

Jason Cusick

# The Anxiety Field Guide

Healthy Habits  
for Long-Term  
Healing



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

Taken from *The Anxiety Field Guide* by Jason Cusick.

Copyright © 2022 by Jason Cusick.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

[www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).

# 1



## Relax, It's Just Your Brain

*Your brain is designed to warn you of danger,  
but sometimes it sends you false alarms.  
You can be thankful for your brain while  
retraining it to respond differently.*

**I WAS ALONE IN MY OFFICE** at work when I heard a fire alarm. It startled me. “Is there a fire?” I thought. “Where is it coming from? Do I need to leave?” I gathered a few things and hustled down the hallway only to find some of my coworkers huddled in our small break room. One of them told me, “Someone was toasting some bread and the crumbs in the toaster triggered the fire alarm.” We laughed it off and went back to work.

It happened a couple more times over the next few weeks. The alarm would sound, I’d get startled and pop my head out the door, someone would point to the toaster, and we’d roll our eyes. After three or four more times I wondered why we didn’t clean or replace the toaster. I got used to telling myself, “If it’s a real fire, someone will come get me.”

One day, I was meeting with a member of our church in my office and the alarm went off again. She was startled and also confused as to why I wasn’t even reacting to the sound. She finally asked, “Umm . . . is there a fire?” Without thinking, I replied, “Oh, no. It’s not a fire, it’s a bagel.”

I remember this so vividly because it happened right around the time that I was learning about how our brains help us (and don't help us) when it comes to fear and anxiety. What I learned was probably the single most important insight on the path of freedom from my chronic worry, intrusive thoughts, and unwanted feelings: our brains are wonderfully designed to help us respond to threats, but sometimes our brains are wrong.

Imagine if I were hiding behind a door and shouted "boo!" as you entered. Before you could think about what was happening, your brain would dilate your eyes so you could see better, signal your renal glands to produce adrenaline for more energy, and trigger your heart to direct more blood to your extremities. This is done to ready you for four potential responses: fight (resist), flight (avoid), freeze (lock up), or fawn (people please). This all comes from a little almond-shaped area of your brain called the *amygdala*. It's the threat center of your brain, and in that moment, it shouts, "Be afraid!"

Then you realize it's just me shouting "boo!" The thinking area of your brain takes over. You breathe deeply, your heart rate slows, eyes adjust, and nervous energy subsides. You laugh a little (or punch me) because you realize there is no reason to be afraid.

Here's the good news: Without even thinking, the threat center in your brain quickly assessed the possible dangers and jumped into action to prepare you for how to deal with the problem. When the threat was over, your brain reassessed the situation. Your fear and anxiety changed to other emotions and responses.

Here's the bad news: Sometimes our brains don't readjust. Sometimes the threat or perceived threat is gone, but our hearts are still pumping out of our chests, our minds are still racing, and we are still filled with energy. While this is happening in our brain and body, we become restless:

- We have a sense that we are in danger when we aren't.
- We feel like we did something wrong and don't know how to make it right.

- We're sure we forgot to do something but can't figure out what it was.
- We overthink our appearance, health, safety, reputation, and self-worth.
- We decide that the most important thing to do is get rid of these bad feelings.
- We panic, thinking we've lost touch with God, others, or ourselves.

This is anxiety—and it starts in our brain.

Just like that fire alarm at work, your brain is doing its job. Your brain is trying to warn you of danger and get you ready for action. Most of the time this is happening without you knowing it. Thank God!

Sometimes your threat center lights up when there's no threat at all, or it lights up and won't turn off. This is called *amygdala hijacking*. It's when your feeling-self overrides your thinking-self, sending you well-intentioned false alarms.

Why does this happen? We're not exactly sure.

***It could be chemical.*** Emotions are biochemical reactions in the brain that we perceive as expressions of who we are and what we think. What we experience as fear is a cocktail of chemicals being released from the amygdala to the rest of our brain and body.

***It could be conditioning.*** Our brains are always collecting data for future use. If we've always feared something, our brains will help us continue to be scared. If we've learned to be afraid, we might have to start unlearning it.

Anxiety and fear are intended for our good, but for whatever reason they can also cause problems.

When people say, "Don't worry!" they're trying to talk us out of our anxiety. But it's not that simple. Well-meaning advice or quick fixes are rarely helpful for those of us with anxiety. In fact, they often make us feel guilty or embarrassed. We don't want to be anxious. Managing our anxiety can end up feeling like a full-time job.

But there's hope! Let's start this journey with what is called *normalization*—learning to accept that anxiety is natural.

---

### ACTION STEPS

1. ***Take a moment to be grateful.*** The next time you feel anxious or afraid, find a place to sit down. Breathe deeply, feel your feet on the ground, and be aware of your body and your surroundings. Read Psalm 139:13-14, which says, “You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body / and knit me together in my mother’s womb. / Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!” These simple exercises can help you slow down and quietly be thankful for being present in the moment.
2. ***Blame your brain.*** One of the most liberating truths that I’ve learned has been to pass off some responsibility to my brain and not carry it all myself. You have an oversensitive amygdala. Put the responsibility where it belongs. You’re starting to take responsibility for your own wellness. Begin by accepting that some of what’s happening in you is neurological and chemical, and it’s happening outside of your control and choosing.
3. ***Give yourself permission to not fix what you are feeling.*** It is very common to be anxious about our anxiety. Trying to stop your brain from doing what it’s done for years can lead to frustration, self-condemnation, and exhaustion. This will take a little time. In your next anxious moments, speak some encouraging words to yourself. Remind yourself that you are just getting started, and this will get better as you keep at it.