

IT'S  
OK  
THAT YOU'RE  
NOT  
OK

Meeting Grief and Loss  
in a Culture That  
Doesn't Understand

MEGAN  
DEVINE

Foreword by *New York Times* bestselling author Mark Nepo



In uncertain times, it's easy for anxiety to run rampant, taking up residence in your heart and your mind. Difficult times make it difficult to find your center. We've pulled this chapter on anxiety from my book, *It's OK That You're Not OK*, in hopes that you find it useful. For whatever you're living, may you find peace amid the chaos. One moment, one circle of calm at a time.

Much love,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Megan". The script is fluid and cursive, with the 'M' and 'G' being particularly prominent.

Megan and the Refuge in Grief team

# 10

## GRIEF AND ANXIETY

### Calming Your Mind When Logic Doesn't Work

Grief changes your body and your mind in strange ways. Cognitive capacity isn't the only brain function that gets wonky. Anxiety—whether it's new to you, or you experienced it before your loss—is a huge issue in grief.

I used to struggle a lot with anxiety.

Driving home from grad school late at night, my tired brain would conjure all manner of horrible, horrible images: things I was helpless to stop from where I was, still hours away from home. I'd imagine I'd left the stove on twelve hours earlier, and the house had burned down. Maybe it was burning right now. Images of my animals suffering flashed in front of my eyes.

It was awful.

With a lot of self-work, insight, and just plain irritation with that pattern, I found ways to manage those fears. In fact, I became so good at redirecting those thoughts that I felt I'd completely moved on. I hadn't had a freak-out like that in well over a decade.

In the months before Matt drowned, I noticed those fears coming back. I would leave the house and begin to panic that

the cats would escape, get stuck somewhere, and die cold and alone and afraid. Or that our dog would get hit by a car, and I wouldn't be there to help. I started to worry whenever Matt was late calling. I'd spin off into imaginary negative fantasies instead of focusing on whatever was actually going on.

I caught myself in a fearful thought-spiral one day in early July. Out loud, I said, "Stop!" Out loud, I said what I have told myself a thousand times and have told clients over and over again: "Worrying about what has not happened is not useful. If something bad does happen, you will deal with it then. It is highly unlikely that anything awful will happen. If it does, you will deal."

Seven days later, the highly unlikely did happen. And you know what? My fear sensors never made a sound. No panic. No anxiety that morning. Nothing. I'd felt entirely, perfectly calm. When I needed my acute sensitivity to all things dangerous and bad, it failed.

In the years following, my anxiety went through the roof. I imagined more bad things happening. I imagined everyone I loved disappearing in an instant, everyone I knew and loved (including myself) in danger, suffering, dead. I was alert for any small indication that things were about to go wrong. It didn't matter that anxiety had proven itself highly ineffective in predicting or preventing catastrophe. Anxiety is an addictive drug, made all the more powerful by knowing that unlikely shit *does* happen, and there is nothing you can do.

I tell you this story because I bet you can relate.

Feelings of anxiety are normal for those who have survived an intense loss or trauma. Inside your grief, the whole world can feel like an unsafe place, one that requires constant vigilance: searching for early warning signs of trouble, guarding against more loss. You rehearse what you would do if you were faced with unthinkable trauma *again*.

If you're struggling with anxiety inside your grief, maybe you've tried to calm yourself down by thinking positive thoughts, by reminding yourself of the goodness all around you, or by asserting the typical safety of everyday life. But those things no longer work when you've already lived the unlikely. Freak accidents, out-of-order deaths, horrible, nightmare events—these things happen. To us. To me. To you. Anxiety, grief, and prior experience are a tricky combination. You don't trust your instincts anymore. Terrible things are possible. Constant vigilance can seem like the only route to take. Danger lurks everywhere. Loss is always waiting for you. You have to be prepared.

