

Beating Anxiety

It's all in your mind!

Patient2Patient Series
by John I. Jerkovic

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Beating Anxiety - It's all in your mind!

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F O R W A R D

..by my wife

Adriana Jerkovic

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I am the wife of a wonderful man who became a victim of this very common and not too talked about disorder. I am the first to admit that prior to my husband's first panic attack I was pretty much ignorant about the whole situation. My life seemed to have been in order. I had a strong marriage, a wonderful son and a bright future ahead of me. Without even thinking too much about anything, I took many things for granted, including and especially health.

Then one day it all came down to a crashing end, when I got the call from a Hospital Emergency Room. It was my husband's crumbled voice on the other side.

"Adriana, please come get me. I am in the Hospital. I had an attack while I was driving. I felt like I as dying. My whole body got paralyzed and I could not breathe nor talk. Thankfully, the police were close by and they helped. Come get me."

I grabbed my car keys and left in no time. I was petrified. I did not know what to think or what to expect. I kept praying on my way there, asking God to please save him. He was the centre of my life and I could not imagine my life without him. The drive to hospital seemed longer considering my nervous state. The man of my life was in need of my help but more importantly he was in need of self-help. When I finally reached him, he looked fragile, broken down and terrified. He was not the man I had seen the night before, full of life and energy. He was very shaken and confused. We both were. I wanted to console him and tell him that everything would be all right. In reality, I did not even know about his condition. I was not informed nor was I educated on the effects that everyday stressors have on anyone. All I could do at that point is to thank God for seeing him in one piece and pull all my strength to help my husband win this war. The doctor shortly came back to see him, to reassure him that he would be fine. He prescribed a tranquillizing drug to help him calm down and to soothe him. He seemed numb like he was not present emotionally or mentally in that Hospital. I was scared but tried hard not to show it. I thought of million reasons for this happening and looked for someone to blame. I immediately thought of his demanding work schedule, his long commute, and our living arrangements. In essence, I was looking for culpable parties to lessen my own guilty feelings. I too was in shock and pretty much in denial.

Then we drove home. He was different in many ways. His breathing seemed deeper. His voice was weaker as if he was scared. We both did not know much about the condition called "Panic Attack". We never thought it could happen to us. We were both young, healthy people with a good education and a great head on our shoulders. Boy did that event bring us back to earth. It was a wake up call for us. It made us realize all the things that we were doing wrong. In some weird way it was a blessing of some sort. It made us stronger as a couple and most importantly as individuals. We learned to put things into different perspectives and value what we have instead of focusing on what we don't. My husband received years of therapy following his attacks. This including weekly visits to a

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psychiatrist and drug therapy. I was left battling my own demons and dealing with his disorder from the outside. I felt useless at first and pretty much not a part of his healing. I was so wrong. It took me some time and some self awareness to realize that I was a key person in my husband's recovery. I needed to be strong for him and most importantly for our marriage. I needed to show him that he was able to count and lean on me. In retrospect, I wish I could have done things differently and perhaps better. It is only my earned experience now that sees that. I feel lucky that I have been able to figure out many pieces of this tough puzzle called life. I am still working on the rest of them. I am not giving up just yet.

Many things were different after his first attack. Little insignificant things would throw him off. He was living on the edge of discomfort. He was not himself and as a consequence our relationship was not the same. He seemed distant and cold. He was struggling to come back and I was selfish in many ways. I was thinking of us, our son and I also must admit of me. I was aware that he was the one in need for help. Through our relationship struggles, we grew stronger and more understanding of each other. As bad as it might sound, I never thought it would have been possible for me to say the following. Anxiety has changed our lives for the better. It has opened up our eyes to another dimension of this world. We have been made more aware of what's real and what's important. As my wonderful loving dear husband would say it has made us smarter and wiser. We now view things in a different light and we put emphasis on the really important things in life, the things that are truly valuable, health and family. The rest comes and goes without leaving anything behind.

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Who should read this book?

This book is for all those who have anxiety / panic disorder as well as those suffering from depression. Furthermore, this book is for all those that are curious about the subject as well as those who have to deal with people who suffer from this disorder. I would actually suggest it to any adult as it talks about many common stressful situations that should be handled in different ways to minimize general stress. Why wait until anxiety hits you? Why not prevent it in its tracks?

