

JAMES COWART, PHD

THE
ABCs
OF COPING WITH
ANXIETY

USING CBT TO MANAGE STRESS AND ANXIETY



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INTRODUCTION

“The longest journey begins with a single step.”

ATTRIBUTED TO LAO-TZU, L. GILES (TR.), *SAYINGS OF LAO-TZU*

Perhaps you have picked up this book because you have not yet found adequate help in dealing with the excessive feelings of stress and anxiety you may be experiencing. My aim in this book is to share with you coping skills that will enable you to manage your excessive stress and anxiety on a day-to-day basis. In my clinical experience, the consequences of untreated problems with anxiety can be devastating. Untreated anxiety problems tend to spread and grow through fear conditioning and eventually can take over a person's life. As this worsens, it is not uncommon for individuals to begin to experience outbursts of anger and growing depression as well. In an attempt to escape and avoid the stress and misery they are experiencing, an individual may begin to smoke, abuse alcohol, take illegal or prescription drugs or engage in other distracting, but ultimately self-defeating, behavior. These excessive activities may make them feel better, even if only for a few minutes, but will have detrimental long-term consequences. These individuals may eventually suffer from a wide variety of limitations and problems that negatively affect all aspects of their lives. Alternatively, I have seen a great number of people successfully treat their anxiety problems by learning key coping skills from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). This form of therapy is based on helping people change their behavior and their thoughts and beliefs. It is this particular form of evidence-based therapy that underpins the ABCS outlined in this book.

So what do we mean by the term anxiety? There are a number of terms we commonly use to describe the nature of an anxiety

disorder: e.g., stress, worry, panic and fear. I think of panic as being similar to the height of fear. Anxiety is often less intense than that, but still involves unpleasant feelings of stress and tension throughout the body that can last for a prolonged period of time. Worry refers to the thoughts that pass through our brains that can increase the unpleasant feelings associated with anxiety. You may also have heard people talk about the fight or flight (or fight, flight or freeze) response. This refers to the set of changes that happen within the brain and the body when an animal (or a human) is in real danger. When danger strikes, the brain reacts with automatic stimulation of the amygdala and hypothalamus, which results in adrenaline and other stress hormones being secreted into the bloodstream. The heart rate goes up and bodily functions not needed in an emergency are slowed or stopped (e.g., digestion). All these types of biological changes are designed to help the body deal with a perceived danger by preparing it for confrontation or running away (or freezing and hiding). The freeze element is our biological response when the situation is deemed so dangerous that the first two options will be ineffective. These responses happen automatically and require no conscious thinking. The fight or flight response evolved for good reason: to keep us safe from danger. It may be surprising to learn that anxiety is not necessarily always a problem. The ability to get anxious is a normal part of our human nature. Without this response our distant ancestors who lived in a physically dangerous world would probably not have survived long enough to reproduce. At a young age, they would have impulsively blundered into dangerous situations and perished, and we would not have had the chance to live. Our biological programming evolved to keep us safe.

All animals have this fight or flight response. However, humans can also use language to trigger it. Imagine a small group of early humans approaching a watering hole. A keen-sighted member of the group sees a lion approaching and immediately feels a rush of emotion as his fight or flight response is triggered. Almost as fast, he whispers "lion" to the others. They all feel a similar rush of emotion, before they see the lion, and they all automatically prepare to fight or run away, since hiding won't work in this situation.

The word, and the thought of the lion, is enough to trigger this process, without them needing to see the object of their fear. The individuals in alert groups like this survived long enough to pass their genes on to later humans. The key point is that in humans, language and thoughts can also trigger emotions.

The fight or flight response has evolved to keep us safe, but if it gets triggered in situations where there is no real danger then problems occur. One good way to think of an anxiety disorder is as a pattern of false alarms that persistently trigger our fight or flight response (partially or completely). The false alarms may be in the external environment or within us – in our own thoughts and language. The alarms are false because the individual is in no real, physical danger, but the sense of danger and the feelings of fear and anxiety are completely real.¹ To use the lion example, it wouldn't matter whether we were stood in front of the animal, or whether we had merely heard the word "lion," the stress response would be as palpable as if we were about to be attacked by it.

Priming us to run away from a lion is clearly a useful function of these anxiety inducing hormones. The problem with anxiety is that human beings can also become anxious in a way that doesn't serve a useful purpose. Humans have more complex brains than other animals. Our brains mean we are able to think about and imagine lots of possibilities. Presumably, dogs and cats don't worry a lot about what might happen in the future. Humans can use their more complex brains to think about and plan for the future, which of course can be a very good thing. However, our more complex brains also give us the opportunity to worry and get anxious about things that we have no control over, leading to the serious problems known as anxiety disorders. Learning to accept what we can and cannot control is one of the first steps in overcoming problems with anxiety.