The problem is, rather than helping you feel safe, perpetual fear creates a small, hard, painful life that isn't safer than any other life. Your mind becomes an exquisite torture chamber. The future rolls out in front of you in a stream of horrible things. You can't sleep because of your anxiety, and your anxiety gets worse because you aren't sleeping. It's an incessant hamster wheel of fears, attempts at logic, and memory of things gone wrong.

Anxiety is exhausting. It sucks. And it's not even useful, no matter how much it screams that it's real. Anxiety is patently ineffective at managing risk and predicting danger. Most of our fears never come to pass, and as I wrote above, in true emergencies, anxiety is often conspicuously absent.

If anxiety is such a poor predictor of reality, why do we do it? What is it about anxiety that makes it seem so real, so logical, and so impossible to turn off?

## BRAINS DO WHAT THEY DO . . . TOO WELL

Here's the thing: our mind is *made* to imagine dangerous scenarios. It's actually quite brilliant: we're programmed to envision things in the safety of our mind that we could never

risk with our physical bodies. We run scenarios to assess risk, to work out what we might do in a certain situation, to puzzle out how we'd solve a life-or-death problem, so that we don't have to try out those risks with our much more fragile physical selves. On a less life-threatening basis, our brains work out what we'd do with everyday problems as a way to reduce the stress load on the body itself: you think through a problem, finding ways to make things easier or more manageable.

The brain is an internal problem-solving survival mechanism. It's beautiful.

When there is clear and present danger, our brains unleash a cascade of hormones meant to help us quickly escape. The nervous system shifts into high alert. The healthy, well-functioning brain helps us either escape the danger or fight off whatever has threatened our safety. Once the danger has passed, the body is meant to return to its calm, non-anxious, low-stress state.

That cascade of hormones and the resulting flight-or-fight response can also be triggered when we *imagine* stressful, dangerous, or threatening situations. Sometimes imagining a realistic potential danger is useful. The problem, though, is that, especially when we've already experienced a truly dangerous situation, we overuse those great imaginative skills. Each time we imagine multiple *potential* disasters, horrible dangers, all the ways the world can go wrong, we tell our nervous system that there is a current clear and present danger. We cue that flood of hormones that would help us escape. You can't run from an imagined danger, so those stress hormones never dissipate. You imagine more and more and more danger, cueing the body to spring into action it will never take; you never get back to "calm and relaxed."

We push our brains into exhaustion, trying to keep ourselves safe.

It's like a dog chewing at a hotspot—gnawing at the rash makes it itch more, which makes him chew on it more, which

makes it itch more. Fear thoughts create a brain response, which creates a body response, which conditions your thoughts to come up with more fears, which starts the cycle again.

And this is why you can't talk yourself out of anxiety. It's also why you will never run out of terrible problems to solve: your mind is caught in a loop of its own making, always coming up with new threats to manage.

### IMAGINING DANGER IN ORDER TO FEEL SAFE

If it's both ineffective and horrendous to live with, why do we do this to ourselves? It doesn't make logical sense, does it? Honestly, what we're looking for—in any kind of anxiety—is proof of safety. Whether that means physical safety or emotional safety, we all want to know we're safe, cared for, and won't be left alone, unloved, or unprotected. Our mind runs scenarios, often repeatedly, of *not* being safe—of being hurt in some way—so that we can find some scenario, some evidence, that proves we're safe.

In a weird sort of way, it's an understandable response: something in your mind says, "I'm scared," and your brain responds with a cascade of images and hormones to help you find safety. Because you've experienced the world as drastically unsafe at one point, when one fear gets resolved, your mind comes up with another fear, in a perpetual bid for safety: it's a natural survival tool on tilt.

Of course you're anxious. After a death or other massive loss, the whole concept of "safety" gets really sketchy. You can't rely on old comforts of believing that your fears are unlikely to come true. You can't lean on the statistically low risk of certain illnesses or accidents happening. Just because you saw your people half an hour ago does not mean they're still OK *now*. When the ordinary safety of the world has already failed you, how can you ever feel safe here again?

