family member or just read it out loud for yourself. Reading it out loud helps you imagine that you are reading it to your lost relative, loved one or friend.

### **Be thankful for the positive memories and lessons**

Making a note of all the good memories you have of the person you lost, and concentrating on how grateful you are to have them, will help you through your process of grief.

It also helps to try to acknowledge that the more grief you feel, the more love you had for him or her. Being able to say that this person has enriched your life for as long as they did, is something you can be thankful for.

A while ago, I followed a personal development course in NLP. NLP focuses on your thoughts and behavior patterns and discovering what drives you and what holds you back. In the chapter on NLP, I dive further into the basics of this method.

During one of the exercises, I was asked to think of the lessons my father had taught me. These lessons varied from always trying to outperform myself to helping others as much as I could.

Then they asked me to feel grateful for these lessons as they were given by him with the best of intentions.



Lastly, they asked me to check for myself which of these lessons I would honor and carry with me throughout my life and which I would thank him for but choose to let be.

This exercise was very emotional for me, but it has given me the confidence to choose my own path for which I am grateful. I can decide for myself whether I want to outperform myself or whether I want to help others as much as he did.

I have since then chosen to lower the bar for myself so that I experience less stress. It might be the way he wanted to live his life, but it does not have to be the way I live mine.

Grief can be one of the most excruciating experiences. You may feel completely hopeless or even depressed for a while. Right after my father passed away, a friend that had been through the same told me that 'time will heal all wounds'. I had trouble believing him then as I was certain that those feelings were there to stay. Now I can see the truth in what he said as I no longer feel so broken as I did right after he died.

Every now and again it hits me, and I accept feeling sad or depressed for a while. Nowadays I even think it is a good way to be reminded of him and am grateful that he is still in my life in his own way.

I still miss him, even though I no longer think about him every day. There is nothing I would not do to have him back. But I have made my peace with his death and am grateful for all he was able to teach me. I want to honor him by getting the most out of my life.

Do not expect grief to be easy, but hopefully this chapter has given you some insight on how to cope with it in your own way.

Remember to be grateful for your life and those who are, or were, a part of it.





## How to get fitter

Almost everybody has tried to get fitter at some point in their life. This can be by trying to lose or gain weight, gaining muscle mass or working on stamina.

I am certainly no expert on how to get fit, but during my anxiety disorder and after my father had passed away, I gained a lot of weight. When I hit the 100kg mark I decided to turn my life around and was able to lose enough weight to reach 85kg nearly a year and a half later. Now I am fairly confident in my body and am mostly focused on maintaining my weight and controlling the damage during vacations and in the summer. There is always more work to do, but I have made the change I wanted, and I know I could do it again if need be.

In this chapter I would like to share some tips that have worked for me. Getting fit is a very personal process and you may have to try out different strategies to find which suits you best. Perhaps these tips will provide you with some inspiration that can help you on your way.

### **Reflect on your bad habits**

Before you begin setting up a strict diet or exercising like crazy, get to know whether your bad habits are related to nutrition or exercising. If you are honest with yourself, you will be able to pinpoint which habits actually harm you. These are the habits you should focus on changing.

Later in the book two chapters focus on this. The first, Question yourself, is focused on identifying these habits. The second, Unwanted habits, provides you with some tips to help you get rid of them.

These habits can range from snacking too much or too late, putting sugar in every cup of coffee or tea, skipping on exercise, or drinking too much alcohol. You will know which bad habits have more impact if you feel more resistance when you try to change them.

You do not have to kick these undesirable behaviors entirely, but you may try to make them less pronounced. On the other hand, the more you eliminate, the less you will need to make up for with additional healthy eating and exercise.

### **Find the type of exercise which suits you best**

We all know that exercise helps us get fitter. Our stamina increases, we burn calories, and we feel better all round. We also tend to eat healthier once we have worked out, so that we do not waste the effort spent.

However, for a lot of people exercising can be hard and sometimes they have trouble finding the motivation to get started at all. I advise trying out several different sports to find the one you like. Do not be afraid to start small. Going for walks or bike rides or doing chores around the house will also provide you with enough exercise to get started.

You will eventually become fitter by participating in the activity you enjoy and being able to stick with it for a while than by giving 100% to a sport you do not like or feel neutral about. For me this sport was bouldering. Lately I have become less enthusiastic about it, and I am looking for something to replace it. But I would invite you to discover for yourself which sport you like best.

### **Nutrition is key**

If you have tried to get fitter before you may have already read or heard about nutrition a hundred times. I will not tell you what you should or should not eat or how many calories you should consume. But I will address the importance of nutrition as it is inarguably the most influential and impactful aspect of getting fitter.

What worked the best for me was taking some time to track the number of calories I consumed each day. I also set a goal for caloric consumption per day. It was not a very strict limit, but it was something I could reasonably aim for. A good app to track the calories you have consumed

is MyFitnessPal as it already contains the details of most foods and drinks including their macronutrients.

This gave me a general idea which foods and drinks have a lot of calories but did not provide me with the proper balance of macronutrients (protein, carbs and fat) to reach my goals. These are the foods and drinks I replaced or reduced in my life as much as possible before setting up a real diet for myself.

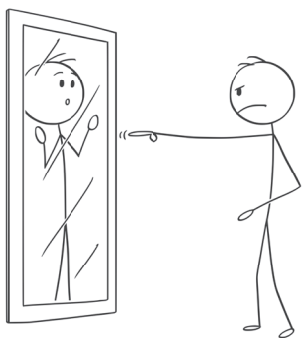
If you wish to learn more about macronutrients and the ratio in which you should consume them, I advise you to schedule a professional consultation or do some research for yourself.

Before I finally succeeded in losing a lot of weight, I had already tried several times without any lasting success. You must make significant lifestyle adjustments if you want to get fit. The best way is to apply incremental changes you can hold on to rather than going on a crash diet or over exercising. Then again, who am I to say those are not good strategies for you.

In this chapter I have tried to pinpoint the changes I made during my last attempt which made it possible for me to get fit. Hopefully these tips are of value to you and will help you in your own struggle by setting up your battle plan.







## **I am responsible for myself**

One thing I have learned along the way is that the responsibility for my wellbeing and happiness is mine and mine alone. This has helped me to be more in control of my own life and become more aware of the decisions I make and their consequences.

You are living your own life, not the life of others. This means that you are not responsible for the happiness of those around you. You can contribute to their wellbeing and happiness, and you should try to, but they are always responsible for their own actions and therefore their own lives.

This is true for you as well. You cannot blame anyone for what happens in your life. Even when someone has been awful to you or interfered with you in some way. You are still responsible for the way you respond and how you deal with it.

You cannot make others responsible for your happiness as you cannot control their behavior. You can however control your own behavior and the way you process certain events in your life.

To build your resilience, try to keep your attention on yourself. In that way you can take responsibility for your actions and your life and accept that your quality of life is in your own hands.

For example, I have become more aware of the way people treat each other. I would become agitated when somebody did not treat me, or others, as I wanted them to. But instead of trying to alter their behavior, I now try to accept them for who they are and change the amount of time I spend with them. That is something I am in fact able to change, and which will alter the impact they have on my life.

I have also learned that I should put in the effort myself if I want to change something in my life. Sometimes life just throws you a bone and someone makes your life better. However, in order to live the life you desire for yourself you often need to assume responsibility and take action.

Take my anxiety disorder for instance. Whenever I needed a break to recover from a stressful period or when something was causing me too much anxiety, I had to address this with my manager myself. I had informed him of my condition, and he wanted to help me the best he could. But he still sometimes asked me to do something out of my comfort zone without thinking about whether it might cause me any, or a lot, of anxiety. It was up to me to judge

whether I could do something or not and take action if I needed to.