Research presented by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) shows that 18% of adults in the United States experience anxiety disorders each year, and 23% of those cases are considered "severe." According to some research, of all the adults

1 For more on this see Barlow (2002).

in the United States who suffer from an anxiety disorder each year, only 13% receive even minimally adequate treatment.² Globally, problems with anxiety are very common and can be severe. It seems clear that a lot of people who suffer with anxiety problems do not get appropriate treatment. That may not be especially comforting to you as you begin to move forward in coping with your own anxiety, but hopefully in the future the availability of effective treatment will catch up with people's needs. In 2008, the National Health Service in England began a large initiative to expand the availability of CBT, but unfortunately this is not currently typical of most other countries around the world.³

The primary causes of serious problems with anxiety include: inherited genetic predisposition, negative childhood and adolescent experiences, past emotional traumas and current life stressors. An anxiety disorder is not a sign of "weakness of character" and has nothing to do with an individual's morality or courage. In fact, these negative cultural myths sometimes prevent individuals from getting the treatment they need. I have worked with many patients who have had to overcome these types of prejudices from bosses, friends and even close family members before they could even begin treatment. This social stigma is another reason why only a small percentage of people with anxiety problems get appropriate treatment.

If for whatever reason you can't get adequate access to an appropriate therapist, the skills you can learn from this book will form a good basis for you to begin to manage your anxiety. This book attempts to show how a set of easy to remember coping skills can be applied to different anxiety problems. The book is intended to be a teaching tool for individuals suffering from these problems and therefore minimizes excessive technical detail in favor of simplicity. The references within the book are there should you wish to read more about a specific aspect of anxiety, although this

2 See for example Kessler et al. (2005). The latest updates to this prevalence data can be found at the web site maintained by the NIMH (www.nimh.nih.gov). A broader world view suggests that the current, prevalence of anxiety disorders in Euro/Anglo cultures around the world is at least 10% (Baxter et al., 2013).

3 See Clark (2011) for more information.

volume should equip you with all the basic information you need. If you are reading this as a mental health professional, there is a brief section in the back of the book which outlines how you might find the book useful in your practice. Overall, the book emphasizes the importance of using coping skills to directly face core fears (whether they are fears of imagined catastrophes, humiliating social situations or traumatic memories) and adjust to negative life changes, rather than allowing the anxiety to progress and result in more and more limitations and other related disorders.

Anxiety coping skills can be used with classic anxiety disorders, with common fears and phobias and also in other stressful situations (e.g., the break-up of a relationship, the diagnosis of a frightening medical condition, etc.). This book also teaches other sets of coping skills to help with the related emotional problems that so frequently accompany anxiety disorders: depression and impulsive and angry outbursts. All of the coping skills come from my reading of the professional literature combined with decades of clinical experience as a cognitive behavioral therapist and clinical supervisor, plus countless interactions with my colleagues. This book is addressed to you, as you work on your problems with anxiety, but it is also useful as a resource for the cognitive behavioral therapist. If you are working with a therapist, ask them if they would be willing to help you work through the book.

As the title suggests, I use the acronym *ABCS* (acceptance, breathing and relaxing, countering and staying with it) to help you remember the key skills. It is easy to forget things when you are feeling a lot of stress and that's when you really need to use these skills. I have found that each of the four coping skills is helpful for full recovery from problems with anxiety. While it is not possible to control what others think or do, and it is not possible to directly control our emotions, it is possible to learn and apply these coping skills. The *ABCS* are to be used to face feared situations, not to escape or avoid them. Of course you can use the same coping skills when unexpected situations trigger anxiety.

Regardless of the initial causes of your anxiety, some of it is now maintained by your own cognitions (e.g., your thoughts, beliefs and assumptions). In childhood, we learn so many behaviors, and this can include unrealistic and unhealthy thoughts. They are strengthened throughout later childhood and adolescence. Despite parents' and teachers' best efforts, children may learn and then internalize thoughts such as: "It's terrible if I make a mistake in front of others." "It is horrible if someone doesn't like what I do or say." "I can't cope like other people do." "It is a catastrophe if I feel anxious." Once these types of cognitions are internalized they can easily arise again throughout life, during moments of challenge. These cognitions then help to make you more anxious and distressed just at the time when you need your energies to focus on how to deal with the challenge. The *A* for acceptance and *C* for countering are to assist you in learning to think about yourself in a more healthy and realistic manner so that you can begin to challenge this cause of your anxiety.