It's not that anxiety is *wrong*; it's more that it's not effective in creating the safety you seek. Here's the thing: no matter what your anxiety tells you, rehearsing disaster will not make you safe. Repeatedly checking in with people to be sure they're *still* safe will never create a lasting sense of safety.

## SHORT-TERM APPROACHES TO ANXIETY

Because anxiety is a survival mechanism run amok, it won't work to just tell yourself to stop it: if you deny your fears, they will get louder. You can't apply logic to a fear-based system. It also won't work to wrap up everyone you love in a protective bubble and never let them out of your sight. Rather than suppress your fears, or frantically try to make the world around you safe, there are other things you can do to enhance your inner sense of security while maintaining a state of alert calm.

Since you're reading this chapter, I assume you're dealing with active anxiety. During active anxiety, it's not always helpful to do some of the more complex practices later in this chapter. Those approaches will help you retrain your mind to a more stable, neutral pattern so that you don't get lost in anxiety as often. But what if you're already in it? Soothing your mind when you're already in an anxiety-spiral and practicing self-care can help in the short term.

### Soothe the System

Remember that anxiety is a brain-based, nervous system response to imagined danger. It's not logical; it's *biological*. Studies in both trauma sciences and neurobiology show that modifying your breathing helps soothe your nervous system when it's agitated, as it is during acute anxiety. I could totally geek out on all the cutting-edge brain science here, but what's

really important is very simple: lengthening your exhale soothes your nervous system, shutting down the flood of stress hormones that trigger anxiety.

When you feel anxious, make your exhale longer than your inhale.

It really is that simple. And that's a good thing—because when you are actively freaking out, remembering one simple direction is far easier than remembering a whole slew of other interventions. Making your exhale longer than your inhale soothes the flight-or-fight response in the nervous system, and the focus on your breath gives you an anchoring thought in your mind rather than chasing one fear thought to the next. That it's simple is great: one option, under your control, always accessible.

During acute anxiety (“acute” meaning your brain is a tangled mess of fear) you might also consider some of the anchoring and calming exercises we talked about in chapter 8. If you pair one of those with lengthening your exhale, you'll help both your body and your brain find a still, calm place.

Did you just panic at the thought of being calm because you might miss something dangerous?

Remember that calming your anxiety is not one bit related to whether something unexpected happens or not. Calming your anxiety is about only that: *calming your anxiety*. The crazy train of fear prevents you from being present to what is, and it most definitely keeps you from enjoying whatever goodness is here in this moment. Anxiety also depletes your energy reserves, makes sleep difficult, and, in general, feels like crap. I don't want that for you.

If you take nothing else from this chapter, practice making your exhale longer than your inhale. It doesn't even have to be a deep breath: just exhale for a moment longer. Experiment with it. See how it goes.

## Tend the Organism

Recognizing anxiety as a *symptom* of something rather than a predictor of reality is a useful distinction. For many people, anxiety increases when they're overtired, not eating well, or exposed to multiple challenges. If you know that your anxiety is connected to how you're feeling physically and emotionally, you can look for early warning signs—parallel markers—that let you intervene before it gets crazy.

The easiest approach is to refer back to the lists you made in chapter 7: that's where you'll find your early warning signs. As your thoughts become more anxious or agitated, it's a cue that you need to turn in, slow down, and care for your physical organism: sleep, eat, rest, move. Addressing these physical needs first can actually reduce a lot of your anxiety.

## LONGER-TERM RESPONSES TO OVERCOME ANXIETY

Figuring out what to do when anxiety wraps you up in knots is important. When you're inside an anxiety spike, it's much more useful to help yourself calm down than it is to investigate the reasons behind it. Transforming your overall response and reaction to life from one of anxiety to a more calm and even state takes some practice, but it's not impossible. There are things you can do to help your overall system not fall into those anxiety habits so easily. Reducing the frequency and overall amount of anxiety you experience has three parts: learning to trust yourself, replacing disaster scenarios with more positive images, and finding a neutral place—neither denying danger nor succumbing to rampant anxiety.