With the use of this idea, I have been able to break my dependence on those around me.

This does not mean I do not ask others for help, on the contrary. Whenever I am incapable of doing something, I ask others to help me do it. By doing this I am able to accept responsibility for my own shortcomings and make an effort to learn from others who can already do it.



# Journaling

Journaling has been a way for me to express my thoughts and get them out of my head. Whenever I have concerns and cannot seem to get them out of my head, I write them down. Thoughts are abstract and are rarely finished. Instead, they fly by and leave you with a feeling which is good, bad or sometimes neutral. By writing them down or saying them out loud, you make them concrete and easier to challenge. Sometimes expressing your thoughts immediately shows you how irrational they are, and you instantly feel relieved.

In this chapter I want to share a few different journaling methods I have incorporated in my life. I now feel more at ease and have a better understanding of my concerns thanks to these strategies.

## **Express gratitude**

An easy way to start journaling is by expressing gratitude. As described in the chapter about Grief I used to keep a journal in which I would write down three things I had been grateful for that day. This could be something someone else said or did, or something you did yourself. If you

are having trouble thinking of anything, try to think of something you usually take for granted. There is always something to be grateful for, like your job, friends, exercise, or even coping with another stressful day.

I feel happier when I reflect on these things and become more conscious of the good things I have going on in my life. Whenever I am feeling down, I can also go back and read the things I have been grateful for in the past. This usually lifts my spirits as I can relive those grateful moments. This technique is called anchoring and will be thoroughly explained in the chapter on NLP.

### **Write down your concerns**

You can also write down whatever bothers you. I received this tip during my first round of therapy, and it helped me a lot in the period after my father died. I would lie awake in bed, not being able to sleep and stressing about every single thought that popped up in my head. Most of these thoughts were very depressing or anxiety provoking and were not helping me at all at that time. I was trying to sleep and not even doing whatever I was depressed or anxious about.

So, I would write down these thoughts, just as they were. I would turn on the light and start writing down anything that would come up in my mind without trying to change or solve anything. I did not want to be bothered by my



thoughts at that moment, so I would not waste any energy on them. However, after writing for a few minutes, I would calm down and the thoughts would become less disturbing. And after five to ten minutes, depending on the initial stress level, I would be calm enough to try and sleep again. Sure enough, I usually fell asleep quite quickly afterwards. Even if I did not, I would be less anxious and therefore not so angry with myself for not being able to sleep.

### **Summarize your day**

Recently I bought a journal with pages big enough to write down a brief account of my day. This has helped bring down my anxiety as I can expand on the subjects that bother me. By writing down these thoughts I instantly reflect on them and can more easily apply any techniques I have learned through the years. For instance, I can challenge my anxious thoughts, or I can write down why I want to spend the energy in overcoming this particular fear.

Since the page is big enough, I can also express my gratitude or pride and elaborate on the accompanying sensations.

I try to journal every night, although I skip it sometimes if I am too busy or otherwise involved. I still reflect on those days at a later point in time, but I do not write down as much as I would have on the night itself. I never skip a day if it has made a huge impact on me, because I feel the urge

to write down my thoughts and reflect on them. This can be because I have experienced some anxiety, or because I have overcome some fears or perhaps a new insight has popped up during my day.

### **Self-therapy sessions**

A few years ago, I had been feeling anxious for a few days and was not able to shake it off. One day I got in the car to see a friend who lives a little over an hour's drive away. I could not enjoy music or a podcast and decided to have a 'self-therapy session', as I now call them. I reckoned that a good conversation with a friend could help me clear my mind, so why not try this with myself?

I usually put on some classical music to help me calm down or just mute the music altogether. Then I begin talking out loud and pretend to have a conversation with myself. I know it sounds strange, but verbalizing my thoughts helps me to reflect on them. I immediately form an opinion of those thoughts and I say that opinion as well. This way I rationalize any irrational thoughts by challenging them and thereby calming or motivating myself.

I do not do this often, perhaps once every few weeks or months. This can happen when I am really anxious, or just because I want to make use of my time in the car. I find it interesting to see how long I can have a conversation with myself and how good it feels to express understanding and

support to myself.

It may feel a bit uncomfortable at first. Just think that other people tend to sing loudly in their car, and you are just having a conversation.

Of course, there are many more methods for journaling. There might even be better ways to do it. However, these are the ones I have implemented in my life so far next to writing this book, but some might find that a bit excessive!

Try it out and see if journaling will help you calm yourself and clear your head as much as it helps me.



# Knowing yourself

Most people are very intuitive to the point where they let their feelings decide what they do and do not like to do. They just know if they like doing something, but usually they do not know why they feel that way.

A great tool to figure out why we feel how we feel is self-reflection. Getting to know yourself yields a lot of benefits. It helps you understand why you (automatically) do or say things and what is important to you. When you understand what is important to you, you also get to understand why something has an impact on the way you feel.

I want to ask you a few questions in this chapter to help you get to know yourself.

## **What do you want to see in those around you?**

By asking yourself this question you will learn what you value about the people in your life. Knowing which characteristics you value, helps you understand why you want to be around certain friends more than others.

This also helps you understand which of your own values

you think are positive and which are negative. We tend to make friends that are like us, so by knowing what makes them good friends helps you get to know yourself better.

### **What do you like doing?**

Sometimes it is easy to lose yourself if you have a busy schedule. Feeling obliged to accept invitations from friends and family can make us feel busier than we would like to feel. We have all had the feeling that we would rather have been somewhere else and doing something different.

It is a waste of your valuable time to undertake too many activities you would rather not do. By finding out what you like doing, you can schedule your time accordingly and implement more activities that energize you and make you happier. It is nearly impossible to achieve a week filled entirely with fun activities, but a well thought out balance is worth the effort.

You could ask yourself how your ideal week or weekend would look like if you could schedule it yourself. Be realistic and think about an average week or weekend. How would you like to spend your working hours or your free time if it was completely up to you?

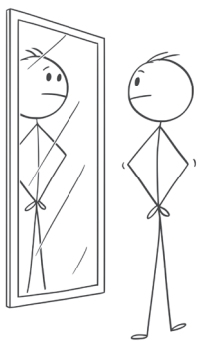
### **What do you want to do with your life?**

Besides knowing what you like to do, it is good to know what you want to do. Setting goals in your life or creating

a bucket list helps you discover whatever makes you happy or whatever you feel deserves your effort. Reflecting on your goals makes sure that you guide your energy towards what matters to you.

I try to review my goals and my bucket list annually. That way I know whether I am still aiming in the right direction. I also reflect on whether I am working towards any goals I no longer cherish. For some this might be good to do instead of, or in addition to, their New Year's resolutions.

Knowing who you are helps you to understand why you do things, or why you experience certain emotions when something happens to you. It also helps your self-development, and taking responsibility and action towards living the life you have chosen for yourself.





## **Listen to your body**

People who have experienced a burn-out often say they should have listened to their body sooner. When you are stressed or burnt out, your body sends all kinds of signals to let you know something is wrong. Before you reach a state of stress there are certain sensations that can be considered alarms and can be acted on accordingly.

Some of these sensations are tiredness, distressed bowel movements, stomachaches, headaches, muscle cramps, a lump in your throat, sweating and many more. These sensations may indicate that there is either a physical or a mental issue bothering you, so it is important to be aware of them as soon as possible. This will enable you to assess whether the sign should be taken seriously or ignored.

In this chapter I would like to provide you with some exercises to become more aware of your bodily sensations and what they might mean to you.