I would suggest you read this book from chapter to chapter. After you finish reading the whole book you can use it as a helpful reference.

Part I - Learning the basics

This chapter will give you the gentle introduction of the things discussed in this book as well as to give you a positive head start to your road to recovery by establishing some well known facts that should make you feel more comfortable with your condition. It will also help you identify if you have an anxiety or panic disorder and/or are suffering from depression. Here is the chapter breakdown.

- *Introduction*
- *Defining anxiety/panic disorder*
- *How to find out if you have it*
- *Word about Psychiatrists*
- *Anxiety and Adrenalin*
- *The "Fight or Plight"*
- *You are not alone or the only one*
- *Put Stress into the right perspective*
- *Anxiety attacks happen for many reasons*
- *Life is too short / Live it now*
- *The Practical Road to Recovery / Summary*

1 Introduction

By reading this book, you have chosen to start on the path towards change. I salute you for your decision to improve your life. Any step in life that is worth anything and that is good in its true foundations is not an easy step to take and this is no different. There are many hurdles and obstacles standing in your way and as you might already realize, there are no easy answers.

I would like to thank you for joining the road to your recovery. The length of this journey depends highly on each individual. The road to recovery starts by recognition of the problem and then taking charge to resolve the problem. A person that suffered a panic/anxiety attack did not suffer this attack "out of nowhere". The attack is the culmination of the life experiences you've had or have lived before the attack. It is important to identify these experiences early on your journey to recovery. It is only then, when it will be possible to take charge of your life and eliminate this horrible, at times scary, condition.

I will not lie to you and tell you that you will be fine in a week or a month or even a year. Each individual will have different results. Just like it took considerable time to build to your disorder, it will take about the same time to get rid of it. If you have lived through an anxiety/panic attack you have lived through an easy part! It may sound odd but the hard part is still to come. It's the part where you have to make changes in your life in order to beat your anxiety, panic attacks or depression. Some of these changes may require sacrifices, primarily within your lifestyle, but at this point in your life those changes should look and feel insignificant next to the horrible experience associated with anxiety, panic attacks and/or depression. Your dedication and staying the full course with your lifestyle changes is required. There is always the danger of going back to this condition if you don't follow through your new life-changing commitments. As a first step towards your recovery, please engrave in your mind that you will not die! You do not have to suffer forever or alone. The next part is about managing your condition. In other words, you want to work on getting your condition/disorder under control so that you may move on with your life.

I will share with you my most intimate details relating to my struggle with anxiety, panic attacks and depression disorder. This will fill you up with ammunition for your own fight in order to win this war. Each individual is unique so some of my ways will not be suitable for all of you and some will. I will also present you with some ways/methodologies that didn't work for me but may work for you. What I am trying to say is for you to use common sense and use the skills that make you comfortable and that you find most helpful for your situation. For example, I used to travel by car to work for over two hours a day and would constantly get symptoms of anxiety. Using certain techniques or methods I would not let these

symptoms develop into full scale panic attack. Some of you do not have a problem with traveling by car so you may not need to use these methods. Others may find these methods applicable to other situations. I will discuss all of this in much more detail in later chapters specifically dealing with coping methods and techniques of preventing full-scale panic attacks. The point is: you will have an arsenal of practical tools from which you will pick the ones that work for you.

When we talk about anxiety disorder, panic attacks, depression they are usually related. Lot of times they are all part of a vicious circle. Many times one leads to another. Many sufferers have all three conditions. I was one of them. Consider this, all my life, before my first anxiety attack occurred I was probably the most

confident person I have ever known or so it seemed on the surface. When my first anxiety attack struck I felt like a little ant and was afraid to do many things including driving, going to work, speaking to people, flying as well as being alone.



TIP

You will not die from anxiety disorder!

1.1 Defining Panic Attacks, Generalized Anxiety and Major Depression

To begin our road to recovery, let us first get the formal definition of what these disorders are as viewed by the medical practice.