## Presume a Skilled Response

Anxiety is a manufactured feeling state that has nothing to do with current reality: it thrives in an imagined (negative) future. If you keep coming up with imaginary problems, your mind will keep providing imaginary solutions. Because the solution to each scenario is different, the anxious mind will try to cover all possible “what-if” situations, attempting to defuse each one in turn. In a relentless search for safety, it feeds on itself.

Here’s an example: one of my clients is an intelligent, resourceful, calm, and diligent person. After her husband died, she began to obsess about things going wrong in her house, about changing jobs, about whether or not to travel, and any number of other things. She would lie awake at night wondering if she had set the heating system properly. If she had, was it actually working correctly? What would happen if it failed? What if the smoke detectors failed, or the furnace randomly blew up?

One after the other, her mind came up with new disasters. If she solved one, another popped up in its place. That’s the problem with anxiety: you never run out of potential disaster.

Rather than continue to run successive disaster scenarios, coming up with an action plan for each and every one, it’s far more effective and efficient to . . . trust yourself. In the face of multiple challenges presented by your mind, you might say: “I trust myself to handle any problem that comes up with the house. If there’s something I don’t know how to solve, I trust myself to ask for help.”

Self-trust is tricky, but no matter what, you’ve got a bank of success stories to draw from. Large or small, you’ve likely proven that you can face most kinds of challenges. There is no reason to believe you wouldn’t be able to solve these problems yourself, or ask for help if needed.

There’s also the fact that putting out imaginary fires does absolutely nothing to help you prepare for any actual fire. If you have

anxiety over specific things, see if you can identify ways you can lessen the risk of those things happening. Do practical, realistic things, like changing the batteries in your smoke alarms, locking your doors at night, and wearing your bike helmet. Address your fears in concrete ways, but don't let your fears keep you captive. Until and unless an actual need arises, there is no reason to run disaster scenarios.

Instead of creating trouble out of nothing, you might tell yourself: Right now, as far as I know, everything is fine. If a challenge arises—of any kind—I trust myself to respond with skill. If there's something I don't know how to do, I trust that I'll ask for help.

Using a blanket statement of self-trust increases your sense of security far more effectively than running potential disaster-resolution patterns. Over time, you can retrain your mind to self-soothe rather than self-implode.



“But,” you might say, “I seriously *failed!*” Self-trust can feel impossible when loss has shown up in your life. In cases of accident, suicide, prenatal loss, and other losses, it's normal to question yourself. What doesn't help, though, is persecuting yourself from now through all eternity. Maybe you could have done something different. Maybe. And maybe you did what you could with the information you had at the time. And maybe this loss truly had nothing to do with what you “missed,” and you couldn't have changed the outcome.

Regardless of what's accurate, it does you no good to move through the rest of this life afraid to miss something. Courting that kind of perpetual anxiety will only exhaust you to the point where you can't respond with any skill or insight when you actually do need it.

A calm mind and a well-rested body are your best chance at assessing a situation and responding with skill. Relentless self-interrogation, fault finding, and shame will not get you there.

### Imagine the Best Thing Possible

*Oh great, you might think, now I have to be anxious about how anxious my thoughts are because thinking about disaster is making everything worse, and it's more likely to make me less skilled in the event of another emergency.*

Yeah. That's anxiety. It just keeps building on itself.

We've also got that pervasive cultural belief that your thoughts create your reality. A lot of our self-help books and false gurus tell us this, too—that if we were only more aware of our surroundings, if we were more attuned to *detail*, we'd not get into horrible situations. And if we're having a hard time, it's because we caused it somehow. With our thoughts. So there's a lot of cultural support for anxiety: you get what you think of, so you'd better be sure you're thinking the right thoughts. It's your own fault if something goes wrong.