### **Quick scan exercise (1 or 2 minutes)**

One of the easiest and quickest exercises you can do is the quick scan. Take a few seconds to settle yourself by taking

a few deep breaths down into your stomach. Then check if you experience any bodily sensations. Lastly label the sensation without trying to change it.

Some examples of sensations I have experienced with their corresponding labels are:

- Higher respiratory and heartrate	Anxious or excited
- Rumbling stomach	Hungry or sick
- Heavy head	Tired or stressed out
- Lump in throat	Sad or anxious
- Smiling	Happy or proud
- Lightheadedness	In love or dehydrated

Almost all bodily sensations can be given different names or labels. The key here is to link your sensation to your current situation by thinking about it. Ask yourself if a certain emotion or state could be caused by what is happening now. This way you will probably be able to find out what it means for you.

For example, when I notice I have clammy hands I know

if this is because I am doing a workout, or because I am about to speak in a meeting.

**Scan and adapt (5 minutes)**

Sometimes we are aware we are not feeling well, but we do not know what is causing it. Often, we just get on with what we are doing and hope the feeling will go away eventually. Most of the time this does happen after a while. However, by doing this we do not realize why we felt this way in the first place or what it meant to us.

This exercise is like the previous one, but besides doing it at any time you feel like doing it, you can do this when you are experiencing a negative sensation. The other difference is that you try to change this feeling instead of just labeling it and letting it be.

Next time you are feeling down, take four or five deep breaths to settle yourself. Notice what sensations you are experiencing in your body and give them a label. Consider which positive state you would prefer to be in as you acknowledge the negative state you are currently in. Perhaps you would like to feel relaxed, proud, well rested or content.

Then try to think of something you can do at that moment or in the very near future to reach that positive state. Lastly, do the action you set for yourself and reap the rewards.

This action could be going for a walk, meditating for a while, preparing a healthy meal or anything you can think of that would get you closer to your desired state.

### **Body scan (15 to 30 minutes)**

A body scan is a form of meditation where you focus on bodily sensations. It is the method I personally use a lot to meditate as it helps me stay in the present and focus on my body and what it is trying to tell me.

There are two ways for the body scan that I have personally used and found effective. Both begin with a few minutes of focusing on your breath to relax and settle in your body.

The first involves bringing your attention to each part of your body one by one, starting with your feet and working upwards, and checking if you experience any sensations. Sensations can vary from tingling, pressure, cramps, or tension. If a sensation feels negative, focus on breathing into it. Channeling your energy in that direction will help it subside.

The first time may be difficult, but it is okay to just try and experience what happens. If nothing changes, accept this, and move on to the next body part. The more you practice, the easier it gets.

The exercise is over when you have been through every

body part and have taken an extra minute or two to focus on your breath and relax, before gradually returning to wherever you are at that moment.

The second way is focused on experiencing tension in your muscles. Personally, this is the way I prefer.

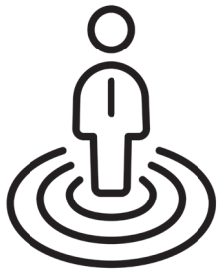
After settling your breath, take a few moments to notice how your body feels. Then start by flexing one of your body parts and releasing it after a few seconds. I usually start with my feet and work up from there. Notice how the sensations in that body part changes, both when you tense it and after you release it. Then move on to the next body part and repeat the process.

One thing I like to do in this exercise when I get to my legs, is flexing and relaxing all the muscles in one leg and feeling the sensations. Then, before moving on to the other leg, I try to notice the difference in sensations in both legs. I do the same with my arms.

Doing these exercises help you get to know your body better. It makes you notice bodily changes and sensations sooner which can then be used as alarms. If you act appropriately to these signals, you can avoid letting the sensation build up to the point where serious measures are necessary.

Your body is often desperately trying to communicate with you. So, you should start listening to it.







## **Moving on**

One thing that drains a lot of energy is feeling bad about something that has already happened to you. For instance, you might experience something negative in the morning that alters the way you feel throughout the rest of the day. We all know the frustration of having been in a traffic jam or being cut off on the road or in the store. This feeling can last a long time and set your mood for the entire day if you are not careful.

This has happened to me quite a lot! When I learned about the ‘circle of influence’, some of the stress subsided. This idea is based on the principal of being able to control a certain situation. It can be explained by asking yourself these two questions whenever something is affecting you negatively.

### **Can I do something about it?**

If something is happening to you that you do not like, ask yourself whether you can do something about it. A traffic jam is something you cannot change, but a bad meeting or conversation can be turned around if you put in the effort.

Feeling guilty about something is useless if there is nothing you can do to change it. This might be easier said than done but try to remember that it is happening *to* you, not *because* of you. Letting it ruin your day is something you do have influence over, so that is where you can take action. Altering the way you respond to situations helps you alter the way those situations make you feel.

If it has already happened and you could have done something about it, think of it as a lesson. You can no longer change what has happened, but you can choose to grow from it and try to respond differently next time around.

If it is happening to you and you can control it and do something about it, you can move on to the next question.

### **Do I want to do something about it?**

Even if you have control over a situation, it is a good idea to check if it is important enough for you to actually do something about it.

If you do not like what is happening, but you do not think it is important enough to put in the effort to change it, then you should not let it affect you negatively. If you think it is a waste of your time, then it most certainly is a waste of your energy.

If you do want to do something about it, and you are able to, then it is your responsibility to act upon it. If you still choose to do nothing, then it is indeed you who are choosing to let that situation affect you negatively.

If you decide to act upon it, then you can be proud to have taken your responsibility. No matter what the outcome is, you can feel good that you took action.

If you succeed in changing it, you are left with a great feeling. If you failed however, try not to let it impact you too much and focus on the fact that you tried. Again, take it as a lesson to change your strategy next time and hopefully you will succeed then.

This theory has given me a lot of freedom. I often notice that I no longer get bothered by situations that in the past would have definitely gotten on my nerves.

If something is not your responsibility, then it is not up to you to feel bad about it.



# NLP

NLP stands for Neuro Linguistic Programming which I have learned through a group training course. Even though it sounds like an IT-system, it is however a method based on a psychological theory.

It focuses on discovering your automatic thought and behavior processes. After having identified your patterns, you are taught how to challenge and potentially change them. Further into the training you also get to discover what drives you, what your core values are, and how you identify yourself.

If you were to ask any NLP trainee what their most valuable lesson was throughout the course, they would all answer differently. This is part of what makes NLP great as it provides you with a lot of tools and theories. Everybody can take whatever lessons they need from it and store the rest as knowledge for future reference.

In this chapter I would like to explain some of the theories and exercises that were taught on an NLP course which have made the most impact on my life.

## **What you do and say might be interpreted otherwise**

We have all been in a situation where you are not quite sure if somebody really understood what you were trying to say. You might notice they do not get what you are saying, but they do not always ask for further clarification. Usually whenever you notice this, you make sure that the message is properly understood by rephrasing or elaborating it.

This happens because everybody has their own frame of reference, where certain words or gestures may be interpreted in different ways. This in turn is due to things we have experienced, what we have been taught by our family and friends or at school, by what relationships we have been in, etc. For instance, if a colleague of mine was talking about a training, I would think of an interactive workshop, whereas he might be talking about a lecture.

There can be an issue when someone does not show they are puzzled or when they are not even puzzled at all. They might be convinced of what they think you meant, even though you meant the exact opposite. Without either of you realizing it, this leads to misunderstanding. The misunderstanding may even cause someone to be unjustly offended or disappointed.

Since you cannot always tell that it is happening, it is often hard to do something about this. However, if you are aware

that it could happen, you might be more careful about how you phrase an important message.

