

# THE SKY IS NOT FALLING

Chicken Little was way ahead of his time. His worry and fear about the sky falling would have been so much more timely in our current society of amped-up anxiety. We're moving at a breakneck pace, and we're maxed out, overcommitted, and exhausted. And survival is often our top priority.

In our personal lives, we're managing our energy with caffeinated and carbonated drinks just to get through the day. And at work, we're laser focused on the next deadline. Efficiency is king. We want immediate results. We rarely pause long enough to realize that in the name of efficiency we've sacrificed effectiveness. And quite frankly, if we did slow down, we'd probably start worrying about the time we were wasting.

At the pace we're moving, it's no wonder that one in eight Americans ages 18 and older suffers from an anxiety disorder, and that the rates of Xanax and Valium use have skyrocketed in the past decade.<sup>18</sup> Not to mention the increase in prescriptions for insomnia medications. "I'm not dependent on Ambien, I just use a little bit at night if I can't sleep," a patient once said to me.<sup>19</sup> As a nation, we are worrying ourselves sick.

Chicken Little had so many good things to worry about. And so do we. They usually start with the words *what if* followed by some sort of catastrophic thinking:

- *What if the deal doesn't go through?*
- *What if I get sick?*

- *What if I can't get it all done?*
- *What if it's too stressful?*
- *What if I fail?*

This isn't the only way we scare ourselves silly. What about the other fears that haunt millions of Americans, such as spiders, heights, dogs, flying, the dark, crowds, needles, public speaking, and death? After reading that the fear of public speaking trumps the fear of death for most Americans, comedian Jerry Seinfeld joked, "If you have to go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy."<sup>20</sup>

## WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Just like anger, anxiety is rooted in other emotions; in this case, it's fear. Though we are born with only two natural fears—the fear of falling and of loud noises—we sometimes learn fear as an adaptive behavior to protect ourselves from danger.<sup>21</sup> So it's normal to feel anxious at times. While guilt and regret are about past behavior, anxiety is an attempt to control the future.

Anxiety can be motivating and lead you to take action—for instance, to meet a rapidly approaching deadline. Anxiety can fuel you to pull an all-nighter to solve a problem, double-check your work to avoid errors, or deep-clean your house to prepare for a peaceful visit with your in-laws. On the other hand, anxiety may have you treading water. Some people repeatedly think through the endless scenarios that could happen in hopes of outsmarting an undesirable outcome. Then, if what they're anxious about actually does happen, maybe it won't be as bad, because they think they will have already prepared themselves. They can say, "I already thought of that" or "I *knew* that was going to happen."

But pay attention if you find yourself preoccupied with what-ifs and worst-case scenarios. Even if you have a compartmentalized fear, say only about losing your money, your youth, your job, or your relationships, this anxiety can unravel your health and happiness. Chronic anxiety repeatedly triggers the stress response

and drains your emotional and physical energy. Excessive anxiety shuts down the cortical thinking part of your brain that helps you problem-solve and come up with creative options. Eventually, it will undermine your ability to communicate and function day-to-day.

To make it easy, think of anxiety in three categories:

1. **Generalized anxiety** is a state of worry that lasts for at least six months and is usually focused on one or two specific areas of your life (your health, your finances, your work, etc.). People with generalized anxiety tend to feel on edge and have difficulty sleeping, relaxing, and enjoying life.
2. **Phobias** are intense fears of a specific object or situation—such as taking an elevator, being bitten by a dog, or using a public toilet—that tend to be out of proportion to any real risk. Sometimes, a past traumatic experience, like being locked in a closet by a sibling, can trigger an ongoing fear of being stuck in a closed space (claustrophobia). People with phobias often worry continuously about whether the situation they fear is going to occur. (Extreme trauma, such as surviving a serious injury or fighting in war, can alter the adrenaline response and several areas of the brain, leading to post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.)
3. **Panic attacks** are intense feelings of being overwhelmed, accompanied by the fear of losing control, going crazy, or dying, even without any evidence to support those fears.

In whatever form anxiety takes, it triggers your nervous system. When adrenaline is released, it causes a flood of physical sensations, such as a racing heart, sweating, and tightened muscles. This makes it challenging to slow down and listen deeply. When you're anxious, you *react* rather than respond. Fear

and panic interfere with your brain's critical thinking and hinder your ability to communicate effectively.

