

Chapter 11

Putting It All Together: A Whole Brain Approach to Anxiety

Keeping the Big Picture in Mind

We have written this book with the intention of giving you the knowledge and resources that you need to reach the goals you set for yourself in life. When your anxiety blocks you from your goals, we want you to have the strategies you need to overcome anxiety. We want you to be able to change your brain so that you aren't limited by fears and anxieties. This will be a challenge, but you will find yourself more successful if you use your **whole brain** in overcoming anxiety.

Remember that what you are hoping to accomplish is to make lasting changes in your brain necessary to modify your anxiety responses. Because you know the amygdala is the underlying source of all fear and anxiety responses, you recognize that knowing the language of the amygdala is the key to being successful in this endeavor. Through specific experiences, you are trying to provide your amygdala with the opportunities that it needs to learn a new way of responding.

At the same time, you are making use of your cerebral cortex. This book is written to your cerebral cortex, which allows you to read, learn, and remember how anxiety functions in your brain. You also use your cerebral cortex to exercise control over your cognitive or thinking processes, so that you don't allow them to

worsen your anxiety and fear as you work on changing your brain.

The combined use of your cerebral cortex and the language of the amygdala is a very potent treatment approach. Many therapists target only the cerebral cortex, focusing on changing thinking in order to reduce anxiety. This method does not consider the whole brain. Although making changes in your thinking processes can be helpful in modifying some aspects of anxiety, to be effective you also need to consider the role of the amygdala. Changes in thinking cannot be completely effective because anxiety can be produced by the amygdala without the influence of any thinking at all. A clear understanding of the *role of the amygdala* and the *influence of the cerebral cortex* is essential in the process of using your whole brain to overcome the limits of anxiety.

Don't Go It Alone

We strongly recommend that you seek professional help as you work on the strategies presented in this book. The kind of assistance that will prove most helpful is cognitive behavioral therapy, because cognitive behavioral therapists are trained in identifying self-defeating thoughts as well as in exposure therapy. Cognitive behavioral therapists may come from a variety of disciplines, like social work or psychology, for example. The important question for you to ask when choosing a therapist is whether your therapist is knowledgeable about cognitive behavioral methods of treatment. A therapist with this background

can assist you in a variety of ways as you carry out the strategies recommended in this book.

Specifically, a cognitive behavioral therapist will be familiar with how to approach exposure. A therapist who can assist you in identifying triggers and deciding which ones are important to target in exposure exercises is very valuable in this process. Having some assistance in determining which triggers most impair your ability to reach your goals in life allows you to target your efforts most effectively.

Learning relaxation skills may also be easier with a professional's assistance. Therapists can be helpful in providing encouragement, reminding you of what you are trying to accomplish, and highlighting your successes, too. Therapists who have experience with exposure can offer suggestions for responding to difficulties that arise in exposure exercises. Their expertise will assist you in making exposure exercises more effective. Finally, cognitive behavioral therapists are very adept at recognizing self-defeating thoughts and suggesting coping thoughts to replace them, so they can help you to use your cortex to combat anxiety.

Consider This:

Do you have a therapist with whom you can discuss your difficulties with anxiety? Does the therapist have training in cognitive behavioral therapy, including use of exposure therapy and identification of self-defeating thoughts? Can you discuss the “language of the amygdala” with your therapist?

While it is possible that you can accomplish many of the goals you set without a therapist, don't underestimate the challenge that you are facing. Having a skilled therapist is a very valuable resource. When facing the complex difficulties that anxiety brings, it is helpful to have a non-anxious brain available to assist in the process. And if the other brain helping you also understands the language of the amygdala, so much the better!

Prepare Your Brain For Learning

As you begin working on changing your brain by teaching your cortex new habits of thinking and providing your amygdala with new experiences, make sure your brain is ready for learning. You can best prepare your brain by making sure that it is healthy and rested. Make sure that you are eating a good, balanced diet, which will help you to remain alert and not sluggish.

You should also make sure that you get quality sleep. Sleep is important for two reasons. First, when you don't get enough sleep, your amygdala is much more reactive than when you are well rested. In fact, research has shown that when a person is sleep deprived, even for one evening, the amygdala reacts much more strongly to negative stimulation, and the cortex seems to have difficulty maintaining any influence in the situation.¹ Second, sleep is also essential for changing your brain. It is during sleep that our memories are formed and carefully stored by our brains.² Sleep-deprived brains don't form memories as well as rested brains do. As you try to

provide your brain with new experiences, in hopes of rewiring the brain's circuitry, you need to sleep well so that those experiences are transformed into memories that will last.