### **Your behavior is the best choice there is**

This was a difficult one for me to grasp, but once I did, it was very comforting and freeing. It is related to another NLP theory that suggests that everyone acts with the best of intentions. This means that you do too. You always act with the best of intentions, at least when it comes to yourself.

Being convinced of this helps you realize that it does not help to dwell on a bad action you took, or a decision you made, as it was the best thing you could have done at that point in time. If afterwards you do not agree with it, do not let yourself feel bad, but consider it feedback for the next time.

I really understood this when I put it together with the circle of influence as described in the previous chapter. Learn from your mistakes and know that next time around whatever you choose to do will be the best thing you can do with the experience and knowledge you have then.

### **There is no failure, only feedback**

NLP is built on the belief that everything you do to grow has a positive outcome, even when you feel like you have failed.

When we fail, we learn what not to do, or what to do differently next time. We also might learn that the way we thought about it was irrational or incorrect. By looking at it this way, failure can be considered feedback and can be somewhat relieved of its negative stigma.

Even now failure still upsets me, but I have noticed that my anxiety about failing has dropped significantly. Additionally, I have observed that once I do make a mistake, I no longer dwell on it for very long and instead view it as a lesson to be learned.

### **Anchoring**

Anchoring is a method based on the fact that certain things can bring up memories from the past and alter your mood. We all know a song that reminds us of a loved one or a scent that reminds us of our youth. These memories can come with a feeling of the state we were in at that point in time.

For example, when I was little, I used to listen to my father's iPod when we were going on holiday. I would mostly listen to Enrique Iglesias. Now whenever I hear one of his songs I briefly return to those moments and feel a sense of calm and happiness. Others might be reminded of unhappy times and have their mood altered negatively. Some might not experience a shift in their mood at all as they have no memories that are connected to his songs.



The theory of anchoring takes this a step further. It explains that you can use these memories to trigger a desired feeling or state. By consciously putting on one of his songs, I am choosing to alter my mood positively.

You can even train yourself to use visualization to return to these moments and reexperience the feelings more vividly and change your current state.

This theory has helped me a lot with my anxiety. Whenever I have to do something I am anxious about, I play a song which was played during a certain section of the NLP course. This makes me more confident and helps me get into a more powerful state. Sometimes I even visualize that I am at the start of a past sporting event, which helps me turn my anxiety into enthusiasm and makes me feel hyped up instead of anxious.

My favorite part of NLP was anchoring and even now it is the tool I use the most. I would encourage anyone to try this. You can even use it to return to a moment in your life where you were very relaxed. This may be somewhere in the outdoors with lovely views where you can revisit those sensations of serenity and relaxation.

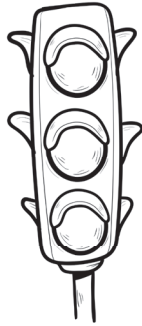
For me NLP sounded a bit goofy and spiritual at first when a good friend told me about it. But after experiencing it firsthand, I realize it is simply a guide to discover who you

are, what is important to you, and how you can take the steps towards the life you want for yourself.

Everybody takes away something else from the course, which to me is the beauty of it. It is your life and your process, and the instructors are just there to give you guidance and provide you with the tools and techniques to help you do it yourself. After the course has ended you are able to continue the process on your own.

If this chapter has whetted your appetite for learning NLP, there are a lot of NLP training centers out there. Check it out for yourself to see whether it is something you would like to do.





## **Out of your comfort zone**

It is quite obvious how the comfort zone earned its name. Most people have had experiences where they were uneasy because they had to do something they were not yet familiar with. This uneasiness can be translated into feeling uncomfortable and therefore doing something out of your comfort zone.

Luckily for us our comfort zone is not set in stone and can be expanded with some effort if desired. In severe cases of anxiety, expanding your comfort zone is done with the exposure exercises mentioned before, and should always be done with the guidance of a professional. But even when you are not experiencing severe anxiety, you might want to expand your comfort zone on your own.

In this chapter I would like to share some theories on this, which may give some insight on how to do it. These theories may even make a comfortable experience out of it.

### **Safe, stretch and stress**

This theory displays our comfort zone as a traffic light where green is safe, orange is a bit of a stretch and red is stress.

When doing something you are completely familiar with, you are fully inside your comfort zone and in this green area you are safe. Then you are not bothered by doing it at all.

When we do something that makes us somewhat uneasy, then we are in the orange area and are stretching ourselves. Usually in these situations we are not comfortable but are able to rationalize and manage it.

Those familiar with stretching know that putting a bit of tension on your muscles for a while will make them more flexible. What is felt as tension at first, will eventually not even feel like stretching anymore as you have become used to it. At this point you can apply more pressure and stretch a bit further. However, applying too much tension from the beginning can cause damage or injury and is referred to as stress.

The same goes for stepping too far outside your comfort zone. When we do something that causes anxiety and can no longer be rationalized or managed, we experience stress and are in the red area. Doing something that causes you a great deal of stress can shrink your comfort zone. Next time you might not be so eager to try, because you do not want to feel the same way again. Then the best thing is to take a step back and do something to turn stress into stretch. Once you have stretched enough you can try again and see how it feels now.

Successfully recovering from stress can greatly expand your comfort zone as well though. Just be sure you are able to cope with the stress that arises, and you can grow a lot from it.

### **Stretching for too long will tire you out**

If you stretch an elastic band too hard it will instantly break. This is what is meant by the red area mentioned before. But if you carefully stretch it to a certain point, it will not break. However, keeping up this amount of tension for too long will cause tiny fractures and eventually it might still break.

With this I want to address the importance of letting go every now and again as described at the beginning of the book in Downtime.

Stretching yourself to grow and to expand your comfort zone is a good idea, but it is advisable to step back into your comfort zone after a while and take some time to recharge. Catch your breath and reflect on what you have learned while stretching. Once you have recharged you can start stretching again.

### **Staying in your comfort zone for too long**

The opposite of stretching your comfort zone is shrinking it by staying inside it. When you stay inside your comfort zone for too long you get used to the feeling of being com-

pletely comfortable all the time. And while in theory this does not sound like a bad thing, in practice you become less likely to step outside it, as that has become even more unfamiliar. This causes you to become even more anxious about doing anything outside your comfort zone.

Once I listened to a podcast where someone explained how he would do something uncomfortable every single day to get used to the awkwardness and therefore become less anxious. He definitely had the appropriate attitude and made the necessary moves to step outside of his comfort zone.

This is an ambitious plan though, and it won't work for most of us. Stepping outside your comfort zone can provide you with quite a bit of stress and drain your energy. You can get away with a less ambitious strategy. Just be sure you put in the effort needed to maintain, and/or occasionally expand your comfort zone. Only you can decide how much effort is required to do this for yourself.

I like to imagine my comfort zone as a circle, almost like an archery target, where the center is the most comfortable. The further I get from the middle the less familiar I am with it. Everything outside it is ranked on the amount of stretch or stress it provides based on the distance from the border.



By edging outside my comfort zone enough, I will be able to expand my border and take on new things that were beyond my reach before. But if I go too far outside, it will get out of balance and the circle might break. Then I will need more time to recover to get back at it again. This theory is taught during NLP as well and has helped me quite a lot.



## Positive mindset

Throughout these past years I have read and listened to a lot of self-help books. The ones that really stuck were, ‘*Can’t hurt me*’ by David Goggins and ‘*The fear bubble*’ by Ant Middleton. These are a must read or listen for anyone dealing with anxiety and are also included in the book list at the end of this book.

What struck me the most was their positive mindset no matter what obstacles were ahead, even after all they had been through. Mildly put, neither of them had the easiest of childhoods and adolescence. But it did not knock them off their feet. If anything it made them even more driven to succeed.

In this chapter I would like to elaborate on ways to maintain a positive mindset. These are derived from the books I have read and from my own experience.

