Beyond the What-If

A Free Anxiety Workbook

An evidence-informed guide from Sequoia Behavioral Health

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Before You Begin

Anxiety is part of being human. It helps us notice risk, prepare for challenges, and protect what matters. For some people, it may also reflect what they have lived through or what they once needed to do to feel safe. A protective response can make sense in context and still begin asking for something life cannot provide: complete certainty.

When that happens, we may spend more and more energy trying to prevent discomfort. We replay conversations, research every possibility, seek reassurance, postpone decisions, avoid situations, or wait to feel ready. These responses are not signs of weakness; they are understandable efforts to create safety or control. They may bring real relief in the moment, while also making it harder to discover that uncertainty can sometimes be tolerated without relying on the same response. The cycle continues, not because we have failed, but because the strategy has worked just well enough in the short term.

This workbook is not about arguing yourself out of every fear, forcing yourself to feel calm, or treating every anxious response as irrational. It is an invitation to notice your patterns with curiosity, understand what they may be trying to accomplish, and explore whether another response could better serve you now. Move at your own pace. You may skip any prompt or return to an exercise when you have more support or feel more grounded.

For the duration of this workbook, choose one recent worry that causes mild discomfort and feels manageable to explore. This will be your anchor worry throughout the workbook. You will return to the same worry in each section: first to understand how the pattern unfolds, then to determine what it needs, and finally to practice a different response. After completing the guide, you may repeat the process with another worry if doing so feels helpful.

This workbook can also be a beneficial resource to utilize with a mental health professional. Consider exploring your responses in a therapy session or with a trusted provider.

Using This Workbook Safely

This workbook offers general education and guided self-reflection. It cannot determine what is happening for you, diagnose a condition, or replace care that is adapted to your symptoms, history, culture, circumstances, and goals. You may pause, skip a prompt, choose a less distressing example, or explore the exercises with a qualified mental health professional. Stop if an exercise increases distress, dissociation, thoughts of self-harm, or difficulty staying oriented to the present.

This workbook is not intended to help you tolerate abuse, coercion, discrimination, unsafe living or working conditions, concerning medical symptoms, or genuine threats to safety. Behavioral experiments should involve situations that are reasonably safe and appropriate for self-guided practice. Do not reduce actions that protect your safety, disregard professional advice, delay needed care, change prescribed medication, compromise legal rights or financial security, or place anyone's safety at risk based on this workbook. If you are unsure whether a behavior is anxiety-driven or protective, consult a qualified professional before using this guide.

1. See the Cycle

Anxiety rarely begins with a feeling alone. Something happens, the mind gives it meaning, and that interpretation shapes what we feel and do next.

For example, a friend does not reply to your text message. The mind says, "*I must have upset them.*" Anxiety rises.

You reread the conversation and send another message. Perhaps you ask whether something is wrong or whether you have done something to upset them.

If your friend responds with reassurance, you may feel better. That relief is real and understandable. At the same time, the experience may teach the mind that reassurance was necessary in order to feel safe in the relationship.

If your friend does not respond, the uncertainty may become even more difficult to carry. You may feel pulled to send another message, replay the conversation, or search for evidence that something has gone wrong. These responses are understandable attempts to resolve uncertainty, but they can also leave fewer opportunities to discover that an unanswered message does not necessarily mean the relationship is in danger (and that uncertainty can be present without requiring an immediate response).

> Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a well-established psychological treatment that examines how thoughts, emotions, and behaviors influence one another. Clinical guidelines recommend CBT for anxiety disorders, and research supports its effectiveness across anxiety-related conditions (American Psychological Association, n.d.; Carpenter et al., 2018; National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2011).

CBT helps us slow this sequence down, not to blame ourselves for responding as we did, but to understand how the pattern unfolds and recognize where a different choice may be possible.

Journal: Map One Anxiety Loop

Take out a pen and a piece of paper. Give yourself some time to reflect on the questions below.

Return to the anchor worry you selected before beginning. Bring to mind one recent situation in which this worry appeared and use that experience to answer the questions below. You do not need to begin with the most painful or distressing example of the pattern.

If you begin to feel overwhelmed or disconnected, you may pause, skip a question, or return to the exercise later.

Situation: What happened? Try to stay with only the observable facts.

Story: What might my mind have predicted or assumed about the situation?

Response: What emotions and physical sensations showed up?

Action: What did I do (or avoid doing) in response?

Relief and cost: How did this response help me in the short term? What might it have cost me or reinforced over time?

As you reflect on your answers, notice whether judgment begins to enter the conversation.

Many people who experience anxiety have learned to ask themselves, "Why am I like this?" But that question often leads us more toward shame rather than understanding.