According to the DSM-IV¹ definition of Panic Attacks, Generalized Anxiety and Major Depression is as follows:

- **Panic Attacks²:**

Experiencing symptoms such as:

- heart palpitations,
- sweating,
- trembling,
- feelings of shortness of breath and choking,
- chest and abdominal discomfort,
- feelings of dizziness,
- unreality,
- tingling,
- chills,

¹ Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Ed., copyright American Psychiatric Association, 1994

² Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Ed., copyright American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 395-398

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- heat,
- fears of losing control ("going crazy"),
- thoughts of dying

With an actual attack, these symptoms can be very intense, but generally do not last a great length of time. The attacks, however, can be followed by an equally uncomfortable period of anticipatory anxiety (i.e. expecting another attack to occur).

- **Generalized Anxiety³:**

Symptoms include:

- restlessness,
- being "keyed up",
- concentration difficulties,
- irritability,
- sleeping problems
- muscle tension and
- fatigability.

It is an excessive, hard to control, anxiety or worry, over several events or activities that is present (more often than not) for at least six months. The anxiety/worry is not focused on one thing, but a range of things and is significant enough to impair major life areas (ie. work, family life, relationships etc).

- **Major Depression⁴:**

Whether a single episode or recurrent, depression involves a "major depressive episode", which is marked by such symptoms as:

- (constant) depressed mood,
- lack of interest or pleasure in one's activities,
- significant weight loss/gain,
- sleeping changes,
- agitation,
- energy loss,
- thinking difficulties,

³ Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Ed., copyright American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 432-436

⁴ Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Ed., copyright American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 327, 339-345

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- dip in self-esteem, and
- (possibly) thoughts of death/suicide.

Major depression, or "major depressive disorder", can be a single episode, or of the recurrent kind. It is depression not better accounted for by some other disorder and does not involve the "mania" of manic-depression.

Not one of these is a mental illness. Although psychiatrists are the ones that can help you through this ordeal through various cognitive and/or medication therapies there is nothing wrong with your mental condition. In other words, you are not crazy! Your condition is better described as a chemical imbalance.

There is another type of anxiety called Agoraphobia, which is not necessarily a result of panic attacks. It is the avoidance of open places or situations. This avoidance could be for any reason. For example avoiding travel by airplane could be a form of Agoraphobia. Another example could be avoiding places or situations where you experienced your anxiety attacks.

1.2 So how do you know if you have anxiety/panic disorder and/or depression?

You may already know if you have a specific disorder. If you don't know, a pretty good start would be if you can associate any of the conditions described in the previous section to your own situation. If unsure consult your local psychiatrist/psychologist for an evaluation. Not surprisingly, many people are afraid to go to a professional. I was one of them. I thought that other people would see me as crazy. You should not be afraid. In the worst case, only your loved ones would and should know, as they are the ones that will help you the most. Sometimes a good friend could be even better than family. Heed my advice and do not prolong your suffering. It is better to find out early in the game what you have then to suffer more in the long run or even worst create a bigger problem than it already is. So do the right thing and book an appointment to get evaluated.

This evaluation would normally consist of multiple-choice questions assessing your current state of mind. These questions would usually ask you about the last seven days (last full week) and how you felt about different things such as life in general and weather or not you have experienced any of the common symptoms that would indicate anxiety disorder. To see an example questionnaire given by psychiatrist please see Appendix A.

Common symptoms that could indicate an anxiety/panic disorder as well as depression include the ones as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 - Common Symptoms

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• heart palpitations• sweating• trembling• shortness of breath• thinking about breathing• choking• chest discomfort• abdominal discomfort• dizziness• unreality• tingling• chills• heat• fear of losing control• fear of dying• always in some expectation state• excessive anxiety or worry• restlessness• irritability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• worthlessness• hopelessness• sleeping problems• muscle tension• fatigability• constant depressed mood• lack of interest• lack of enjoyment or pleasure• significant weight loss/gain• sleeping changes• agitation• energy loss• thinking difficulties• low self-esteem• thoughts of dying• thoughts of suicide• being "keyed up"• being "on the edge"• concentration difficulties
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Generally speaking, an individual suffering from anxiety/panic attacks, is also suffering from depression. This depression does not necessarily have to be related to one's self-esteem but could also be disappointment about major things in one's life such as family matters, family members and/or other major avenues such as your career.