### **Grow from your set-backs**

I have mentioned this throughout the book. However, it is important enough that I wanted to address it many times and in different ways to help you grasp the concept.

When bad things happen to us, we frequently reflect on them. Of course, it is okay to sulk for a moment as this is an important part of processing what happened. However, afterwards it helps more if you look for any lessons you can take with you.

If you look back on your life, there are events that can obviously be described as negative. You can feel bad about the negative events and think it is unfair, or even unjust that they happened to you. Or you can turn them into positive experiences by reflecting on the things you have learned *because* they happened to you. Often, we grow a lot more from our ‘negative’ experiences than from our positive ones.

If you look at it like that, can you still call them negative though?

### **Fill in positive thoughts**

Many of the interactions we have throughout the day leave some thoughts unspoken. If you tell someone about your weekend or explain something to an assistant, they will likely think about it and not always express their thoughts out loud. This is just as well, as it would be chaotic if everybody said everything they were thinking all the time.

However, us humans are cursed with the awareness of our own and other’s thoughts and have the ability to form our

own thoughts or opinions about them. The reason I call this a curse, is because we tend to do this in a negative way.

Whenever we speak up during a meeting or have a serious discussion with someone we tend to fill in the opinions others have about what we said and what happened. More often than we would like, we fill in their thoughts with a negative opinion about ourselves. This is because we tend to be more critical of ourselves than we are of others. So, the thoughts we fill in for others are basically a reflection of what we think about ourselves. Sometimes they can even reflect what we are afraid others might think about us.

But it happens quite often that the other person is thinking something completely different or was not even fully paying attention to us.

If we can't know for sure what others are thinking, why should we not try and fill in their thoughts positively? This makes us feel better about ourselves and causes a lot less stress. For example, I can be very open towards friends or colleagues about how and why I feel a certain way. If someone does not openly respond to that however, I am sometimes afraid they are judging me for being too soft or too weak. Nowadays I tend to fill in their thoughts by imagining they think I am brave for being able to share those feelings with them. If the others were in fact thinking

something negative, then it is their responsibility to speak up or leave it unspoken and let me be me.

This can be hard to do at first. In that case you can start by focusing on raising your awareness of this happening. Whenever you catch yourself filling in someone else's thoughts about you negatively, just acknowledge that you are filling them in and that you are unsure whether they are indeed true.

Once you have practiced this for some time, you will become able to intervene and alter whatever you are filling in.

### **Visualize a positive outcome**

If you are anything like me, you are very good at 'catastrophizing', with which I mean anticipating a negative outcome for an upcoming event you are anxious about. This unfortunately causes you to feel even more anxious. This vicious circle of anxious anticipation is the crux of my anxiety disorder.

Visualization is a very strong tool in mindfulness and psychological training such as NLP. In the chapter about NLP, I described how visualizing a certain happy memory can alter your state of being and help you feel more positive. Unfortunately for us, this is also the case when we are visualizing a negative outcome for an upcoming event. It will alter your mood in the present, causing you to feel anxious

and stressed out even though the event might still be more than a week or a month away.

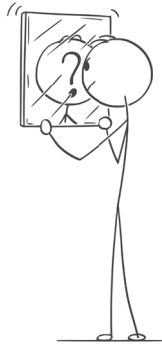
The key here is to become aware of these automatic thought processes. Then take some time to focus on what a positive outcome could be and try to visualize it as vividly as possible. This helps us to convince our brain that the positive outcome is also a valid option and might even be more rational than the negative outcome.

This is a tool I use a lot to reduce and challenge my anxiety. In the chapter about Visualization, you will find some exercises to develop this skill in order to reap the benefits.

Our minds are constantly racing through automatic thought patterns. These patterns are more often negative than positive, and this may impact the way we feel and even the way we behave. Becoming aware of this and aiming towards positive thoughts and patterns is an important step in creating your positive mindset.

In turn this will help you experience less stress about things that have happened or about what is still to come, causing you to live in the moment more, and enjoy current events more consciously, thereby becoming a happier person.

Positive thinking is positive living. Take responsibility and take control over your mindset.





## Question yourself

As previously explained, we all have a lot of automatic thought processes and habits. Most of the time we let these habits take control as it usually requires the least amount of effort. It happens without us even being aware of it.

Sometimes it pays to reflect on what we do and check if it is in accordance with what we want to do.

In this chapter I would like to share some questions you can ask yourself to learn about your habits. The chapter is focused on raising awareness, not on changing your habits. That will be the topic of a later chapter, called Unwanted habits.

### **Am I doing what I want to do?**

We have already discussed how we sometimes do things that others want to do, which we ourselves would rather not do. We also act out of habit without even thinking about it.

It helps to reflect on how you have spent your time in the last day, week or even month. When you do, be honest with

yourself and look for anything you might rather have done differently or not at all.

This is perfectly natural and nothing to feel bad about. After all, we have already learned that our behavior was the best action at that point in time, no matter what the reasons were.

Just acknowledge that you would rather have done something else in hindsight and take that into account the next time you are thinking about doing it.

### **Am I saying what I want to say?**

As well as looking at what we have done, we can also look at how we have communicated. Each of us can recall a conversation where we felt there were numerous things we could have stated more effectively. However, what we said was a result of our automatic thought patterns, which caused us to answer right away.

This happened to me whenever I was having a conversation with someone I admired. Whenever he or she made a comment about something insignificant, I would almost instantly agree with them. In hindsight I would feel bad for going along with them and not speaking my own mind. Nowadays, I take a moment to think about my position and say that instead. This has helped me to feel more like my own person.

Asking yourself this question every now and then helps you become more aware of these patterns. Once you have enough awareness, you can take the next step to alter what you are about to say.

### **Am I being who I want to be?**

We are who we are, and we should try to accept that. But sometimes it happens that we act out and do or say things that are not like us. We all have our core values and want to act accordingly, but when pressured we can stray away from them and later feel bad about doing so.

This occurs to me, for instance, when I make jokes about other people to blend in with the group. I want to respect everybody for who they are, so whenever this happens, I address this for myself. By having paid attention to this, I have become more aware of it happening and now I find that I no longer do this as often as I did before.

Asking yourself this question and answering it honestly will help you act more in line with your core values. By acting more in line with your values, you will feel more in control and in agreement with your thought and behavior patterns.

These questions are just another method of self-reflection focused on automatic habits. Becoming aware of these patterns is the first step in trying to change them. Without

awareness there will be nothing to act on and therefore nothing to potentially change.





## Road ahead

As I have often written in this book there are many ways to develop yourself and work on your anxiety and stress levels. And, we have also discussed how important downtime is. This chapter aims to help you find the proper balance between these two opposites. I would like to do this by explaining a technique I call road mapping.

### **The basics of road mapping**

Road mapping is about making a to-do list for the coming weeks, months or year aimed towards a certain area of development for yourself. The goal is to create an overview of what you have already planned to contribute to your development.

This way you have something concrete to rely on when a new opportunity arises. If your road map already contains enough challenges, it is a good idea to postpone or decline new challenges. Of course, if the new challenge is something you want to take up, you can still choose to accept it and maybe include it, instead of one of the ones you have already planned.

If your roadmap is almost empty, then this is a sign to schedule something new which is appropriate to your current energy levels and the time you have to spend.

### **Development goals**

The road map should apply to the area of your life you are looking to develop most. For me this has been my anxiety, so I would write down everything that might soon cause me anxiety. You should not include any other planned activities or challenges as they do not apply to this area of your life.

If I think my road map is too full, I reflect on which events can be scratched. However, sometimes I notice that I do not have as much planned as I had imagined. This helps me feel calm and in control and I then plan a new challenge, unless I need to recharge first.

