

DISCOVERING THE ART OF CALM

In 2021, as Bo Burnham put the finishing touches on his darkly brilliant *Inside*, several things converged to make me more obsessed with overcoming anxiety than I'd ever been before. They included these factors:

- Many of my clients (now consulting me on Zoom) were climbing the walls with anxiety—and who could blame them? They worried about the pandemic, their financial futures, political upheaval, the steadily weirding weather, and myriad other problems. In order to help them, I began researching anxiety more intensely than ever before.
- During lockdown, I spent several months developing and teaching an online course about creativity. The goal was to help people come up with innovative ways to navigate a world that had become overwhelmingly uncertain. As part of my preparation, I learned everything I could about the way creativity works in the brain.
- I began having regular conversations with different scientists and psychologists, including Jill Bolte Taylor, a neuroanatomist whose time at Harvard had overlapped with mine. Jill once had a massive stroke that shut down much of her brain's left hemisphere. Her experience, as both a scientist and a stroke survivor, contains powerful lessons about how our brains produce anxiety, and how we might let it go.

These experiences gave me new ideas for dealing with my own unquiet mind. I became fascinated with the neurological dynamics of anxiety—how it works in our brains and also in our behaviors and social interactions. I was particularly intrigued by the evidence that shows a kind of toggle effect between anxiety and creativity: when one is up and running, the other seems to go silent. I began to play with something I called “the art of calm,” because it was all about using creativity to calm my anxiety.

The results of this experimentation astonished me. At a time of worldwide crisis, when I fully expected to be feeling extremely uneasy, my anxiety dropped to near zero. Events that once would have triggered anxiety attacks—physical pain and disability, financial uncertainty, potential critical illness and loss of loved ones—no longer caused me to panic. As I developed and practiced this “art of calm,” I found myself caring more than ever about other people and the world but simultaneously experiencing far less anxiety.

Since the lockdown had moved pretty much every social interaction besides diapering babies onto the internet, I also found myself doing a lot of group coaching, including free online meetings that drew hundreds of participants. My sociology-nerd mind thrilled at the opportunity to test my new anxiety-calming methods. I walked thousands of people through these strategies, and thanks to the wonders of technology, those people could give me real-time feedback about how the techniques worked for them. The overwhelming majority of every group reported that the methods I’d developed helped lower their anxiety immediately and consistently. That’s when I decided to write this book.

THE BASICS OF GOING BEYOND ANXIETY

Stacked on the desk where I’m writing these words are many wonderful books on how to reduce the chronic worries of the reading public. They all contain terrific advice. I’ve read them carefully and repeatedly. I’ve used their advice in my own quest to feel less anxious. I’ve taught many of the methods I’ve learned from them (always with attribution!) when working with clients. A lot of the information I’ve gleaned from them has really helped.

But until recently, this felt like shoveling out the Augean stable. After years of diligent mental hygiene and thousands of hours of meditation, something many of those books advise, I’d learned how to drill down through my anxiety and connect with a state of inner peace. For a while. On most days. But then something worrying would come up—a work deadline, an alarming news report, a weird pain in my belly—and my brain would start producing anxiety like all

of King Augeas's cows and horses on Ex-Lax. I could stabilize myself enough to smile during the day and sleep at night, but it took constant effort.

Then, researching away from a number of different disciplines, I realized Three Important Things that would change my life. They helped me see how anxiety was always scratching its way into my mind, and how to turn it from something vicious into something downright gentle. As I experimented with new calming strategies, my anxiety dropped to nearly nonexistent and stayed there almost all the time. Here are the Three Important Things, which I hope will form the foundation for your own path beyond anxiety.

IMPORTANT THING NO. 1: We're all taught to unconsciously activate an "anxiety spiral" in our brains. We keep this spiral spinning and accelerating without any awareness that we're doing so.

From early childhood, you have been constantly rewarded for thinking in a certain way: verbally, analytically, in organized lines of logic. You're doing this right now as you decode symbols on a page, turn them into language, follow my reasoning. This kind of focus has built up (is building up) a certain part of your brain, the way weight lifting might build your muscles. The part of your brain that you're strengthening is located largely in your left hemisphere, though your entire brain is active almost all the time. While there are huge advantages to focusing on this kind of thought, at least one major *disadvantage* exists: inside everyone's buffed-up left hemisphere is a neurological mechanism I call the "anxiety spiral."

The anxiety spiral works like one of those tire rippers you may have driven over while leaving a parking lot: it allows the brain to go forward into higher anxiety but not to drop back into relaxation. All animals have fear responses when they're in danger. But because of our fancy powers of speech and imagination, we humans can keep that fear response elevated indefinitely, whether we're in danger or not. In fact, the more left-brain dominant our society becomes, the