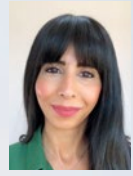


Yes, you can beat ANXIETY!



Psychologist Dr Kirren Schnack shares her foolproof methods in a new book

We all get anxious sometimes – it’s a natural part of life. There are even times when anxiety can help us do better, such as during a job interview, because adrenaline can boost performance. But what if your anxiety begins to control your life?

Typically a feeling of fear, worry or dread, its symptoms range from manageable to extreme. Some people might avoid social situations or suffer panic attacks, while others might fixate on a worst-case scenario.

For anyone who feels overwhelmed with anxiety, it can seem like you’re trapped in an endless loop of doom and stress. But Dr Kirren Schnack, a psychologist who has treated thousands of people with a range of mental health issues, says there is hope.

‘A lot of the people I see believe their problems are chronic – that they’ll never get better,’ she says. She compares it to starting an exercise regime and thinking you’ll never improve. The first step to having control over your anxiety is believing that it’s possible.

Dr Kirren, as she’s known to more than 650,000 combined followers on Instagram and TikTok, is worth listening to. Over her 20-year career, she has worked across the NHS, private healthcare, schools, local authorities and family courts.

When the pandemic hit, she found wider recognition on social media for her accessible explanations of anxiety symptoms, such as why your chest might tighten during a panic attack.

‘It’s all about moving out of the problematic zone of anxiety into a zone where anxiety can help you again,’ she says.

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WHERE DOES YOUR ANXIETY COME FROM?

According to Dr Kirren, the first step to beating anxiety is to work out the underlying reason for it. Many things can cause anxiety – including genetics, environmental factors, life stressors and traumatic experiences. During the menopause, your changing hormones might cause anxiety, too.

Dr Kirren sees many clients who have started experiencing more severe anxiety during middle age. ‘You may start to question the future more – and the relationship dynamics in your house can change as your children grow up, which can be unsettling,’ she says. Once you’ve worked out what is causing your anxiety

(it could be a combination of multiple factors), you can work out how to tackle it. The key? Focusing on what’s in your control and accepting what isn’t. ‘We get stuck in habitual patterns of thinking, which maintains our anxiety,’ Dr Kirren explains. ‘To reduce that fear and avoidance, we have to start facing situations we’re scared of; we have to be in the present moment and accept our thoughts and emotions without judgement or reaction.’

Here, Dr Kirren shares her top tips for beating anxiety when it arises...

TACKLE PANIC ATTACKS

A panic attack is a sudden and intense rush of fear and anxiety, which manifests physically. You might feel your chest tighten or struggle to breathe, or you might feel cold and shaky or cry. They usually last between five to 30 minutes, and then you might feel a bit of residual anxiety. If you

find yourself panicking, don’t

resist it – accept it. Count backwards from a high number – for example between 500 and 5,000 – to help divert your mind away from feeding into anxious thoughts. By focusing on counting, you give your mind a break from engaging with imagined future catastrophes. The mental effort of counting backwards means there is less mental effort available to focus on racing thoughts that feed anxiety, and it can also help regulate your breathing.

ACCEPT ANXIOUS THOUGHTS

When your mind presents you with an anxious thought, start by thanking your mind for its contribution, then label the thought you’re noticing based on the theme. For example, if you worry that someone you love is upset with you, you might think: ‘Thank you, mind, for reminding me of this; this is the “Your friends hate you” thought again.’ Say it out loud, in your head or note it

down. This can help you to accept your thoughts and reduce their believability.

HANDLE UNCERTAINTY

If you feel worried about uncertain scenarios, you may avoid new experiences or situations and stop trying new things. One way of overcoming this is making a list of five different things that you could do to change your routine, such as walking a different route to work. Once you’ve decided on the activities, pick one that seems easiest to do. Before you start, reflect on the changes in

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your ability to tolerate the discomfort of whatever you expose yourself to. Then make note of the activity you did, with a rating on a scale of 0 to 10 of how discomforting it was. Persist with the task until you get so used to it that you no longer experience high levels of uncertainty. When you get to this point, repeat the process with the next easiest thing on the list and keep going until you’ve done all the things.

GET BACK YOUR ATTENTION

Use your vision to redirect your attention away from your anxiety and on to something else. For example, when you notice an anxious thought, pick a colour and look for different objects of that colour in the space you’re in. How many are there? Move around the entire space and say them out loud. Try to focus your attention on this exercise for a few minutes, switching to different colours if you need to. This will help to take your attention away from the anxious thought, reducing its power.

COOL YOUR EMOTIONS

Self-soothing physical touch can have a protective effect on distress. This might be self-hugging, placing your hand on your heart or stomach or stroking your upper arms. Find what type of touch feels most comfortable and use it for at least a few minutes each time. When you practise this, start by taking a few deep breaths, then turn your focus towards the warmth and the physical feeling of touch.

Words Bryony Gooch Photography Getty/Westend61



• *Ten Times Calmer: Beat Anxiety And Change Your Life (Bluebird) by Dr Kirren Schnack is out 14 September*