### **Time-based model**

It is important to choose how much time you can devote to this one area of development because other tasks or difficulties are not included in the specified roadmap. There are plenty of other things to do in your life which drain your energy or even contribute to another area of development. These activities should not be ignored.

Although it may be difficult to decide on a specific amount of time you are able to spend on this roadmap you prob-



ably have a reasonable idea of the free time you have in a week or in a month. Take a percentage of that according to your energy levels and you have a good starting point.

### **Keep it clutter free**

It is quite normal that we are developing ourselves in many areas at the same time. But for me doing this consciously creates an amount of chaos and only works counterproductively. I like to focus on one specific area, although admittedly this might be because I have only been able to focus on my anxiety. A friend of mine is always working on at least three things at once and likes to put in a lot of effort on planning his development. Everybody has their own strategy.

However, when using a strategy like a roadmap, I advise working only on one area as making more roadmaps will only make you lose track of the time appointed to each and which challenges are included in which roadmap. There is always an area of development you want to work on the most. Create a roadmap for this and let the other areas run their own course for the moment.

Of course, there are a lot of ways to plan your development and keep a proper balance in going the distance and maintaining your downtime. Roadmaps help me to keep a clear sight of what is ahead. When I do not do this, I am prone to thinking I have too much going on at the same time.

The roadmap helps me stay calm and feel a certain pride about putting in the effort to develop myself.

Try it out for yourself and see what it brings. You could also start small and see if you have any challenges scheduled in the coming day or week. If there is still some space, think of something you can implement to contribute to your development. This can even be something small like journaling, meditating, or exercising. Of course, it depends on the area of development you want to focus on.





## Social media

I have formed a strong opinion about social media and how it is impacting our social lives, so I am somewhat bi-ased regarding this subject. Please know that I do not want to force my views on you, I am just sharing it to provide you with an alternative view.

Over the years technology and social media have made an exponential growth and have taken a prominent place in our everyday lives. I noticed that I spent increasingly more time on socials without them bringing me much, or any, joy. It was just another way to spend (read: waste) my time whenever I was bored. Furthermore, I noticed that I was desperately looking for validation whenever I did post something.

Eventually I weighed the benefits and the disadvantages and realized there were no longer any real benefits for me. Watching *'The social dilemma'* on Netflix, which is very biased but eye-opening, also helped me to see this. Then I decided to delete all the social media apps from my phone. My accounts are still active, but I no longer spend any time on them.

This chapter is not dedicated to summing up the negative influences I think social media has on us. I want to share some of the insights I have learned these last years and some of the benefits I have experienced since I deleted the apps from my phone.

### **Spend your time on something beneficial for you**

Of course, you do not have to be productive all the time, but social media is literally designed to keep you engaged as long as possible. There were plenty of times when I went to Facebook or Reddit out of boredom and before I knew it, I had spent half an hour or longer, just scrolling on my phone. This even happened several times a day.

I can imagine that for some, social media can feel quite relaxing. But for me there are better ways to spend my time. I prefer to listen to audio books, watch a movie, do some yoga or meditation, read or even write a book or work out.

Since I deleted the apps, I have felt more in control of how I spend my time and have become more productive. An additional huge benefit is that it has helped me become less anxious about being productive as well.

### **Do not let yourself get distracted**

It is completely natural to get distracted as we cannot be focused all the time. However, what I have learned from a training is that it takes about one or two minutes to become

focused again once we have gotten distracted. Add this up to the dozens of alerts we receive daily on our phones, and you have got yourself a recipe for disaster.

Even if you did nothing with an alert, you were still distracted for a moment. As well as receiving these alerts, we also often check to see whether we might have missed one.

There are plenty of apps that track your phone usage, both in time and amount opened per day. I would encourage you to try one of these apps for a week and check your results.

Deleting all my social media apps has made me less distracted. I even started to get somewhat annoyed by the alerts I still received from WhatsApp and other non-social apps.

Because of this distraction and annoyance, I have turned off all my alerts. This has been very relaxing as it has relieved me of the pressure of having to reply as soon as possible.

To be honest, I still check my phone a lot and I open WhatsApp to see if I have any messages. But since my alerts are off, I have become aware of every time I open my phone. In time my usage will become even lower, and I am quite certain this will make me glad to have done this.

### **Be more in the moment**

I was one of those people that would have a conversation while looking at my phone and not be able to pay full attention to the other person. But whenever somebody did the same to me, I would become very annoyed.

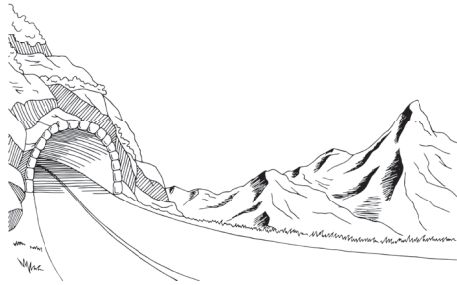
The latter still applies sometimes as I cannot control what somebody else does, but I try to be focused on a conversation myself whenever I have one. Having fewer alerts has helped me do this.

It has also made me less distracted when I am on holiday or am just having fun or doing something cool. I get to enjoy everything more consciously which has made me grateful for these moments.

It feels as if our society is being engulfed by social media. Of course, there are some benefits, but unfortunately also a lot of disadvantages. The need for validation, the waste of time, and the waste of attention, clearly outweighed the few benefits it had for me. This led me to take these decisions and so far, I have been very grateful that I did.







## **Tunnel vision**

When you are trying very hard to achieve something, it is easy to forget about everything else around you. You can put off finishing other modest activities that need to be done if you are pressed for time or are about to engage in an activity you would rather avoid. We may constantly take the same approach when trying to solve a challenging problem and become frustrated when we keep receiving the same results.

In this chapter I would like to give you some tips to break through this tunnel vision for those moments you feel helpless or stressed out.

### **Ask someone else for help**

This might be easy for some, but for others it is easier said than done. However, somebody else may have already been through what you are struggling with, and they might be able to provide you with the answer. Sometimes it just helps to bring in a fresh pair of eyes that will look at the problem differently. You might have been stuck for a while and, due to tunnel vision, been unable to see an obvious solution.

Do not feel ashamed when this happens. Just be glad you did not wait any longer to ask for help. Usually, the other person even feels good about being asked for their help.

### **Walk through the process from the start**

When you are stuck, it can be helpful to take a step back and retrace your steps from the start. You might have made a mistake earlier and been oblivious to it. We often assume the solution is to go forward, yet going backwards may help to re-evaluate how you got to where you are now.

This might also shed some light on steps in the process that can be adjusted for the next time. There could be steps that can be automatized, readdressed or elaborated to decrease the chance of failure in the future.

### **Pretend to explain what is wrong to someone else**

If there is nobody around to help you, you could always pretend there is. This is a technique I learned in therapy where you pretend to help a friend with the same problem that you have. If you try to explain your problem to someone else, you first must think about clarifying it for him/her to understand you. Then you are more aware of where the issue lies.

Sometimes trying to explain your problem already solves it. For instance, has it ever happened that you asked for help and, while explaining the issue, you already thought

of the solution yourself? That has happened to me a lot. So why not try doing this without anybody else around?

### **Take a moment to look at the bigger picture**

When you are fully engaged in an activity, you tend to lose track of the bigger picture. This can create even more problems in the long run as you forget to do certain tasks or get stuck on a problem.

When you are stuck on something, or discover you are more involved than you initially thought you would be, take a moment to zoom out and regain an overview of your current situation and everything else that is going on.