So why all the worry? Underlying anxiety is a lack of self-trust to handle uncertainty. When experiencing a loss of control, anxiety is often an attempt to create order out of perceived chaos. Except there's one small problem: it doesn't work. You've probably heard people say, "Worrying doesn't take away tomorrow's troubles; it only takes away today's peace."

## THE QUICK FIX

If you have recurring anxious thoughts that increase in frequency and intensity, they will eventually take on a physical manifestation. Surprise, surprise! If you've been missing the early signs, your body will likely be the messenger that no longer allows you to ignore your anxiety. You may feel helpless and be willing to do almost anything to restore sanity to your life.

Anxiety can bring on everything from mild physical discomfort to the palpitations, shortness of breath, and dizziness of a full-blown panic attack. It can cause sleepless nights for executives, public speakers' repetitive finger tapping, nail-biting for parents who are concerned about their children, and tummy aches for little kids who have been bullied or neglected. I've seen dozens of physical ailments result from prolonged anxiety: hives, headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, asthma attacks, and abnormal heart rhythms, to name a few. By the way, now would be a good time to check in: Has merely reading this list provoked some anxious thoughts or feelings in you?

Once anxiety sends clear physical signals, people will often turn to physical strategies, such as prescription drugs, to alleviate them. Since they don't know what to do with their worrisome thoughts or fearful emotions, it can seem easier to control their physical bodies instead. And often people become dependent on these short-term reprieves. The irony is that anxiety has a mental and emotional basis. Physical strategies serve to get you through the moment, but they won't solve your problem.

When I see patients who are suffering from anxiety, they've usually already found a coping method, or several, to temporarily alleviate the physical symptoms. Some people turn to smoking, others work long hours, and still others numb themselves with food, alcohol, or drugs in order to function. When these behaviors go on too long, they can lead to health problems, burnout, or addiction.

And then there are the folks who use yoga or running as a strategy to relieve their discomfort. The interesting part is that focusing on your physical body *alone* relieves two things, the muscle tension and the need to be in control—but it only works until the next time you feel anxious. This is complex because society rewards people for this type of strategy. Your friends may be impressed, but you haven't gotten rid of your anxiety. It's fueling your healthy coping mechanism, which is a good short-term strategy.

Let's see how this might play out: If you have a new boss who keeps close tabs on your work, this may cause you to have a glass of wine (or three) to "take the edge off" your day. Your anxiety may even lessen after a few drinks, but tomorrow, it will be time to head back to work and nothing will have changed. You're just getting by.

On the other hand, if you choose to manage your anxiety by running a few miles after work each night, you will probably feel stronger and in better shape. That's a good thing. After a few months, you might even get compliments from your friends and colleagues about your stellar physique. Except your relationship with your micromanaging boss will still be the same each morning, as if it were Groundhog Day.

Both of the above scenarios demonstrate that coping strategies can have a beneficial impact in the short run—and to some degree, even longer-term, as in the running example. However, the takeaway is that neither of these strategies solves the underlying problem: your relationship with your boss. Until you commit to having an honest conversation, your anxiety will continue.

When you experience anxiety, use your pause button, just like you've learned to do with tears and anger. Once you've managed your physical symptoms, pay attention to the internal conversation driving your fear. Then it's time to get curious and challenge

those beliefs in order to create new possibilities. Slowing down may seem counterintuitive, but actually it's the fastest way to get back on track.

## SCARED TO DEATH

At 27 years old, Carly, a good friend of my younger sister, Sarika, had just been diagnosed with cancer that had spread throughout her body. Sarika was blindsided by the news. She and Carly had so much in common. They were both independent, strong women who had excelled in school, were committed to environmental causes, ran marathons, worked hard, loved cooking healthy and delicious meals, and were changing the world.

That summer while receiving treatment, Carly moved home from New York City to surround herself with the love and support of her family. Sarika, willing to do anything to help her friend, offered to sublet Carly's apartment.

The very day that she moved in, Sarika noticed herself burping and tasting acid in the back of her throat. She saw multiple physicians who scoped her throat and her colon, looking for the physical culprit. The end result was the same. "Everything looks normal, Sarika. You're doing great. We're not sure why you have this intractable reflux, but we can give you a medication to cut the amount of acid your stomach produces. Hopefully, that will take care of your symptoms."

Even though the doctors agreed on the treatment for reflux, Sarika wasn't convinced. It was then that she called me to relate her story and her diagnosis. It was clear the physical exploration of her reflux was not yielding results. So I got curious about her mental and emotional stress response to moving into Carly's apartment.