Consider This:

Have you ever noticed how a lack of sleep can influence your moods? Do you find that you are more edgy or anxious when you have not had enough sleep? How many hours of sleep per night do you need to feel rested?

Another way of preparing the brain for change is to consider what substances are affecting the brain. The use of recreational substances, including **alcohol**, can impair the brain's ability to learn, and may make it difficult to change your anxiety responses. Even though certain substances like alcohol can help us to get through an anxious experience, they do not change the underlying brain processes that cause the anxiety. They are only a band-aid approach to the problem, covering it up, but doing nothing to promote new learning.

Caffeine can also have a strong effect on the brain, increasing activation of certain neurons, and promoting adrenaline release. Use of caffeine can contribute to symptoms of anxiety, and is best avoided when you want to minimize anxious responding.

In a similar way, you should consider what medications you are taking as you attempt to change your brain's anxiety responses. As you recall from Chapter 9, some medications will impair the brain's

ability to create new circuitry, and some medications may actually assist the creation of new circuitry. It is important that you and your doctor or therapist know the specific effects of the medication that you are taking.

Medications in the Whole Brain Approach

When you recognize that your goal is to make lasting changes in your brain, you should view the use of medications in a new light. Certain medications, like benzodiazepines, have the ability to reduce our anxiety in minutes, but they actually impair the brain's ability to learn and change itself. So, even though we feel better in the short term, we are not making any changes in the brain's circuitry. These medications "cool" the anxiety-producing circuitry in the brain, which provides a great sense of immediate relief, but they are also "freezing" the brain in its current state. Nothing has changed. The same associations are maintained in the amygdala.

If you want to include medications in the process of modifying your anxiety responses, the first step is to communicate with your psychiatrist about what you are attempting to accomplish. If a family practitioner is prescribing your medications, we strongly suggest that you seek the help of a psychiatrist during this process. Psychiatrists have more experience with the specific medications used to treat anxiety because they are specialists in treating psychological disorders. They also know more about the brain, and how medications affect it, than do most family practice physicians. In addition, psychiatrists are more likely to be familiar

with cognitive behavioral approaches, including exposure and the use of cognitive therapy for self-defeating thoughts.

This is not to imply that psychiatrists are trained in cognitive behavioral methods. Psychiatrists are trained in the administration of medications, and very few have extensive training in cognitive behavioral therapy or other psychotherapy methods. Many individuals seeking treatment for anxiety expect their psychiatrists to provide therapy, and are surprised that psychiatrists focus primarily on the use of medication. The reason is that psychiatrists are not therapists. They are *physicians* trained to treat psychological disorders (largely through the use of medications). You should expect your psychiatrist to be your best resource in terms of understanding how medications affect you and your brain, but you should not expect your psychiatrist to be trained in therapeutic techniques.

As you speak with your psychiatrist about the medications you are taking or are considering taking, make a distinction between those medications that provide relief from anxiety on a short term basis, and those which can assist you in modifying your brain's anxiety responses in a more lasting way. Refer to Chapter 9. Inform your psychiatrist about any side effects you are experiencing from the medications, and explain the approaches you are using in combating anxiety. Communication between your psychiatrist and your therapist can also help facilitate the process of changing your anxious brain. All three of you (the psychiatrist, the therapist, and you) can make important contributions in the process of evaluating

how a medication is working, and how it affects the treatment process.

Consider This:

Are you comfortable talking with your physician or psychiatrist about your medications, including how they work (in both the short term and long term) and what side effects they produce? Do you have a therapist who can assist you in evaluating whether the medications are having the effects that you are seeking?

Where Do I Begin?

The many strategies described in this book may leave you wondering how to begin the process of using the whole brain approach. The best way to start is with **Relaxation**, as explained in Chapter 7. Learn the skill of relaxing yourself by turning off your sympathetic nervous system and activating your parasympathetic nervous system. Don't forget to consider exercise in achieving relaxation, as well. Use relaxation repeatedly during each day so that your overall anxiety level becomes generally lower. Integrate relaxation methods into your life so that it becomes second nature to relax yourself several times each day.