Ask yourself if there are any other priorities that need to be dealt with or how much time you can spend on your current problem. This way you minimize the chance of causing a chain reaction due to not meeting other deadlines.

Tunnel vision does not necessarily have to be a bad thing. In fact, some people are happy they can focus so well. I find it can cause a great deal of stress and in those cases, it helps me to use the strategies mentioned above to break through and eventually move on.

When you are stuck in tunnel vision for too long, you may even miss certain opportunities that come along. Even worse, you could be too stressed out to enjoy it when you

finally solve the problem or perform the activity you were anxious about.







## Unwanted habits

In a previous chapter, called Question yourself, we raised awareness of our habits, both the wanted and unwanted ones. Now the time has come to learn what you can do to get rid of your unwanted habits.

This is not a guarantee for success, but I would like to provide you with a strategy that could help you aim in that direction.

### **Write down why you want to get rid of the habit**

The first step is to become fully aware as to why you would like to get rid of the habit. As your thoughts are constantly racing it helps you to say it out loud or write it down. The latter provides you with the additional benefit of being able to go over it again later.

By doing this you will be more convinced about wanting to get rid of the habit. Try to list as many reasons as you can because doing so makes you spend more time pointing yourself in the right direction.

### **Acknowledge your pitfalls**

There are always scenarios or situations that evoke this habit more than others. These are your 'pitfalls'. These pitfalls could be a certain situation, location, person or mindset.

Eliminating or reducing these pitfalls from your life will lower the risk of the unwanted habit recurring. Doing so might not always be easy or even desired. However, you cannot decide whether you want to reduce or eliminate your pitfalls if you do not know what they are.

In order to eliminate or reduce these pitfalls, you must first identify and acknowledge them. Be completely honest with yourself in identifying in which situation, where or with whom you are more prone to display the unwanted behavior.

### **Set alarms on your phone**

Depending on the habit, you could use an alarm to remind you of the habit and prevent it from happening. Alarms could also serve as a simple reminder of them, allowing you to pause and think about them. You might have failed to stop the habit from happening, but this way you are at least aware of it again.

When we are busy or distracted, it is easy to lose track of time and life and to stop thinking about our objectives.

By using alarms, you guarantee one or more moments per day that you are thinking about your aim to get rid of the unwanted habit.

### **Reward your own achievement**

We often take our own progression for granted, because we feel that we owe it to ourselves to grow. While that is true, there is no harm in celebrating success and rewarding yourself for your efforts.

Depending on the habit, you can reward yourself for not doing it a certain number of times, for a certain period or just whenever you feel like you have earned it. This will provide you with an extra stimulus to keep putting in the effort and helps you to feel that it is worth doing so.

These tips can be used to help you get rid of habits you no longer want to have. But they are also very helpful to build new habits which you want to incorporate in your life.

While writing this book I decided to lower my caffeine intake drastically. Over the years I had developed a routine where I drank four to five cups of coffee on average every day. I read that your caffeine intake may impact your anxiety levels and sleeping pattern, so I decided to try it out for myself.

By using the tips from this chapter, I was able to bring my

intake down to only one cup of coffee per day. I had tried to do this before, but never succeeded. I really feel like the tips from this chapter gave me the edge to finally succeed this time. Unfortunately, I have not noticed any major differences, yet the strategy worked for me nonetheless.

Be aware that you have lived your life in a certain way for a while now. Which means that these habits have been there for quite some time and will take some more to change them.

Do not lose hope when your unwanted habits are not gone straight away. It may be a good idea to revisit and review the first two steps in this chapter and see if the reward from step four is appropriate for the effort needed to get rid of the habit. If you still cannot get rid of the habit, you could try to implement a huge reward to provide yourself with a major incentive. You could also try to find a friend or coach to help you stay on track and work on it together.

Remember to be completely honest with yourself as that is what is needed to change.





# Visualization

As previously described visualization can be a great way to alter your mood. It is also a method often used in meditation and brainstorming. It helps to relive certain events and evoke a certain mood for yourself. It also helps you to visualize a positive outcome for an upcoming event to make you feel less anxious.

However, for those unpracticed in the skill it is quite difficult to use. This is due to our racing thoughts, sometimes referred to as our ‘monkey mind’. When you are not yet trained in either meditation or visualization, it can feel as if one of those clapping monkeys is inside your head. New thoughts are constantly popping up one after the other. Luckily this becomes less the more you practice.

In this chapter I would like to give you a few easy exercises to train you to visualize. With these exercises you can familiarize yourself with visualization, train the skill, and eventually reap the benefits.

## **Visualize a tour in your house**

This is an easy exercise as it only takes a few minutes.

As you spend a lot of time in your home it will be easy for you to visualize it. You can imagine yourself walking through it and getting a clear image of each room as you go.

This exercise can be done in two different ways. You can either imagine yourself getting up from your bed or out of your chair, depending on where you are at the moment, and walking outside. The other option is imagining you are coming from outside, entering your home and going through each room and finally sitting down where you are now.

Go as fast or slow as you want but take time to get a clear image of each room you go through, if you are able to.

### **Remember an event from the past**

We all have memories from the past. But mostly when a memory surfaces, we just have a vague recollection of it happening.

With this exercise it helps to think about something that stands out and preferably something positive, such as an event during a holiday or a concert or show you have been to. Instead of just remembering it, try to focus on the sensory details at that time. These details can be anything you saw, heard, smelled, or felt both internally and externally. You might even experience a sense of calm, excitement, or joy.



Congratulations, you have just unlocked one of the best ways to use visualization to your advantage!

### **Relive the previous day**

Another exercise you could try, is to visualize the previous day, almost as if it is a movie. Some moments will be harder to remember than others, as they were less significant. Yet it should be relatively easy to go through the highlights. Again, go as fast or slow as you like.

To make this exercise more challenging you could try to focus on certain details.

If your previous day made you feel bad, you could pick the day before or your current day up to now. Or you could use visualization to help you process what happened during that bad day.

Sometimes when I cannot fall asleep, I retrace the steps of a weeklong hiking trip I did in Scotland. It helps me settle down and feel grateful for the trip I made. Usually, I am asleep before I make it to the end.

Visualization has helped me alter my mood as I described in the chapters NLP and Positive mindset. There are a lot more benefits to this skill, yet these are the ones I am most grateful for.

Just like any other skill it becomes easier the more effort you put in. I still have not developed it as much as I would like. Yet I can put it to good use whenever I want.

If you would like to learn more about the theory behind visualization or want to know more exercises to practice, there are a many articles, books and videos about it.





# Workload

You might have experienced this before. For a while you have been quite busy with your work; sometimes it may even feel as if there is no end to it. At a certain point, even the smallest additional task might be too much and cause a lot of stress.

But what can you do about it? In this chapter I would like to discuss a couple of the ways I deal with my workload.

Please be aware that these tips are related to my office job and may not be applicable for you. If that is indeed the case, I hope they at least inspire you to see that there are many ways to relieve yourself of some workload.

## **Ask your team members for assistance**

Most of the time, your team members are more than happy to help you, especially when they know that you can return the favor when they might need it. Maybe they are less busy than you are now, or they might know a more pragmatic approach to whatever you are working on. It cannot hurt to ask them to help you by taking over some tasks or by brainstorming with you.

Being able to cross off items on your to-do list is obviously the quickest way to lighten your workload.

### **Address the issue with your manager**

Managers are people too, with the occasional exception of course! They usually understand that their business or department is run by people and therefore by you. It might surprise you how agreeable they are if you ask them whether you can come up with a plan together. Either way, it will not increase your workload and it will make sure your manager takes it into account in the future.