She burst into tears. "This isn't fair! Carly is such an amazing woman, and I thought I would be helping her financially by moving in. But it's like I can't get away from my fear. I'm surrounded by it—everywhere I go, I'm reminded of Carly. What if she doesn't make it?"

"I'm so sorry, Sarika," I responded. "I hear how devastated you are. You sound like you're paralyzed with fear. Do you think your anxiety could be contributing to your symptoms?"

"Maybe. I think about it all the time. She's so young. It completely freaks me out that someone with such a positive outlook on life who focused on her health could get cancer," she replied.

"Are you, by any chance, afraid that you might get sick, too? Are you anxious about losing control?"

Sarika was silent for a few moments, but I could hear her short, shallow breaths and her sniffing over the phone. "Rationally, I know I can't catch cancer from being here, but why did this have to happen to her? I feel like an awful friend. In comparison with what Carly's going through, my fears seem insignificant. I'm battling, wanting to support Carly while dealing with my own fear. If it can happen to her, why can't it happen to me?"

"It's perfectly understandable why you'd be afraid," I told her. "You're worried about the future and what might happen. And as a doctor, I'm concerned because your symptoms have been going on for over a year now. Aside from your reflux, is there anything else wrong?"

"No, except that I keep thinking about what might happen. Neha, what if—"

I interrupted her. "Sarika, take a nice, deep breath. Soften your belly, let your shoulders relax and just feel your bottom on the chair. You're way out in the future, trying to control something that hasn't even happened yet. I think I know what's going on, but before I can partner with you to heal your body, you have to get back in the present moment and become aware of the thoughts and emotions that are undermining you."

Together we took three slow, deep breaths as Sarika shifted her focus from her racing thoughts to her body.

"Okay, I'm better. I can listen now, so tell me what's happening," she said.

"From what you've shared, it sounds like you're brokenhearted about Carly. That in itself is an emotional tidal wave of stress that can overwhelm your body.

“You said your reflux symptoms started the day you moved into Carly’s apartment. You’ve checked it out with your doctor, and the results are normal. But stress can often cause a breakdown in your gut, and this affects your sensitivity to the food you’re eating and how you feel. There are so many nerves in your GI tract that anxiety commonly shows up as a stomachache, diarrhea, constipation, or even reflux.

“Short-term, you can take the acid blockers to relieve your physical symptoms. The problem is that your stomach needs a low pH in order to digest your food and absorb key nutrients. So if you take acid blockers as a long-term solution, it will eventually affect your absorption and soon we’ll have other issues to deal with. So let’s get to the root of what’s causing your stress—the paralyzing thoughts, intense fear, and devastation around you and Carly’s health. Then maybe you won’t need the medications anymore.”

## THE CURE

I bet you can relate to my sister’s anxiety or know someone who has had a similar experience. Since Sarika’s anxiety manifested as reflux, she was searching for a physical remedy. She didn’t realize that her thoughts and emotions were the real culprits. Her inability to express herself to Carly led to feeling trapped and more anxious—which made her reflux even worse.

No matter how strong your confidence in certain arenas, there may be other areas that, in Sarika’s words, “totally freak you out.” While I feel at ease in the midst of a medical crisis, I completely freak out when swimming in deep water, even if I can see the bottom. My anxiety began after I saw the movie *Jaws*. No, I’m serious.

I’ve worked through anxiety with myself, Sarika, and hundreds of patients to resolve their physical symptoms and help them express themselves. Here are the steps I use.

**1. Get present.** When you notice you're having worrisome thoughts about the future, a quick way to interrupt that pattern is to focus on your body.

First, identify the unique physical signals your body is giving you (tense muscles, throat constriction, racing heart, trembling hands, etc.), and when they occur, hit the pause button. To do this, use grounding and soft belly breathing to focus on your body right now. Just be sure to use the proper techniques outlined on page 52 in Chapter 4.

It might sound too simple, but when you're present in your body, you are focused on the here and now—and therefore, you can't be in the future.

**2. Name that fear.** The monster under your bed loses its power when you turn on the light and all you find is an extended family of dust bunnies.

Begin by acknowledging the stories in your head. Name your fears about the person, place, or situation you're confronting.

Start by writing down the phrase "What I'm afraid of is . . ." Then finish the sentence. For example, when Sarika and I went through this exercise, she said:

What I'm afraid of is . . .