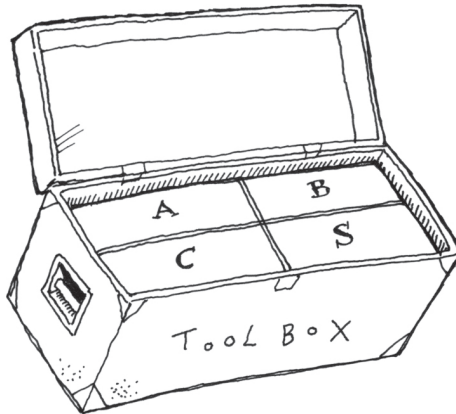
On the other hand, some of your anxiety is now maintained by negative, fear-conditioned experiences from your past.⁴ If you have experienced high levels of stress (also known as the fight, flight or freeze response) in given situations in the past then you may have been conditioned to feel some of that anxiety and fear in similar new situations. You can remedy this part of the problem by breaking the pattern and having many more experiences that you cope with more successfully. Each time you cope well it is like putting money in the bank with a compounding interest rate. Eventually the new experiences can overcome the effects of that earlier, negative conditioning. Coping successfully doesn't mean not feeling any stress or anxiety. It means using your coping skills, your *ABC'S*, to stay in the situation until your commitment to face the fear has been realized. Your commitment needs to be based on your voluntary choice. The *B*, for breathing and relaxing, and *S*, for staying with it, deal with this past conditioning, which is also a cause of continuing anxiety. By being willing to seek out new opportunities to face your fears, and by using your coping skills in

4 As outlined by LeDoux (1996).

these situations, you can actually change your conditioning for the better and begin to remove this cause of your continuing anxiety.

These coping skills emphasize accepting and facing core fears. This is often a difficult message to hear. Many people don't want to even talk about their core fears, much less begin to face them. The reason why is that even talking about it may trigger that very anxiety or fear. However, the fact that you are reading this book means that you have the courage to begin to face your fears and anxiety. That is the first step in beginning to cope with them. A brief summary of the ABCS follows. The remaining chapters explore each point in full and offer exercises so you can practice using the ABCS to seek out and face feared situations in a way that will allow you to really make progress.

The ABCS



A is for acceptance of all things you cannot control. Our human nature doesn't allow us to control our emotions and the automatic thoughts (or memories) that sometimes pop into our minds. Our human nature also does not allow us to control what others think

or do, or protect ourselves, or our loved ones, from all harm. We must accept the uncertainty and risk that is part of life. We may have some influence over some aspects, but we do not have complete control. So, in particular, don't get mad at yourself for feeling anxious or having other bad feelings. Acceptance means letting go of things you cannot control so you can focus on things you can do something about, like what you do and say, and what choices you make in the present moment. So once you have done your best to provide a positive influence in a given situation, you need to learn to let it go. If you have a good understanding of human nature you also know that choosing to voluntarily face unrealistic fears is the best way to reduce them (just as getting more active and productive and reaching out to those who care about you are some of the best ways to improve your mood).

B is for breathing slowly and naturally while you relax your muscle tension. High levels of anxiety or panic often trigger rapid, shallow breathing (i.e., hyperventilation). Rapid, shallow breathing increases stress by reducing the amount of carbon dioxide in your blood so much that you feel lightheaded. So, when you get anxious, choose to breathe in a slow and natural manner, drawing the breath right down into your diaphragm, and make sure you breathe out for as long as you breathe in. This will provide a positive influence on how you are feeling.

C is for countering any unrealistic or catastrophic thoughts with the truth. Look through the unrealistic thoughts and the counters that follow and circle the ones that are important for you. For example, "I can't stand feeling like this!" can be countered with: "I am learning to cope with these feelings." "I shouldn't feel anxious!" can be countered with: "I need to accept that my emotions are not under my direct control." "I shouldn't have a thought like this!" can be countered with: "This is an automatic thought and thoughts are not the same as actions." "Other people will judge me and think I am an idiot!" can be countered with: "I cannot control or even know what others think of me so I need to do what I think is right and then let it go." "I can't stand it when this memory pops into my mind!" can be countered with: "I can't block out all memories, but a memory is not the same as being

there.” Countering unrealistic thoughts with thoughts based on evidence and logic can have a positive influence on how you feel.