As one of the initial steps, it is important to identify what symptoms you have and also identify anything and everything that you feel is negative in your life. Sit down with a pen and paper and write it down. Do not lie to yourself and do not feel ashamed about your feelings, they are yours. Own up to them. You gain nothing in the long haul by being dishonest about the situations or playing them down. This is your time to focus primarily on yourself, be selfish! These are the subjects I later brought up with my psychiatrist. Just by talking to your psychiatrist and letting them know of your problems should give you a good positive boost for the next steps. This will also help your psychiatrist identify best therapy for your individual situation. If for any reason you do not feel comfortable with your psychiatrist, talk to them about this feeling. You may be in denial over your

therapy but if the feeling persists, then by all means change psychiatrists. You want to be comfortable with a person you open up to. On the other hand, if you feel that every psychiatrist is not up to par, the problem may be in your mind. This reflex of fear is normal in many cases. In my case, I was fortunate enough to find an excellent psychiatrist who let me let it all out. While I felt comfortable, believe me the more you talk about your problem the more inner power you will get in battling this disorder.

1.3 Psychiatrists are not magicians but should be consulted first.

Some people are so depressed or are just too tired of their battle with anxiety attacks that they see no light at the end of the tunnel. Believe me when I say this there is the light bigger than you can ever imagine. Life after beating anxiety disorder is more powerful and more enjoyable than anything you've ever experienced before!



TIP

You are not crazy!
Don't be shy from visiting
your psychiatrist.

So if you are not sure of anything or if you are scared, consult with your psychiatrist first. You may want to try medication at first so you can get that initial boost while educating yourself with as much information as possible. Understanding your problem will be, as in my case, the big part of your solution.

Do not stop at the psychiatrist! Talk to anyone that wants to hear you out. The more you talk about your condition with others the better you will feel and the less alone. In this process you might meet a few people that have gone through the same ordeal. There is no better way of success then by emulation of successful people. You have already taken a great step by picking up this book as I will share with you all of the techniques that have helped me and many others in managing their anxiety.

1.4 Anxiety and Adrenalin

Throughout times humans were exposed to all kinds of dangerous situations. During those times, the brain sends signals to the body to go to the "ready/alert" state. This gets accomplished by the release of adrenalin. It is the body's way of preparing itself for the incoming danger. During this time the body's senses are at the most alert state. This is a natural chemical reaction to external danger.



TIP

Your mind is "fooled" by
so much adrenaline it
thinks it's in danger when
in reality it is not.

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When a person starts to have an anxiety/panic attack, a similar situation occurs although with a false sense of "internal" danger. By panicking the brain translates this into the same danger response as in the real external danger, by releasing adrenalin.

The first thing in beating anxiety is by realizing is that you need to change the way you think. You need to restructure your thoughts with things that make you feel nervous. The faster you do this, the faster your recovery will be. If one can "flip the coin" on these stressful situations, one can achieve greatness by staying away from bad stress.

1.5 The "fight or flight"

You have probably heard this term before. Many articles, brochures and books on anxiety talk about this phenomenon that affects anxiety/panic disorder sufferers. When anxiety/panic strikes you have basically two choices. Either you "weather the storm", "ride through the wave" or you choose to run away to your "comfort zone". A comfort zone could be by taking a sedative to calm you down or doing something that makes you feel comfortable during your anxiety or panic attack. Many people find comfort if they are at home and/or talking with someone that cares about them. As we will see this is a false comfort. The only one that can really help you is YOU! Just ask yourself one question: are you willing to run to someone every time a panic attack is approaching or do you want to get rid of these attacks once and for all? Furthermore, many people try using alcohol to calm their fears down but excessive alcohol can make your situation even worse. By reading this book you have chosen to fight.

1.6 You are not alone!

You are just one of the millions of people in North America and around the world that have the same disorder. Keeping a positive attitude about your recovery is the key to your success. Just have a look at Appendix B and the names of all the well-known famous people that went through similar problems you are having. When I did this research on the Internet one thing came to my mind. These people were all top-notch people at what they do and so am I! I hope you would feel the same way!