- I'm sick—and it's really, really bad.
- Carly might die, and I can't imagine life without her.
- I won't be able to handle it.
- If Carly can get stage 4 cancer, so can I.

Keep writing until there is absolutely nothing left to write. And remember, this is all about you. If you're worried about someone else, gently bring the focus back to yourself by asking, "What if this is about me?"

Sarika thought her greatest fear was about Carly. But what she discovered was that the underlying trigger for her anxiety was a deep-rooted fear about her own health.

**3. Expand your perspective.** It's time to challenge your anxious thoughts by identifying how they limit your beliefs. You're a pro at future-thinking. The only problem is that no matter how hard you try, you can't control the future. So just as we did with your body, it's time to get your thoughts into the present moment.

Go back to your list of fears, and after each one, write the following statement: "Right here, right now, what I know for sure is that . . ." Then end each statement with the facts you know about what you're afraid of—not the stories in your head.

For example, when we examined Sarika's fears about the future, she gained a completely different perspective about what was actually true versus the stories she was making up in her head.

- Right now, my tests are normal.
- Right now, Carly is alive, receiving treatment, and living with her family.
- Right now, I have been aware of Carly's condition for some time and have been dealing with it day by day.
- Right now, I am cancer free. And I know that cancer is not contagious.

**4. Reprogram your thinking.** Once your body, thoughts, and emotions are in the present moment, you can access the creative part of your brain to build new patterns of thinking. I suggest using this rediscovered part of your brain to create affirmations—"I am" statements—that replace fearful thoughts. This will rewire your brain to engage in expanded thinking whenever anxiety strikes.

Sarika's affirmation naturally emerged. "I am whole, healthy, and well," she proudly stated. And she began saying it out loud to herself whenever anxiety about her health arose.

**5. Trust yourself.** Ask yourself one simple question: *What would self-trust and courage do now?*

Listen to the answer and allow it to guide you. (And in case you were wondering, there are no wrong answers.)

Sarika's answer was "Self-trust and courage would communicate directly with Carly."

In response, Sarika found her favorite stationery and pen and wrote Carly a letter expressing how much she admired and loved her.

After mailing it, Sarika felt lighter and free. And over the following weeks her reflux subsided. Isn't that interesting? She hadn't gained any control over how Carly's illness would progress, nor had she been able to secure any guarantees about her own future health. Instead she had gained something much more valuable. She had become acutely aware of how stuffing her emotions caused them to show up physically. She was able to come off her acid-blocking medications as well. She recognized the power of her thoughts and how she could turn them around to face her fears head-on. By trusting that she could handle whatever came next, she discovered courage and inner calm.

In this example, Sarika wrote Carly a letter. It felt like the best way to communicate. For you it might be something different. You may want to express your fears by having a conversation with someone. Or you may want to write down your fears in a journal and then do some sort of ritual to release them from your life. Most important, listen to the answer that comes after you ask yourself: *What would self-trust and courage do now?* That's the right one.

## DISMANTLING THE TIME MACHINE

Even if you think through all the what-ifs, it's possible that you might not think of the one that actually happens. What a waste of time and energy. And, to top it off, you've missed what's happening *now!* Trying to control something that hasn't happened yet can be a mind trip. Left unchecked, anxiety can wreak havoc on your health and your happiness.

Paying attention to your body, thoughts, and emotions will help you discern whether anxiety is a paralyzing influence in your life. If it is, allow it to move through you and use it as an

opportunity to bring yourself into the present moment. The more courageous you are about facing your fears head-on, the more self-trust you'll build. You'll see that as the future unfolds, you have everything inside you to handle what comes next. You'll shift from trying to survive to learning how to thrive—right now.

Welcome back from the future.

## THE WAY HOME

Like the weather, challenging emotions can be unpredictable and shift unexpectedly. You can't wish them away. When they do show up, if you choose not to deal with them, they will just wait for another opportunity to express themselves. Ignoring, suppressing, or storing your emotions has an effect opposite what you're hoping for: you drift farther and farther away from your heart and the people you love.

When a situation or conflict introduces fear or self-doubt, if you deal with it head-on, it will likely resolve. At the very least, you'll learn something so you can avoid a similar experience in the future. If you use a numbing strategy (physical or mental) instead, you'll temporarily avoid the situation, but the same issue will recur in other relationships and settings.

