

Your anxiety isn't going anywhere: Here's how to put it to work

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NYU neuroscientist Wendy Suzuki. Credit: New York University

In an effort to neutralize some of the shame and stigma associated with the condition, NYU neuroscientist Wendy Suzuki likes to begin her talks by citing that as much as 90 percent of the world's population suffers

from what she calls "everyday" anxiety—as distinct from clinical disorders, for which 28 percent of Americans have received a diagnosis at some point in their lifetime. And with the pandemic still dragging on well into its second year, she's begun to amend her estimate, suggesting that the proportion of those of us who fall into the first category is now likely about 100 percent.

So we've all got it—whether it comes in the form of difficulty focusing, clamming up in meetings or in [social situations](#), or tossing and turning with nighttime worries about family, finances, or the future. And, of course, we'd all be better off and happier without it, right?

Not quite, Suzuki says. Sure, it isn't pleasant, but it isn't meant to be, she suggests, pointing to its ancient evolutionary purpose: to alert us to potential threats and help us come up with a plan to make sure we stay safe. Through her research on the brain—which includes work on the formation of short- and long-term memory, as well as how [aerobic exercise](#) improves memory, learning, and higher cognition—Suzuki has come to respect and even appreciate [anxiety](#). While it can grow out of proportion and become destructive in our modern lives, Suzuki argues that the solution isn't trying to avoid or get rid of anxiety (likely impossible anyway), but rather consciously transforming it into something we can use.

"Like a sailboat needs wind in order to move, the brain-body needs an outside force to urge it to grow, adapt, and not die," she writes in a new book, "[Good Anxiety: Harnessing the Power of the Most Misunderstood Emotion](#)." In it, she draws on neuroscience and psychology research as well as her own personal experiences with anxiety—including an especially difficult period following the sudden death of her brother a few years ago—to explore how, with reflection and reframing, anxiety can grant you six superpowers.

Those are: "the ability to strengthen your overall physical and emotional resilience; perform tasks and activities at a higher level; optimize your mindset; increase your focus and productivity; enhance your social intelligence; and improve your creative skills." Using [case studies](#) to show how the dozens of strategies she outlines can be used to cultivate those strengths in real-life situations, Suzuki also includes questionnaires, reflection prompts, and planning exercises that readers can use to tailor her guidance to their own needs.

Appropriately for these times, Suzuki has also worked the science behind these techniques into her undergraduate Brain and Behavior course for this semester, placing special emphasis on the parts of the nervous system—such as the cortisol system, the sympathetic nervous system, and the parasympathetic nervous system—that play a central role in mental health. In the second half of the course, students will get the chance to apply what they've learned by conducting classroom experiments to test the effects of anxiety-mitigating interventions such as five-minute meditation sessions or 10-minute walks around Washington Square Park. (This is a favorite subject for Suzuki, whose recent studies on the many ways exercise changes the brain led to a popular TED Talk and best-selling book, *Healthy Brain, Happy Life*.)

At the height of midterms season, NYU News spoke with Suzuki about how to take the anxiety you feel about school, career, family, finances, public health, politics, or the warming planet and put it to work for you using a few science-backed tips that are applicable in all kinds of personal, professional, and academic scenarios.

Tired of "resilience" as a pandemic buzzword? Try focusing on Suzuki's concept of the "activist mindset" instead.

You've heard it over and over lately: resilience is the ability to adapt and recover from hardship in our lives. But how are you supposed to do that,

when you feel anxious about hardships that keep piling up? Suzuki, who has devoted her research career to the concept of brain plasticity—the remarkable ability of the adult brain to undergo significant change—says that it starts with making a conscious choice. When you develop what she calls an "activist mindset" toward reframing your anxiety, she writes "you become able to assert more top-down control of your attitude and orientation toward the bad, uncomfortable feelings associated with anxiety, shifting both your experience of the bad feelings and your belief that you can channel them in positive ways."

In order to change how you think about the future, it might help to start with the past. Suzuki suggests that when you're struggling with a current issue, thinking back on other emotional trials might actually give you the insights, confidence, or creativity you need to address your next hurdle. In the book, she cites the example of how a student dealing with anxiety about public speaking found comfort in reflecting on how he had previously learned to live with worries about his finances.

"Because mindset plays such an important role, one can reconceptualize the aftermath of going through an anxious situation," she says. "You can go from 'you know, I don't know if I can do it again,' to 'Look, that was hard—I had all the anxiety symptoms, and I didn't feel good, but I got through it.' That can be a really powerful moment."

But adopting a positive, change-oriented mindset shouldn't mean ignoring negative feelings.