The newest research has shown that 1 in 20 adult Americans have generalized anxiety disorder. To some people these anxiety symptoms are less pronounced while others go to extreme levels of anxiety by experiencing anxiety attacks.

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Furthermore, many more millions of people have some sort of depression, which can lead to anxiety/panic attacks.

Remember that anxiety is much more understood now than it has been in the past. Years ago, you may have been considered insane; centuries ago, you may have been burned as a witch or put in an institution where all forms of torturous methods were utilized to burn the "devil" out of you. I want to iterate again; Anxiety disorder is not a mental disease. It is a chemical imbalance in your brain that is causing it.

Another positive, although temporary, boost to your mind should be that anxiety's symptoms can be treated by medication. I have used medication to do just that. Having said that, I do not suggest medication for all individuals except those that have the most severe anxiety disorder where they are getting symptoms or attacks on daily basis. I would also suggest going on medication for anyone that has had thoughts of suicide. Medicinal drugs are not the way to solve the problem in the long run. However, they have served a pivotal purpose in my early battles with anxiety and panic. Medication can be a key factor in the beginning in order for you to gain some confidence and to educate yourself properly. This was the case with my battle with anxiety.



TIP

Anxiety is better understood now than ever before. You will not suffer from it forever. Learning about your condition is paramount in speedier recovery and gaining back the control of your life.

Anxiety attacks people that are smart, intelligent and full of ideas. You don't have to have a degree to be intelligent. I know people that are excellent thinkers, some better than myself, but without a degree, and who have had anxiety. If you are a perfectionist you are a perfect target of anxiety attacks. A perfectionist is essentially a constant thinker; a person that continually dwells over same information over and over again. Anxiety loves to attack constant thinkers. I was a perfectionist. I wanted everything perfect in my life. I was expecting a perfect harmony in my work, at home or even with anything else I ever did. There was never the middle ground where it's not simply black or white but a shade of gray. This would never satisfy me. Today, I think there is nothing wrong with being a perfectionist except to say that one must get away from the extremes. In other words, when I do things today I try to do my best. So if it happens that my best is not "perfect" so be it! At the end of the day it will not matter at all. What will be, will be.

1.7 Put stress into the right perspective.

The easiest way to get Anxiety attacks is by having a lot of stress. Stress is a

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common condition for most of the adults as well as some children. The stress I am talking about is the mental stress or simply when you feel nervous. All of us have ups and downs through the course of our lives. Most of us have ups and downs through the course of every day. As you will learn later on, balancing this mental stress with other forms of stress will be the key to your disorder recovery.

Having too much stress can lead to Heart disease. Heart disease is one of leading causes of death in many countries. Stress is one of ways to contribute to heart disease along with improper diet and lack of physical activity. We will talk about all these key subjects, as you will need to become better at each in order to improve your life.

In essence, if you can find ways to manage stress, you are on your way to full control of your life.

1.8 Anxiety/Panic attacks happen for many reasons.

Ask yourself this question: do you live a stressful life? We all have some stress in our lives. Stress comes from many different sources in many different shapes. The one I want to talk about is the bad stress. This stress is the one responsible for anxiety/panic disorder; we are talking about the mental stress. Here is a list of some situations that could make anyone stressed out.

Table 2 - Common Stressful Situations

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Death of a loved one• Divorce/Breakup• Marriage• Being Laid Off From Your Job• Personal Illness• Intimacy Difficulties• Looking For A Job• Moving (To Another Residence)• Bankruptcy• Bad Living Conditions• Bad Neighborhood• Working Way Too Much• Working Underpaid• Outstanding Achievement• Not happy with your partner• Not happy with anything• People You Don't Like	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jealousy• Greed• Birth of a new Child• Responsibility as a Parent• Spouse Problems/Disagreements• Lack of Sleep• Lack of Enjoyment• Unrealistic Goals and Expectations• Trying To Be Perfect In Everything• Thinking of what people think of you• Living in The Past (not focused on present)• Being Unhappy With Everything• Irregular Eating Habits• Wanting Instant Success• Giving a Speech In Front Of Many People
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All of these situations can bring from little to obscene amount of anxiety/stress to your mental state depending on what you care about the most in your life. A few chapters down, I will be focusing on 50 of the most stressful situations in our lives and how to handle those with little or no stress.