For example, your hurt can turn into blame. And suppose your blame is unresolved. It can evolve into anger and eventually, if unaddressed, progress to resentment. It may seem as if you're targeting another person, but resentment is the equivalent of drinking a glass of poison you intended for someone else.<sup>22</sup> It makes you feel awful, and it corrodes your health. How effective is that? Resentment is one of the most damaging emotions—to you.

Another example would be fear or self-doubt in a relationship. If unaddressed, it may progress to frustration or apathy. While apathy may seem benign, don't be fooled. When it sets in, this is the precise moment when people check out of their jobs or their committed relationships and turn to full-blown numbing strategies. Yes, I'm talking about when affairs and addiction become prevalent. These emotions can potentially transform into feeling trapped or hopeless. When people get to this point and feel there's

no way out, they may find themselves severely depressed and even suicidal. If this is you, please seek professional help.

If you aren't sure how to handle your own emotional storms, you put your health and your relationships at risk. When you're ready to listen to your uncomfortable emotions, they will inform you of the path back to your heart.

## EMOTIONAL FREEDOM

Now I hope you can see why it's important to navigate emotions—even challenging ones—both in yourself and in others. By stating what's happening on an emotional level, you can defuse an awkward situation with ease. And when you find yourself stuck on a roller coaster of intense emotions, don't forget to use your pause button and name that emotion, so you can begin to explore how it's showing up in your body and how to help it shift. As you begin to expand your emotional vocabulary and pick up on emotions sooner, you will recognize them and communicate earlier. Addressing issues proactively will save you precious energy and time.

Don't underestimate the power of expressing your emotions. You can write in a journal, speak, or type about the experience to explore what emotions you're feeling and what thoughts are tied to them. If you prefer, you could draw or paint what your internal experience feels like and then express what you see in words. Research has shown that when patients with asthma or arthritis journaled about a traumatic event for 20 minutes per day for four days, not only did they feel better, but their symptoms decreased while their immune systems got stronger. And that was from only four days of writing—imagine if you made it a daily practice!<sup>23</sup>

For those of you dumbfounded because you ended up in the doghouse again, you hold the key to getting out. All you need to do is master Emotions 101 and practice using your expanded vocabulary with Heart Listening to acknowledge the other person's emotions. (An apology goes a long way, too.)

Emotions are powerful, aren't they? But they're not nearly as scary as you might have once thought. Emotions are the invisible

bridges that connect our hearts. Your ability to manage yourself effectively, even during tender or difficult times, allows you to engage and build strong relationships. When you let energy-in-motion move through you, identify what's happening, and know how to clearly express yourself, you have developed a powerful partnership with your heart.



## TALKRx TOOLKIT

### Navigating Anxiety

#### Back from the Future Tool

1. Get present (soft belly breathing + grounding your body).
2. Name that fearful story in your head.
  - What I'm most afraid of is . . .
  - What if . . . (your fears)
3. Expand your perspective.
  - Ask yourself: Is what I'm afraid of really true in this moment?
  - Right here, right now, what I know for sure is . . .
4. Reprogram your thinking.
  - Turn your fear around. Ask yourself: What is the opposite of this?
  - Create an "I am" statement that supports an ideal outcome (see pages 87–89).
5. Trust yourself by asking:
  - What would self-trust and courage do now?

## Express Your Anxiety Tool

- State what you observe.
- Name the emotion.
- Ask for what you need.
- Ask yourself: what would self-trust and courage do now?

Here are some ways to respond:

- “I’m going to miss my flight. I’m worried. Give me a few minutes to calm down and I’ll figure out what’s next.”
- “My heart is racing. I’m scared the package won’t arrive on time. So we have a backup plan, can you please send a second copy of the materials to my home address as well?”
- “I’m anxious about what other people are going to think. I need to stay focused on myself. I’m trusting that I will do my best.”

## Responding to Anxiety Tool

- Breathe and ground yourself.
- Shift into level 4: Heart Listening.
- Name the other person’s emotion.
- Get curious.

Here are some ways to respond:

- “I hear how concerned you are. How can I help?”
- “I see how worried you are. What do you need?”
- “I can tell this is anxiety-provoking. How can I be of support?”

**YOUR I-FIVE MOMENT**

- To explore your personal relationship with anxiety, complete the questions in Chapter 15 of your *TalkRx Journal* ([DoctorNehaTalkRx.com](http://DoctorNehaTalkRx.com)).
- Share with the TalkRx Community whether anxiety plays a motivating or paralyzing role in your life.