Is there such a thing as too much reframing? Suzuki thinks there might be, warning against adopting an outwardly peppy "everything is great!" performance that masks your true feelings. "I want to be clear: this book is not going to get rid of those uncomfortable feelings that come with anxiety," she says. "The negative aspect is what's protective—it's critical. Those feelings are there to help direct us to what we value. We want to

feel them and learn from them, rather than being beaten down by them."

In *Good Anxiety*, Suzuki writes about an unhappy time in her life when the pressure to be seen as "energetic, happy, and active" ended up making her feel "even more anxious and lonely. The breakthrough came when she realized that her "anxiety was a big red flashing sign" showing her what was missing from her life (in this case friendship and social connections). Once she had that information, she could make a plan for how to prioritize that need.

The next time you're especially nervous about something—a meeting at work, say—Suzuki suggests reflecting on what those nerves can tell you, rather than beating yourself up for feeling them. It might be that the upcoming opportunity represents something really important to you, so you want to make sure to put extra effort into your preparation.

Whenever possible, convert your worries into to-do lists.

In *Good Anxiety*, Suzuki suggests channeling "what if lists"—those doomsday scenarios that tend to pop into your head just before you fall asleep—into action items. It's an exercise that can help convert the energy that anxiety brings into something productive, whether the worry is about something small and hyperspecific, like "what if I offended a colleague with that curt email I sent today?" or related to a much more complex and seemingly intractable problem such as climate change. In the first case, the action item might be as simple as sending a follow up the next day. For the second, individual actions you can take might include eliminating [single-use plastics](#) from your home and choosing public transportation over driving.

Why does checking something off a list bring such relief? That goes all the way back to how anxiety evolved, Suzuki explains. "When our worry was about a lion or tiger or something, the resolution to that was always

an action—like getting away." Even when your worry is something more cerebral, she says, taking an action in response can still give you that same satisfaction.

Your phone: spend less time looking at it. (Yes, it's really that simple.)

"Does the nonceasing overstimulation create the anxiety, or does anxiety simply become more noticeable and intense because of the overstimulation?" Suzuki writes of our relationship with our devices. "It's a bit of a chicken and egg problem and both are true."

Bottom line: If you suspect that being online all the time makes you feel keyed up and yet unable to focus on anything in particular, you're right. Receiving notifications from an array of apps or having dozens of tabs open encourages you to attempt constant multitasking, which can "put too much of a cognitive load on our executive functions," Suzuki writes, triggering—you guessed it—more anxiety. To get back your working memory, concentration, and deep thinking capabilities, Suzuki suggests changing your settings to limit "screen time," or even just putting your phone in another room when you need to concentrate on work or school.

Recent revelations about how social media platforms are designed to be addictive, and have been shown to negatively impact self-esteem, especially in adolescents, only underscore the urgent need to unplug. "There are a bunch of smart people preying on us by analyzing what we click on and what will make us keep clicking, whether that's Instagram clothes or Instagram bodies or Instagram items that you don't have but want to have," Suzuki says. She recommends replacing the time you would spend scrolling with time connecting with friends or, if you must be on social media, only engaging with content that genuinely makes you feel good. A tea drinker, she saves her Instagram "likes" for pottery studio accounts that post artistic photos of beautiful tea cups and tea pots, for example.

Let your own particular anxieties teach you how to show empathy and compassion for others.

Suzuki says that when she's only given a few minutes to talk about what she calls the "gifts" of anxiety, this is the one she highlights.

"Pay attention to where your anxiety is drawing your attention," she writes. "Use those moments in your life as a starting point for reaching out to others. If you have anxiety as the new person at work, take the time to talk to the other new hires to make them feel at ease. If you struggle with balancing kids and work, take the time to give a word of encouragement to the other new mothers and fathers in your circle."

This can be an especially useful technique for addressing social anxiety, Suzuki says, noting that she now makes a point to linger after her lectures to give students who are too nervous to speak up during class a chance to ask her questions one on one. "Before I was a professor," she says, "I had many, many years as a student being afraid of asking a question because I didn't want to look stupid in front of everybody. Now I realize that experience has given me the superpower of empathy in the classroom."

Why does that kind of gesture make you feel better? Suzuki points to studies that show that when you do something kind for someone else, that action releases dopamine, one of the neurotransmitters that plays a big role in your brain's reward system. In noticing where your own anxiety is drawing your attention, Suzuki writes, you may find "clues to what icebreakers and lifelines other people might be grateful for you to extend," which both makes you feel better and spreads compassion as you help others who are in the same boat.

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