“You create your own reality” is so patently untrue, and so cruel to the grieving heart. Many of us already feel responsible for what's happened, both the death of someone we love, and the fact that we somehow aren't doing our grief “well enough.” While this adage might (and I mean might) have a bare thread of truth in it, for the most part, it's utter junk. Your thoughts can influence how you *respond* to what is, but your thoughts do not create what is.

You are many things, but you are not that powerful. You cannot manifest death or health or loss or grief just by thinking about it. Your thoughts did not create this loss. Your continued anxiety will not make more loss happen. Not being anxious and on guard will not “doom” you to more loss, nor will it protect you from harm.

If thinking could keep people safe, none of us would be grieving. If thoughts alone could prevent illness, accidents, and suffering, we would not have any of these. Magical thinking doesn't control reality.

What your thoughts *will* do is influence how you feel about yourself and about the world around you. The best way to work with your thoughts is to harness your amazing powers of imagination—evident in all those imagined disaster scenarios—in voting for the future you actually want, not the one you don't. Basically, I want you to use your brain's native powers for good, not for anxiety. If you must imagine something, please try imagining the best possible outcome. Let that be your guiding image. Not because it's going to affect anything (in either direction) but because it makes living here easier on you, and I want this easier on you.

If you're scared, and maybe waiting to see how something will unfold, *you* get to decide how you imagine the whole scene going. Given that nothing has happened yet, use your brain to imagine something beautiful.

Let your thoughts create an internal state of calm, and hopeful (if mild) optimism. That's the reality your thoughts can change.

## Find the Middle Ground

The key to managing, or even transforming, anxiety is not in finding a place of safety, but in finding a place of neutrality. We all need reassurance. We all need a sense of safety, and life itself is inherently not "safe." The next moment could bring any number of things, some glorious, some horrendous. The only way I've found to live inside that reality is to tell myself that, currently, I'm not safe, and I'm not in danger either. Every moment is neutral.

That neutrality is what Eastern traditions, and some earlier Western traditions, are talking about when they speak of “nonattachment,” or the calm, clear center. It’s a space of alert calm: neither rehearsing disaster nor falling back into a denial of life’s risks.

In any moment, something bad and something good are equally possible. Peace-of-being is in what we train ourselves to expect. In early grief especially, it may become a process and practice of choosing to believe in a benign moment. Not good, not bad. Not safe, not in danger. Right here, now, in this moment, you are . . . neutral. Those spaces in between, where you can breathe, where there is space—those are the places you want. This is what the ancient teaching practices are about: living in that neutral spot. Which is not at all the same as having equanimity “no matter what,” or about being “above” everything somehow. It’s about seeing the current situation, the current environment, for exactly what it is, without embellishment or future fantasy. To paraphrase Eckhart Tolle: Anxiety is using your imagination to create a future you do not want. So let’s not do that.

If you can’t believe in “safety,” aim yourself toward neutral. It’s a much more stable place than fear.

## THE BIGGER ANSWER TO ANXIETY: WHAT, EXACTLY, DO YOU NEED?

We have so much shame around anxiety; we often pretend we aren’t feeling it. It’s never effective to pretend you aren’t afraid. Pretending you aren’t afraid makes your interpersonal relationships come out wonky and makes you feel incredibly unstable. Hiding your anxiety makes it shoot out sideways: you *act out* of your anxiety rather than *respond* to it.

Again we come back to acknowledgment as the most powerful medicine we have. It may seem counterintuitive, but somehow

telling the truth: “I don’t feel safe in the world right now,” or “I’m afraid my dog will die,” makes things different. Anxiety changes. It softens. Your grip on the outside world relaxes a little bit.

