

When Negative Feedback Feels Bigger Than It Is

Anxiety can turn one piece of feedback into a judgement about your whole self.

You may hear, “This part could be improved,” while anxiety translates it into, “Everything I do is bad.” That jump can happen quickly. The body may tense, the stomach may drop, your thoughts may race, and the feedback can replay long after the conversation has ended.

What anxiety can add to the message

Feedback is information about something specific. Anxiety often makes it global and personal. Instead of staying with what was actually said, the mind may predict rejection, failure, embarrassment or further criticism. It can also pull in older memories of being corrected, judged, bullied or made to feel that mistakes were unsafe.

What was actually said	What anxiety may say
“This section needs changing.”	“I never get anything right.”
“Try a different approach next time.”	“They think I am useless.”
“There is room for improvement.”	“I have failed completely.”

Why it can feel so physical

The nervous system can respond to social threat in much the same way it responds to other perceived threats. Your heart rate may increase, you may feel hot, shaky, tearful, defensive, numb or desperate to explain yourself. This reaction does not tell you whether the feedback is accurate. It tells you that your system has registered the moment as important or threatening.

Before you decide what the feedback means

Give yourself enough time for the first surge to settle. You do not have to agree immediately, defend yourself immediately, or turn the feedback into a verdict about who you are. Try separating the event from the story anxiety is building around it.

A Two-Minute Feedback Reset

1. Write down the exact feedback.

Use the words that were actually said. Remove guesses about tone, motive or what the person may secretly think.

2. Name the anxious interpretation.

Finish the sentence: **“My anxiety is telling me...”** This creates a little distance between the feedback and the catastrophic meaning attached to it.

3. Make it specific again.

Ask: What particular task, behaviour, decision or piece of work is being discussed? One correction is not evidence that everything you do is wrong.

4. Look for what is useful.

There may be something worth changing, something you need clarified, and something you can leave behind. Receiving feedback does not require accepting every interpretation of you.

Try these questions

- What do I know for certain, and what am I assuming?
- If this feedback were given to someone I cared about, would I judge them this harshly?
- Is there one practical improvement I can take from this?
- What have I done well that anxiety is currently filtering out?
- Do I need clarification before I decide what this feedback means?

A message to take with you

Feedback can sting, particularly when anxiety already makes you question yourself. You can be disappointed, embarrassed or unsettled and still remain capable. Something needing improvement is not the same as you being a failure. Keep the feedback in proportion: take what helps, ask questions where you need to, and allow yourself to keep learning without turning one moment into a judgement on your whole life.

Space to Breathe Therapy

Educational resource - not a substitute for individual mental health or medical care.