### **Schedule more time for tasks**

Often you try to plan as efficiently as possible to do as many tasks as you can. However, if you schedule a bit more time for each task, you will also consider any unexpected interruptions or new tasks that are more urgent. With the time gained from this, you will be able to get ahead or work on the tasks that are less urgent and are usually saved for later.

These three tips were mainly focused on directly reducing the workload. This is the best approach to doing this and the stress that comes along with it. However, I would also like to share some tips related to being able to deal better with a workload in order to experience less stress from it.

### **Write a to-do list**

This might sound like an obvious solution, but whenever you are really focused on the tasks at hand, it is easy to forget some things.

Put together a list of tasks you must do in the coming two weeks, or whatever period works for you. Then add the time you need to spend on each task. This will help you stay in control of all the tasks you have to do, and you will feel less anxious about forgetting one.

Now expand this list with a rating regarding the priority or urgency of each task. Often this relieves a lot of the pressure, because you discover that some tasks are not as urgent as they initially felt. This helps you realize that it is indeed possible to do everything in the time you have available.

If you still think you will not be able to do it all, then this provides you with a good overview to bring to your manager to talk about postponing or reassigning some tasks.

### **Do something relaxing**

As described in the chapter about Downtime it is very important to recharge yourself regularly by doing something relaxing.

It might sound odd, but for me a relaxing activity generally

involves a work-out. Whenever I do a work-out after a long stressful day at work, I get caught up in the moment and no longer think about work, especially when I do this with someone else. This is the best way for me to practice mindfulness. It energizes me, helps me sleep better at night and makes me feel good about myself, all essential benefits to get back to it again the next day or week.

You could also think about activities such as a (long) walk, preferably with some great scenery, getting a massage or reading a book. These activities usually energize you more than going for some drinks, an evening of gaming or binge-watching Netflix.

### **Have (or initiate) an informal activity with your colleagues**

This will help you and every other co-worker to be more comfortable with each other. Furthermore, it will also make you realize that your managers or those annoying colleagues are just doing their jobs. Often those colleagues are much more agreeable in an informal setting than they are during business hours. They tend to be a lot stricter and more formal when it involves work than they are in their personal lives.

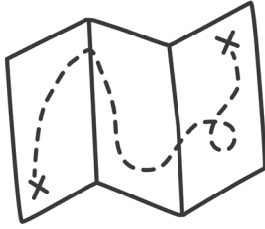
People are typically much more eager to communicate to each other after an activity like this because it brings everyone closer to the entire team.



When you feel more comfortable with each other, it also becomes easier to ask for help or address issues in the current work process. This eventually relieves some of the workload.

These were my tips to lower your workload or to deal with the stress that comes along with it better. I hope they help you in the same way they have helped me during these past years. I know they will continue to help me in the years to come.

A heavy workload can be disastrous for your enjoyment of work. You may feel rushed all the time or you become more prone to making mistakes. Relieving yourself of some of your workload will make you more comfortable with the tasks at hand and may even provide you with some well-earned time off.



## **X marks the spot**

You probably wondered what subject I would think of for this specific chapter. As this book draws to a close, I would like to leave you with a few closing thoughts in the following chapters.

You can think of your life as if it is a treasure hunt. If you are lucky enough, you already have a clear goal or purpose in life (the X). It is more likely though that you will have to find clues as to what drives you to help you shape your purpose and goals.

Once you do find your purpose however, you will not have instantly fulfilled it. There is a long journey ahead and along the way you will make some, or probably a lot of, mistakes that will get you further away from your goals. The hard part then is to get back on track and put in the effort to point yourself in the direction of your goals once again. Without putting in the effort you will not get what you want.

Once you have achieved your goals you will know all the effort was worth it and that the journey has shaped you

as the person you have become. Odds are the journey itself may even have been more rewarding than the goals. This is because your feelings of pride, gratitude and joy are usually formed more by overcoming your obstacles than by achieving your goals. Your purpose and goals are the rewards for the effort spent to overcome whatever life throws at you.



It's Your Life!

It's Your Choice!

## **Your life**

In your life you will meet a lot of people who would like to inspire you with their own. Just as I am trying to do by writing this book.

It is important however, to stay in touch with yourself and your own values and desires. Even though it is all shared with the best of intentions, everybody lives their own lives, and everybody is entitled to their own opinions and decisions.

Some people may disagree with whatever decisions you have made or are yet to make. Yet it is still up to you to make those decisions and reflect on why you have made them.

The most important thing I can tell you is to try and remain honest with yourself. That way whatever decisions you make, you will be able to judge for yourself whether you agree with them.

Your own opinion about the way you live your life is the most important of all. This is because yours is the only

opinion that can fully grasp whether your actions are according to the life you want for yourself.

If your decision was in line with the life you desire, be proud you made the right decision and put in the required effort to do so.

If you do something you had rather not done, take responsibility for it and let it point you in the direction you want for yourself.

Or not. That decision is up to you of course.







# Zen

If you have taken the time to read this book, then you have already put in some effort to work on your self-development. Be grateful for having done so and later on reflect on what you have learned along the way.

Reflect on which lessons you choose to implement in your life and which you choose to thankfully let be as they do not suit you, or at least not for now. Know that each of these lessons was shared with the best of intentions, but you are free to do with them as you please.

I have had a lot of fun writing this book and it has also helped me grow by becoming aware of some lessons I had already learned but which remained unconscious.

Some of the chapters were easier to write than others and I found that the more trouble I had in life with a specific subject, the easier it was to write a chapter about it.

What I would like to say with this is that setbacks and negative experiences are an important part of your development. After everything has settled, you learn that these

experiences have shaped you for who you are now.

My most important life lessons so far have been described in this book. Even though everybody has their own story, I hope some of these lessons will help you in one way or another. Whether it is by providing you with a new insight or by some of the practical tips and exercises.

After reading this book you may think that I have full control over my life. Yet, I still encounter a lot of problems along the way, and even experience the occasional relapse in my anxiety or grief.

Nonetheless, the lessons mentioned in this book have made me more aware of what those problems are and have given me an idea about how to try and solve them. More importantly I have become more accepting towards my anxiety and the way it has changed my life.

For now, you have earned some rest and Downtime. Please do something that will relax you right now! Whether it is a meditation, a breathing exercise, some journaling or going for a short (or long) walk. By now you will have learned the importance of this, and you have definitely earned it, so please enjoy.

Should you wish to comment on anything in this book or to contact me to discuss any specific situation or even share

with me some of your own life's lessons, please feel free to do so at [abcforstressrelief@gmail.com](mailto:abcforstressrelief@gmail.com)

Thank you for reading my book!

## Book list

Over the years I have read or listened to a bunch of self-help books. Below I list the ones that have helped me with my anxiety the most. If you are dealing with anxiety or debilitating stress, these books might be able to help you in your process as well.

### **English:**

*Can't hurt me* by David Goggins,  
published by Lioncrest Publishing

*The fear bubble* by Ant Middleton,  
published by HarperCollins Publishers

*First man in* by Ant Middleton,  
published by HarperCollins Publishers

*The decision* by Kevin Hart,  
published by Audible

*The subtle art of not giving a f\*ck* by Mark Manson,  
published by Levboeken

*How not to worry* by Paul McGee,  
published by Capstone Publishing

*Unf\*ck yourself* by Gary John Bishop,  
published by Harperone

*Man's search for meaning* by Viktor Frankl,  
published by Ebury Publishing

*The choice* by Edith Eger,  
published by Rider & Co

**Dutch:**

*Fokking druk* by Thijs Launspach,  
published by Spectrum

*Je bent al genoeg* by Thijs Launspach,  
published by Spectrum

*Nu of nooit* by Dai Carter,  
published by Promotheus

*Gedoemanagement* by Frank Schurink,  
published by Haystack