

INTRODUCTION

How could we be anything but ...?

It is, in a sense, astonishing that we ever manage to be anything but very concerned.

There is so much to which we are exposed, so many serious and unpredictable risks permanently waiting to threaten our peace of mind.

●→ We live on a crowded planet, bathed in an atmosphere of dread, frenzy and ambition, and are forced to navigate around our vast technology-filled cities with a biological makeup better suited to a simpler, quieter, less excitable life in the savannah.

●→ We dwell within painfully fragile physical envelopes, where something could give way at any time, a blood clot smaller than a full stop having the power to destroy us in an instant.

●→ We are repeatedly compelled to make enormous life choices without the necessary facts and can have little clue what really awaits us around the corner.

●→ Our long childhoods leave us open to every kind of turmoil and dislocation, our beautifully complicated minds being at risk of permanent trauma due to scars that we might have acquired before we could walk.

●→ There is seldom sufficient time to connect with the quieter parts of ourselves or to grasp our uplifting unimportance in the grander scheme. We barely notice ourselves living. Our mass media continuously inflames our passions and fears – while blinding us to the quiet, steady, undramatic kindness and hope all around us.

●→ In relationships, we long to let down our guard but, at the same time, fear – not unreasonably – the grave hurt that may ensue whenever we surrender our emotions to another person.

●→ We put children on the earth and cannot be happy unless they thrive – and yet have no ability to protect them from fate.

●→ At work, our reputations could be destroyed in a moment by malice or error. We want desperately to win and yet are continually haunted by the spectre of defeat. We are never as young, beautiful or intelligent as we need to be.

●→ Our imaginations permanently remind us of everything that is missing, everything that might go wrong and everything that we might already have messed up.

From a clear-eyed perspective, the risks and troubles that face us are truly multitudinous and petrifying. Yet still people will sometimes casually tell us to ‘relax’ – as though such an injunction might be the work of a moment rather than the achievement of a lifetime.

Nevertheless, for all this, we should strive with deep seriousness to let go of one or two of our anxieties – by understanding them a little better, forming good habits to appease them and sharing them with a few kindly others – and thereby grow to enjoy the odd less worried day, when we can look up for a moment from our fretful thoughts and appreciate the wonder and blessing of being alive.

This is a book about anxiety and how to overcome it ✨

ANXIETY & EVOLUTION

We're used to singing the praises of the human mind and body; they are, from many perspectives, truly astonishing pieces of engineering. We have brains capable of doing fractal equations, translating Finnish into Bengali and performing *La traviata* – and bodies that can scale the Matterhorn, send balls over a tennis net at 263km/h and create new life that can last up to a century. And yet, for all that, we should admit how questionably designed we truly are in many areas, if only to forgive ourselves for the mess and sadness we typically generate. It's not simply our fault that we're anxious; the machines we're trying to live through are riddled with flaws.

We are the outcome of evolutionary processes that have left us less than ideally adapted for what is required of us. Our anatomy is filled with redundant or vestigial organs. We have no need for our coccyx, the last part of our vertebrae that is the remnant of the tail that now gives us backache and growing pains. Nor do we have any use for our wisdom teeth, male nipples or appendices. And comparable vestigial problems exist in the mind:

Our wiring is massively and awkwardly oversensitive to our childhoods. Most of us still haven't dealt with our early years by the time we reach old age.

We tend to be very and unhelpfully mean towards ourselves. We're far kinder to most of our enemies – largely because we internalise methods of self-judgement that are modelled on some of the sternest judges from our personal histories.

We're very bad at thinking: we panic easily, we resist important thoughts, we long for distraction and are squeamish interpreters of ourselves. We have a devilishly hard time working out what job we might do, how we might tap our talents and what is truly driving us.

We get wildly over-concerned about some threats while ignoring others, especially the threat of not appreciating what we have while there is still time.

We can't correctly separate the real dangers from the false alarms.

We worry far too much about the consequences of others' views of us; we behave as if we still dwell in small tribes, where every piece of gossip could matter, and waste years improving our image in the minds of strangers who we will never meet.

We exaggerate our chances of happiness – and suffer from bitter disappointment as a result. We can't gracefully accept just how likely it is that we won't be rich or won't have happy marriages – and rail at the unfairness of our condition, which is, in fact, just the statistical norm.

We have addictive tendencies, especially for food, alcohol, pornography and sitting on sofas.

We think of sex far too often, given the opportunities and our competing priorities.

And finally, of course, we are entirely biased towards being unhappy. Very little in our biology is interested in us being content. There must have been an early evolutionary advantage in being fretful and easily triggered: the others got eaten. Nature, apparently, would rather we were worried ninety-nine percent of the time rather than lived in a relaxed way and fell prey to a tiger. So, we let the finest days pass without appreciation. We can't – naturally – ever 'live in the moment', a dauntingly ambitious and inadvertently cruel phrase.

In order to deal with our troublesome, ill-adapted bodies, we invented medicine, nutrition and exercise. To help us cope with our equally wonky minds, we need to lean just as heavily (as we do here) on philosophy, psychotherapy and self-reflection ✨



ANXIETY & MODERN TIMES

We've built a much safer and more prosperous world than our ancestors ever enjoyed, but modern times have also brought a special range of troubles into our lives which contribute to our enhanced anxiety.

Perfectionism

The modern age is ambitious. We wish to cure disease, waste no time, achieve constant happiness and live forever. These are fine hopes, but because they are necessarily still out of reach, they leave us angst-ridden, dispirited, disappointed with ourselves and angry with our societies. For most of history, people suffered greatly, but they were spared one particular agony: the sense that a perfect life could somehow be possible.

Individualism

For most of history, we lived in close-knit groups. The modern world has removed our reliance on the clan or the family and moved us to big cities where we can live privately and prosper on our own. We exist in an age of individualism. This may have liberated us in many ways, but it has also left us free to suffer alone and endure life without an anchor, feeling overly responsible for whatever befalls us and with no one to blame for our sorrows but ourselves.