Consider asking instead:

"What might this pattern be trying to help me prevent or manage?"

Then gently ask:

"Does this response still fit what is happening now? What new experience might help me feel a little more free?"

The purpose of mapping the cycle is not to find fault in how you responded. It is to make visible what once happened automatically. When we can see the pattern with greater clarity and compassion, we create a little more room to choose what happens next.

2. Name What the Worry Needs

Worry often presents itself as preparation. It suggests that if we think long enough, anticipate every outcome, or make the right decision, we may finally feel certain enough to relax.

Sometimes worry points toward a problem that needs our attention. Other times, it asks us to solve a future that has not happened (and may never happen). Both can feel urgent, but they call for different responses.

Worry can often fall into two categories: practical worry and hypothetical worry. A practical worry concerns a current problem that can be addressed through a specific action. A hypothetical worry concerns a possible future outcome that cannot be fully prevented or resolved in the present.

Here is an example of a practical worry and a corresponding hypothetical worry:

Practical worry: "I haven't prepared the information I need for tomorrow's meeting."

This worry can be addressed through actionable steps like preparing the content needed for the meeting.

Hypothetical worry: "What if I say something awkward at the meeting and everyone thinks I'm incompetent?"

Hypothetical worry generally cannot be addressed through actionable steps. Describing a worry as hypothetical is not a judgment about whether the fear is reasonable or whether the outcome is possible. The concern may be rooted in past experience, connected to something deeply valued, or shaped by an understandable wish to avoid future pain. The distinction is simply that the feared outcome belongs to an uncertain future and cannot be conclusively resolved through further thinking or action in the present.

Recognizing the kind of worry we are experiencing helps us respond with greater intention. When a concern points to a problem within our influence, we can identify a thoughtful next step. When no present action can resolve it, the work becomes learning to make room for uncertainty without allowing the search for certainty to consume our attention or determine our choices.

Journal: Clarify One Worry

Return to the same anchor worry you mapped in Section 1. In this section, you will clarify whether it contains a practical problem, a hypothetical worry, or elements of both.

What am I worried might happen?

If this happened, what am I afraid it would mean about me, another person, or my future?

Is there a current problem I can act on today, or am I trying to obtain certainty about a future possibility?

If This Is a Practical Problem

What part of the situation is within my influence?

What is one specific, realistic action I can take and when will I take it?

What information, resource, or support would help me take that step?

Once you have chosen a reasonable next step, notice whether continued planning is creating new clarity or returning you to the same uncertainty. You might remind yourself:

"I have listened, considered what matters, and chosen my next step. I do not need to know the entire path in order to take it."

A plan is not a promise that everything will unfold as hoped. It is a way of meeting the present with intention while trusting that you can respond again when new information becomes available.

If This Is a Hypothetical Worry

When uncertainty feels difficult to carry, the mind may ask us to research, check, replay, seek reassurance, postpone, overprepare, or avoid. These are understandable attempts to protect ourselves from surprise, regret, loss, or pain.

What does my mind want me to do in order to feel certain or safe?

How might that response help me in the short term? What might it reinforce or cost me over time?

How might my past experiences be shaping what I expect in this situation?

What facts or present-day information support my concern?

What information suggests that the situation could unfold differently?

Bring the Evidence Together

Use what you have written to separate what is known from what is feared and identify how you could respond if something difficult occurred.

"Right now, I know _____.

I do not yet know _____.

If something difficult happens, I can _____."

For example:

"Right now, I know that my friend has not responded and that I feel worried. I do not yet know why they have not replied or what their silence means. If there is a problem between us, I can ask about it directly and decide how to respond when I have more information."

The purpose is not to replace an anxious prediction with a reassuring one. It is to hold a fuller picture, one that includes your concern, the limits of what can be known, and your capacity to respond.

3. Create a New Experience: A Behavioral Experiment

Insight can help us recognize an anxious pattern, but experience can change what we have learned to expect. A behavioral experiment is a small, intentional action that allows you to compare what anxiety predicts with what actually happens.

This section also draws on acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), an evidence-based psychological approach that builds flexibility in how we relate to difficult thoughts and feelings. Rather than requiring anxiety to disappear before we act, ACT helps us make room for internal discomfort while choosing behavior guided by the present and by what matters to us (Arch et al., 2012).

This is not a test of courage, and the goal is not to prove that your fear is wrong. Continue working with the same anchor worry you examined in Sections 1 and 2. Use what you have learned about that pattern to complete the steps below in order.

Step 1: Choose Your Experiment

Return to the distinction you made in Section 2:

If the worry involves a practical problem, choose one specific action within your influence. Your experiment is to take that step without requiring yourself to know how the entire situation will unfold.

