

CIRCLES OF ANXIETY

Place your energy where it can support you.

Anxiety can pull attention towards everything that might happen. The Circles of Anxiety tool helps separate what you can act on now, what you may be able to influence, and what is outside your control. It is not about dismissing worry. It is about deciding where your limited energy is most useful.

A useful question: Does this need action, communication, preparation - or release?

THE THREE CIRCLES

CIRCLE OF CONTROL	Your grounding choices; where you place attention; the pace of your breathing. These are immediate, small choices you can return to when your mind is racing.
CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE	Your preparation; who you talk to; how much information you consume. You cannot guarantee the outcome, but you can make supportive choices around it.
CIRCLE OF CONCERNS	Uncertain outcomes; whether anxiety appears; other people's opinions. These can matter deeply without being yours to control.

WHY THIS CAN HELP

When anxiety rises, the nervous system can behave as though uncertainty itself is an emergency. You may scan for danger, seek repeated reassurance, over-prepare, avoid, freeze, or keep researching long after the information has stopped helping. The circles create a visual boundary around the problem.

The aim is not perfect calm. It is to reduce the amount of energy spent trying to control the uncontrollable and redirect some of it towards the next supportive action.



USING THE CIRCLES WHEN ANXIETY FEELS BIG

Start with the body, then decide what needs doing.

1. **Name the concern.** Write one sentence rather than carrying the whole situation at once.
2. **Place it in a circle.** Is it something you can directly choose, something you can influence, or something you cannot determine?
3. **Choose one response.** Act, communicate, prepare, set a boundary, ask for help, or deliberately stop feeding the worry.
4. **Reduce nervous-system load.** Slow the pace, soften unnecessary sensory input, drink, eat if needed, move, sit somewhere safer or quieter, and give your attention fewer things to manage.
5. **Return later if needed.** A concern does not have to be solved simply because your mind has produced it.

COMMON ANXIETY PATTERNS

ANXIETY MAY SAY	A LOWER-PRESSURE RESPONSE
If I keep checking, I will feel certain.	Set one reliable source and one checking time. More information is not always more safety.
I need to know what will happen.	Prepare for what is reasonably foreseeable, then name the remaining uncertainty as a concern.
I must stop feeling anxious.	Shift the goal from eliminating anxiety to supporting yourself while it is present.
They might judge me.	You can choose your words, boundaries and values. You cannot control another person's opinion.
I cannot cope unless this goes perfectly.	Identify the smallest next action and the support you could use if the plan changes.

GROUNDING WITHOUT TURNING IT INTO ANOTHER TEST

Grounding does not have to make anxiety disappear. It can simply give your body a steadier place from which to respond. Try lengthening the exhale gently, feeling your feet supported, noticing three neutral things in the room, holding something with a comfortable texture, or lowering noise and visual input.

If focusing on breathing makes you more anxious, choose another anchor. There is no requirement to use a particular technique.

SUPPORT FROM PARTNERS, FAMILY OR FRIENDS

Ask before problem-solving. A useful question is: **Do you want reassurance, practical help, help sorting the circles, or simply company?** Avoid repeatedly telling someone to 'stop worrying'. Help them identify what is actionable without taking over every decision.

WORK AND STUDY

Anxiety can be intensified by unclear expectations, competing demands and constant interruptions. Helpful adjustments may include written priorities, predictable check-ins, quieter working space, advance notice where possible, protected focus time and clarity about what genuinely needs an immediate response.

MY CIRCLES OF ANXIETY MAP

Use this page for one situation at a time. Short, factual answers are enough.

The situation on my mind:

CIRCLE OF CONTROL - WHAT CAN I CHOOSE RIGHT NOW?

My grounding choice: _____

Where I will place my attention: _____

A breathing pace or other body anchor that suits me: _____

My next small action: _____

CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE - WHAT CAN I SHAPE OR COMMUNICATE?

Preparation that would genuinely help: _____

Who I could talk to / what I could ask for: _____

A limit I want around information, checking or reassurance: _____

CIRCLE OF CONCERNS - WHAT IS NOT MINE TO CONTROL?

The uncertain outcome: _____

Other people's opinions or reactions: _____

What anxiety itself does next: _____

WHAT I AM CHOOSING TO DO WITH MY ENERGY

ACT: _____ COMMUNICATE: _____

PREPARE: _____ RELEASE FOR NOW: _____

Reflection prompt: **Where would my energy be most useful today?**

What would 'enough for today' look like? _____

SUPPORT, REFLECTION & FURTHER READING

A MESSAGE FROM MAGGIE

Anxiety can make everything feel equally urgent. It can convince you that if you think hard enough, prepare enough or check enough, you will eventually reach certainty. Sometimes the kinder task is different: work out what belongs to you, take the next useful action, and allow the rest to remain uncertain for now. You do not have to spend all of today's energy trying to control tomorrow.

WHEN THE CIRCLES NEED TO BE FLEXIBLE

Some situations move between circles. Something outside your control today may become influenceable later; a conversation may create a new choice; a boundary may reduce exposure to a stressor. The tool is a guide for allocating energy, not a rigid rule.

It is also important not to use 'outside my control' to minimise real problems. Discrimination, unsafe environments, financial pressures, caring responsibilities and health uncertainty may genuinely require advocacy, practical support or professional help even when the final outcome cannot be controlled.

BOOKS & RESOURCES

Overcoming Anxiety - Helen Kennerley. A practical CBT-informed guide to understanding and responding to anxiety.

The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook - Edmund J. Bourne. A broad workbook covering anxiety-management strategies and reflection exercises.

Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before? - Dr Julie Smith. Accessible psychological tools for difficult emotions, including anxiety and overwhelm.

PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

NICE publishes evidence-based guidance for anxiety disorders, including generalised anxiety disorder and panic disorder. NHS information also explains common anxiety symptoms and routes to support. The Circles of Anxiety resource is a psychoeducational and coaching tool; it is not a diagnostic checklist or a substitute for personalised assessment or treatment.

Useful UK sources: NICE guidance on generalised anxiety disorder and panic disorder (CG113), and NHS information on anxiety, fear and panic.

WHEN TO SEEK MORE SUPPORT

Consider speaking with a GP or qualified mental-health professional when anxiety is persistent, worsening, causing significant distress, disrupting sleep, eating, work, relationships or everyday activities, or leading to increasing avoidance. If you feel unable to keep yourself safe or are thinking about harming yourself, seek urgent support through emergency services or an appropriate crisis service.