Next, become aware of how your thoughts contribute to your anxiety. Look for **Self-Defeating Thoughts** and identify how they turn up in a variety of situations. Recognize how certain thoughts increase the

activation of your amygdala by suggesting that there is more danger than is actually present. Tune out the **Anxiety Channel!** Work to replace your self-defeating thoughts with **Coping Thoughts** that reduce your anxiety and calm your fears, as explained in Chapter 10. Practice monitoring and modifying your thoughts until you can consistently think in more productive ways in most situations. Consider whether certain medications may be helpful in this process, because, as we noted in Chapter 9, some medications (especially the SSRIs) have been shown to increase cognitive flexibility.

As you consider what aspects of your life you want to change, it is essential that you identify what **Life Goals** are important to you and what fears are keeping you from pursuing these goals. Target the fears that are blocking you. Review Chapter 8 to help you identify **Triggers** for fear and decide what triggers you want to focus on first. Use the language of the amygdala to change your brain's response to these triggers, so that these triggers will no longer create responses that block you from your goals.

Finally, begin using **Exposure** techniques like those detailed in Chapters 5 and 6 to target your specific triggers. If you can associate these triggers with safety rather than anxiety, you can build bypasses and break the hold anxiety has over your life. Make sure that you use all that you know about relaxation, self-defeating thoughts, and coping thoughts to assist you as you work through the exposure experiences with your therapist. Remember to expose yourself to each situation in your **hierarchy** until you feel your fear

markedly decrease. Repeat exposure exercises often until you are relatively comfortable with the situation.

When you feel stressed by the exposure exercises you are undertaking, remind yourself that you must activate parts of your amygdala to generate new connections in your brain. The phrase “**Activate to Generate**” is a reminder that you cannot make new connections in your brain unless you experience some anxiety. Work toward reducing anxiety surrounding any trigger that is blocking your goals until you feel more in control. Be aware of the importance of varying the **context** during exposure and try exposure in different settings. Finally, be careful of the negative effects of **safety-seeking behavior** as explained in Chapter 6.

In summary, the process of changing your brain to resist anxiety is a gradual one, but your brain will slowly adapt itself to the experiences that you expose it to, and will learn to respond in new ways. Your brain is sensitive and responsive to its environment. It will modify itself if it is given the proper learning experiences.

Relaxation and exercise will help increase parasympathetic activation, reducing your body’s stress response. Through this whole brain approach, elimination of self-defeating thoughts will eventually change your cortex’s responding, and exposure experiences will gradually change your amygdala’s responding. No doubt there will be set backs along the way, but you will see an improvement in your ability to take charge of your life if you make use of these strategies.

You Can Do It!

Although this process may seem overwhelming, if you break it down into steps, it is much more manageable. Try to focus on one aspect of the process at a time. You will see improvements at each step that will encourage you. When you see that you are able to relax yourself, you will feel more confident about managing your anxiety. And when you experience how exposure is steadily reducing your fear, you will begin to develop the ability to push through your fears with confidence.

Keep in mind that your ultimate goal is to retrain your brain, so try to remember what is happening in your brain at each step. Every strategy that you use sends an important message to your brain, and your brain will respond. Many strategies require repetition, but that is typical of many personal goals in life, from arithmetic to athletics. Just keep in mind that you are using your whole brain to resist the controlling effects of anxiety. You are taking charge of your life, step by step.

Summary of Strategies

- Use **Breathing** and **Relaxation** techniques to reduce sympathetic activation.
- Monitor thinking for **Self-Defeating Thoughts**.
- Replace Self-Defeating Thoughts with **Coping Thoughts**.
- Determine **Life Goals** and when anxiety interferes with these goals.

- Identify **Triggers** for fears and anxiety that interfere with your goals.
- Design **Exposure Exercises** that can modify your amygdala's response to these triggers.
- **Activate to Generate** new circuitry to build a bypass in your amygdala.
- **Practice** Exposure Exercises until you recognize a considerable decrease in your anxiety and fear.
- Change the **Context** of your exposure exercises to get the most benefit.
- Watch out for **Safety-Seeking behaviors**, and use **medication** wisely.
- **Relax** and enjoy life!