↳ is for staying with it so you can fully face your unrealistic fears and anxieties until they are reduced. It means not escaping or avoiding the situation, or seeking temporary relief, for example by using alcohol or drugs, or repeatedly checking for reassurance. It means fully being there as you voluntarily choose to face the fear. However, you don’t have to face all your fears at once. You can take them on in a step-by-step manner. But once you have picked a feared situation to face, stay with it until you have finished your commitment.

Using coping skills such as the ABCS to face your fears is the best way that I know of to make real gains with an anxiety disorder or a problem involving disruptive anxiety and stress. It is not an easy road. There will be many ups and downs as you work toward greater independence. There are no easy shortcuts. Part of the work is to learn to be resilient after setbacks. Without experiencing setbacks you can’t learn the critical lesson of resiliency. I also believe it is often necessary to develop a step-by-step plan to face your fears. The plan may be formal (written down) or more informal (just in your head or as a few notes). Either way, taking the time to develop your own plan can keep you headed in the right direction. Remember, your goal should not be to avoid all anxiety, but to function with more freedom as you work toward your other goals in life. Please keep these ideas in mind as you read the book.

Anxiety support groups, group therapy, self-help books and organizational web sites such as the one operated by the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) are also good ways to get additional help; details can be found in the resources list at the back of the book. The ADAA web site (www.adaa.org) maintains screening tools that allow users to learn more about the

type of anxiety that they may be experiencing. There is also a screening tool for depression.⁵

Reputable, educational web sites such as the one maintained by ADAA often have find-a-therapist locators to aid you in finding a local therapist, since no handbook can hope to be as effective as working directly with a well-trained psychologist or therapist who is experienced in the use of CBT. I would encourage you to seek help from an appropriately qualified professional whenever you feel you need it.

You have my permission to make copies of all the exercises, plans and forms in this book for your personal and non-commercial use. As I tell all my patients, I think it is admirable that you are willing to work on your issues with anxiety. Not everyone has the courage to do that. I hope that this book can be a part of your positive change efforts. Good luck!

5 These screening tools are found in the “Live and Thrive” section of the web site. However, it is best not to rely solely on self-diagnosis and self-treatment: you should visit a mental health professional for a formal diagnosis and treatment plan if you have never had your anxiety properly assessed.

COPING CAN BE AS EASY AS LEARNING THE ABCS

In *THE ABCS OF COPING WITH ANXIETY*, James Cowart offers a concise collection of tried-and-tested strategies from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and makes them accessible to people who are learning to cope with their anxiety on a day-to-day basis.

These user-friendly techniques focus on developing key coping skills designed to reduce fear and anxiety, and are complemented by a program of practical exercises that can be personalized to meet each individual's unique needs.

Informed by his extensive clinical experience and therapeutic knowledge, and with real-life case studies to guide the reader, James's *ABCS* approach is as transformative as it is simple:

A IS FOR ACCEPTING THE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS YOU CAN AND CAN'T CONTROL

B IS FOR BREATHING SLOWLY AND NATURALLY TO RELIEVE AND RELAX MUSCLE TENSION

C IS FOR COUNTERING ANY UNREALISTIC OR CATASTROPHIC THOUGHTS WITH TRUTH AND LOGIC

S IS FOR STAYING WITH IT SO YOU CAN FACE YOUR FEARS AND ANXIETIES UNTIL THEY ARE REDUCED

You will learn how to become more resilient and stop
the cycle of anxiety from perpetuating.

Dr. Tom Barber, founder, Contemporary College of Therapeutic Studies, educator, psychotherapist, coach and bestselling author

Succinct, comprehensive and straightforward to read.

Peter Mabbutt, Vice Principal, London College of Clinical Hypnosis, Vice President, British Society of Clinical Hypnosis

James has simplified the complex treatment for anxiety and made it accessible to all, providing a good foundation for understanding what anxiety really is and what works in overcoming it.

Dr. Hazel Harrison, clinical psychologist

The ABCS of Coping with Anxiety is a concise, clear, specific and practical user-friendly guide for sufferers of anxiety issues.

Galen Alessi, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program and Clinic, Western Michigan University

SUITABLE FOR THOSE LIVING WITH ANXIETY AND FOR THE THERAPISTS AND PROFESSIONALS WHO WORK WITH THEM

JAMES COWART is a licensed psychologist with a special interest in providing CBT to people suffering with anxiety disorders. He has a PhD in Applied Behavior Analysis and is a member of the American Psychological Association. He specializes in problem-solving formats in family and couples therapy, as well as cognitive behavioral and interpersonal approaches to treating depression and anxiety.

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