Lots of people do not learn from the mistakes of others. They go through the same painful learning process themselves only to say later: I wish I had listened to you. My sincere hope is that you will learn from what I have learned through trial and error for many years so that you will not make my same mistakes.

1.9 Life is too short; Live it now!

Before my anxiety attack I always felt my life was at its best when I was a young boy, a common scenario for many of us. I no longer believe into this statement. My life is the best right here right now. Your life is precious. You better believe it!

To live life is to enjoy life. If you are not enjoying life you are not living it! It is time to go back to do things you have always enjoyed in your life and for some reason you've stopped doing them. If those things are something you did in your childhood and you are no longer interested in them, find something new. At first, you might feel that you will not like something. Believe me, a lot of times these things will be those that you did not even try before hand. Give a chance to new things before judging them. I used to say bad things about Golf for the longest time and now I am hooked!



TIP

Enjoying life is of utmost importance. If you are not enjoying your life you are not living it!

1.10 The Practical Road to Recovery - Summary

I will take you through my life journey from my most miserable days of depression, anxiety and panic attacks to my triumph to living my life to the fullest without any anxiety or depression! You will get the tips and secrets from a former patient plain and simple. I will give you all the gory details of my war as well as the details of my triumph.

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This book is different from any other book. I will give you some scientific background you will need that will not bore you. There are many books written on the subject that can give you as much scientific information as you require on the subject. However, this book is not about theory and science. It is about the practical approach in managing anxiety, panic attacks and/or depression from a "regular guy" who has lived it and lived through it.

When you are in control of your life then you are truly beating anxiety. Some books will tell you that you can completely get rid of anxiety or panic attacks. Don't fall for this trap. Even if you get to the point of truly managing your anxiety you can easily fall back into anxiety or panic attacks. There are however techniques you can use to get to the point where you want to be in, which is the complete control of your life by fully understanding your condition and not fearing anxiety. This is a long-term process; it does not happen over night. Some people might take three years to get a hold of their life again while others might take five years. It all depends on how committed you are in changing your lifestyle. If you read this book, from cover to cover, you will be on your way to put your anxiety under control. Along the way, you should get help from your psychiatrist especially if you are currently experiencing panic attacks.

As good as a psychiatrist can be no doctor will truly understand you unless they went through the same ordeal you are going through. Some books on this subject are books written by doctors and are greatly scientific and try to teach you things by crunching some statistical figures and trying to map everything into numbers and scales. I feel that this information can be useful in the overall fight and understanding the science behind your condition. However, it comes well short when it comes to the practical methodologies in each individual's struggle with anxiety/panic attack and depression disorders. This is what my book will give you.

Coming from an engineering background I found scientific books easy to understand but at the same time for many situations I found these books impractical. I will not skip over any details of my struggle and will give you the full story even if this means exposing some embarrassing situations/moments of my life. As a former patient of anxiety/panic disorder and depression, I understand what and how you feel and what kind of things you are going through. My mission is to help you. If you keep or use 5% of information that I will tell you throughout



This book is different from any other book. The main difference is that it actually gives you practical techniques that you can use right now instead of boring you with some scientific findings. Sure I will give you some pep talk to make you feel good but I tell it like it is even when it's embarrassing on my account or requires sacrifices on your part. Nobody knows how you feel but those that have gone through the same thing.

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the book, you will be successful and well on your way in beating this disorder. As I have already said, nothing changes over night. If you can improve just a bit you have taken your first steps to your full recovery, which is ultimately you managing your life and not just living your life as a reaction to your anxious fears.

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Assignments and Exercises

- 1) If you haven't done so already and you are suffering from anxiety/panic disorders schedule an appointment with your psychiatrist within the next week to talk about your condition.
- 2) Write down, on a piece of paper, the three most stressful situations in the past week and the ways you could have avoided to be stressed.
- 3) Rent a movie that will make you laugh.
- 4) Do something you haven't done in a while that makes you happy.