Telling the truth allows you to relax enough to ask yourself what you need in that moment. When you catch yourself imagining disaster scenarios, tell yourself the truth: “I am afraid of more loss.” Lengthen your exhale. Ask yourself what you’re truly looking for: What do you need in this moment? Possible answers to that question might be: reassurance, comfort, attachment, a nap—anything that establishes a truer sense of safety, not a situational one.

If you identify a need of, say, assurance or connection, what other ways might you answer those needs rather than rehearse un-winnable disasters or relentlessly check in about the safety of people you love? You might need more information about a situation, or you might need to actually ask for comfort or connection, rather than manage your fear of losing it.

If you’re out somewhere, feeling scared about imagined threats to your child’s or pet’s safety, maybe you need to head home in order to care for yourself, rather than ignore your anxiety and attempt to push through. That’s another form of self-kindness. Remember that anxiety is often made worse by lack of food or sleep; you might see it as a signal to care for your physical self.

As with most things, there is no one right answer. The important thing is to let yourself ask, “What do I need right now, and how can I best meet that need?”

You won’t always get what you need. But the practice of asking yourself what you need, and taking the most likely-to-be-effective course of action to meet those needs, actually *builds* a sense of safety in the world. As a longer-term approach to anxiety, telling the truth and asking yourself what you need is highly effective. It works where other things cannot.

The phrase “It’s better to put shoes on your feet than to cover the whole world in leather” is what I’m talking about. Safety does not live in the world around you. You can’t control things enough to guard against loss. Safety resides solely in self-advocacy, listening to your own needs below the surface of your fears, and responding accordingly. You cannot prevent loss. Your “safety” resides in your own heart, in how you care for yourself, in how you imagine the world.

Please come to yourself—especially the anxious, fearful, terrified parts—with love and respect. This kind of anxiety is normal. It’s yet another way your mind is trying to reorder the world after your loss. Your mind is trying to keep you safe. Do your best to soothe your hardworking, overworking mind when you can. Tell yourself the truth about your fears. Ask. Listen. Respond. Commit to caring for yourself inside whatever comes. Above all, be *kind* to yourself. As author Sharon Salzberg is known to say, “You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.”



TRY  
THIS

## ANXIETY MAP

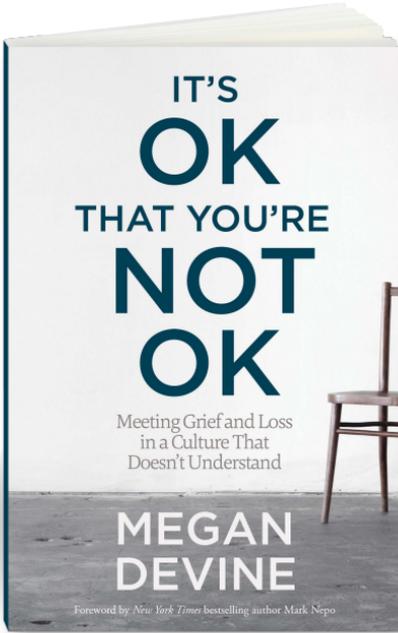
Are there patterns to my anxiety? When is it more noticeable? What are my early warning signs of exhaustion that may lead to more anxiety?

If you aren't sure what sets off anxiety, you might start logging the circumstances or situations that make your anxiety worse. Just as important, take note of what's been happening on days where your anxiety is lessened, or nonexistent. What's different on those days?

When you feel anxious about a specific situation, ask yourself what the actual need is under the fear. Most often, there is a need for connection, reassurance, or stability. What needs do you identify? What are some more effective ways to get those needs met?

What would kindness to self look like in response to your anxiety?

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**Megan Devine, LPC**, is an author, speaker, and grief consultant who advocates for emotional change on a cultural level. Her book, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*, is considered required reading by grievors and professionals alike.

Together with her team, she facilitates a growing catalog of courses, events, and trainings to help grieving people, and those who wish to support them, learn the skills they need to carry pain that cannot be fixed. For more, visit [refugeingrief.com](http://refugeingrief.com).