If the worry is hypothetical, choose one certainty-seeking response to reduce or postpone (such as checking, researching, replaying, seeking reassurance, overpreparing, or avoiding). Your experiment is to leave the question unanswered for a manageable period of time while returning your attention to something meaningful.

If the worry contains both, take one practical step and allow the remaining uncertainty to stay unresolved for now.

Does my anchor worry contain a practical problem, a hypothetical worry, or both?

Based on that answer, what specific action or change in response will I practice?

Step 2: Make a Clear Plan

Make the experiment specific enough that you will know when you have completed it.

When and where will I try it?

What does anxiety predict will happen?

What support, boundary, or reminder will help the experiment remain manageable?

Before beginning, you may name the prediction as a thought:

"I am having the thought that _____."

This does not dismiss the concern. It creates space for the prediction to be present without automatically determining what you do next.

Now complete the experiment before moving to Step 3. Pay attention to what actually happens, what you feel pulled to do, and how you respond. You do not need to feel calm or confident for the exercise to be meaningful.

Step 3: Return and Record What You Learned

Answer these questions as soon as reasonably possible afterward. Begin with observation rather than judgment.

What happened? Describe only the observable facts.

How did what happened compare with what anxiety predicted?

What discomfort or urges appeared, and how did I respond?

What did I learn about the situation, the prediction, or my ability to respond?

What would I repeat or adjust the next time this pattern appears?

What Counts as New Learning?

New learning does not require the feared outcome to be completely disproven. The situation may go well, feel uncomfortable, remain uncertain, or even include part of what you feared. You may learn that the prediction was incomplete, that discomfort changed over time, that support was available, or that you could respond more intentionally than anxiety expected.

Change does not always begin when fear disappears. Sometimes it begins when fear is present and you are still able to respond to what is actually happening and choose the next step with greater freedom.

Courage Before Certainty

Progress with anxiety is not measured by never feeling afraid or by pushing through every discomfort. It may look like noticing a thought without automatically following it, allowing a question to remain unanswered, approaching something gently when it is safe to do so, or choosing what matters while discomfort is still present.

Some days, courage will feel expansive. Other days, it may mean honoring a limit, asking for support, or taking the smallest workable step. All of these can be meaningful movement.
You do not have to become certain before you move, and you do not have to move before you are ready. With safety, support, and repeated practice, you can learn that many forms of uncertainty are survivable, that anxious predictions are not commands, and that your life can be guided by more than fear.

When More Support May Help

Consider reaching out to a licensed mental health professional if anxiety is persistent, causes significant distress, interferes with work, school, sleep, relationships, or daily responsibilities, or leads you to avoid important parts of life. CBT, ACT, and exposure-based approaches can be adapted to your symptoms, history, and goals.

If you are experiencing emotional distress or thoughts of suicide in the United States, call or text 988. If you or someone else is in immediate danger or needs urgent medical attention, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department.

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Selected Sources

- American Psychological Association. (n.d.). What is cognitive behavioral therapy?
- Carpenter et al. (2018). Cognitive behavioral therapy for anxiety and related disorders: A meta-analysis of randomized placebo-controlled trials.
- Arch et al. (2012). Randomized clinical trial of cognitive behavioral therapy versus acceptance and commitment therapy for mixed anxiety disorders.
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. (2011). Generalised anxiety disorder and panic disorder in adults: management (CG113).

Important Disclaimer

This workbook is provided by Sequoia Behavioral Health for general educational purposes only. It is not intended to provide medical or mental health advice; diagnose or treat any condition; recommend a particular course of care; replace individualized evaluation or treatment; or serve as crisis intervention. Use of this workbook does not establish a clinician–patient or other professional relationship with Sequoia Behavioral Health.

The exercises may not be appropriate for every person or circumstance. Individual responses and outcomes vary, and no particular result is promised. Use your judgment, follow the guidance of your treating professionals, and seek qualified care for questions about symptoms, safety, diagnosis, treatment, or medication. Do not delay or disregard professional care because of information in this workbook.

In the United States, call or text 988 for emotional distress or thoughts of suicide. If you or someone else is in immediate danger or needs urgent medical attention, call 911. Outside the United States, contact local emergency services or a crisis line in your country.

What Sets Sequoia Apart

Truly effective mental health treatment should be personal, centering, and grounded in evidence. In our small and intimate clinic, our patients can experience just that.

Our program blends traditional therapy with proven holistic modalities and community support in a home-like environment. Daily individual and small group treatment is balanced with rest and reflection time so that lasting growth can take place. We also accommodate personal needs through access to community support groups and responsible medication management.

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