

*REAL-LIFE STORIES ABOUT
ANXIETY*

FREAKING OUT

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Introduction

WHY AM I FREAKING OUT?

That sweaty, gut-clenching, suffocating, racing-heart feeling. That I-can't-catch-my-breath, panicky feeling. That I-can't-stop-thinking-about-this feeling. That I-am-desperate-to-run-away or I'm-too-scared-to-move feeling. Or that dull, never-ending sense that there's something wrong. What is it? Anxiety.

But what is anxiety?

To answer this question, it can be helpful to compare anxiety to fear. So what's the difference between anxiety and fear? Well, if you're hiking on a narrow trail in the mountains in the rain, your heart might be pounding because you're *afraid* you'll fall. If you're at home in bed and your heart's pounding because you're thinking about how on a camping trip you might take someday, there might be a steep path, and you might fall on it, and you might break your leg, and it won't heal, that's *anxiety*.

Fear is a response to a *known or actual* danger or threat. Anxiety is a response to a *possible or imagined* danger or threat. The

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physical and emotional reactions caused by both fear and anxiety may be very similar, but what sets them off is different.

Anxiety (or worrying) is with us from the time we're babies and cry when our parents are out of sight. As we get a little older, our imagination can take us into strange territory—seeing the monster under the bed, the dragon in the closet. But just when we put those fears to rest, a new crop takes their place: the monster gives way to worry about not fitting in at school.

Nobody can escape feeling anxious

In fact, we're hardwired to have a certain amount of anxiety so that we stay safe. Worried about getting hit by a car? That makes you look both ways. It also helps us focus on what's important to us. Worried about failing a math test? That makes you pay attention in class and study.

Sometimes you feel anxiety for no apparent reason, and alleviating it isn't as simple as studying or looking around before stepping into the street. Life can throw some mean punches, and your anxiety level about that can reach the stratosphere. Anxiety might be a natural response to the biggies that life can hand you, like the death of a parent or endless bullying or heavy pressures in school.

Anxiety can be worse when you're in your teens

When you get to be a teenager, anxiety becomes the new normal. So many rapid changes are occurring in your body and brain, pretty much everyone feels it. You're more self-aware than you used to be, and that's good. It means you're ready to begin taking care of yourself. But there's a downside: The stakes are higher. Family life can get rockier because you and your parents have to figure out ways for you to take on more adult rights and responsibilities, like driving and sharing the chores. Schoolwork is harder, and it matters more: doing well in school can translate into a good job later.

Having friends also gets more complicated as hormones kick in and love enters the picture. The fact is, it's hard to navigate school, to please your parents, and to make and keep good friends. It's hard to recognize and stand up to peer pressure around being cool, sex, alcohol, and drugs. No wonder anxiety is a part of growing up.

Sometimes there's no obvious reason to be anxious, but you still feel it like a straightjacket, cheating you out of enjoying your life. That's when it's time to worry about being worried—and to do something about it. That could mean telling someone you trust or asking to see a counselor.

We all experience anxiety, but it's a sliding scale. Some of us have temperaments that make us less anxious; others seem preset to have a lot more. Neurology and genetics definitely play a role: it's common for anxiety to run in families, for example. But what happens to us as kids, and the environment we grow up in, can also cause the scale to tilt in a negative direction. Even a small tendency to worry can erupt into full-blown panic if our lives go a certain way and we don't get help.

The thirteen young people who tell their stories here all coped with excessive anxiety when they were teens. Each of them faced periods of extreme stress, and each of them found a way to manage that stress and move beyond it. Things *did* get better.

These stories are tough but they're also hopeful. Although it's hard to believe when anxiety has you in its grip, there *are* ways to eliminate, or at least to diminish, it. The first step to overcoming excessive anxiety is recognizing what it is.

If you suffer from anxiety, or think that you might, I hope that reading these stories will help you see that it doesn't have to take over your mind or prevent you from living your life fully. You can live with far less (or even none) of that sweaty, gut-clenching, suffocating, heart-racing feeling.



I
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Heavy Losses

CELIA

I have so many happy memories of my childhood, tearing around the neighborhood with a pack of kids, darting in and out of one another's houses. The families on our street looked out for one another. In winter we'd play hockey on backyard rinks and go sledding in the park. In summer we'd run through sprinklers, screaming for joy, or splash around in the huge plastic pool that my dad filled up for us every June. Then when I was ten, everything changed. The years that came after were full of longing for what I had lost.

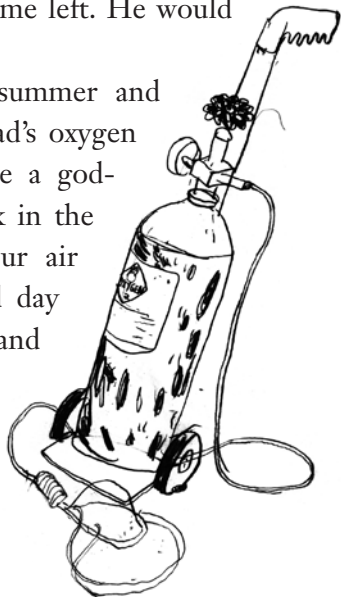
The first loss was huge, as huge as my dad. He was a mountain of a man, three hundred pounds and six-and-a-half feet tall. He was also the gentlest person ever. When I was afraid of huge dogs or scary dreams, he was there to protect me. The safest place in the world was sitting on our saggy leather couch, his giant arms wrapped around my big sister, my little brother, and me. He made up hilarious stories and pretend-wrestled us until we gasped from laughing. Sometimes at dinner, out of the blue, he'd look around and tell us he was the luckiest man in the world.

The unthinkable

My dad was a heavy smoker but we were completely taken aback when he developed lung cancer. When he told us, my sister cried and my brother didn't understand. I wasn't afraid because I couldn't even imagine losing him. That winter was bitter and stormy. On snow days, when I didn't have to go to school, he'd take me to chemo with him. Afterward we'd go to our favorite diner for fried chicken. It became normal for me. I knew cancer was bad but I always thought, *My dad's not going to die. He's a superhero. When I get older, I'm going to tell people that my dad survived lung cancer and it's going to be pretty awesome.*

That spring I turned eleven, and my dad had many weeks of radiation treatment. Then, in June, he had a seizure while bringing the groceries in from the car. I was terrified. Mom drove him to the hospital while we waited at home into the evening. My sister made us tomato soup and grilled-cheese sandwiches that I couldn't eat. When Mom came home, she looked totally wiped. She sat us down and explained that the cancer had spread to Dad's brain. He would be coming home from the hospital to die. We freaked out, wailing and shrieking. She said he wanted to be with us and didn't have much time left. He would need lots of peace and quiet.

School had just ended for the summer and the house was anything but quiet. Dad's oxygen machine beeped constantly and made a god-awful whirring noise. We were smack in the middle of a huge heat wave and our air conditioner was broken. Fans buzzed day and night. We kept all the lights off and the blinds closed. When our clothes got soaked with sweat, my mom did another load of laundry and the noise



of the machine shook the floor. Dad couldn't climb the stairs anymore so he rested on the recliner in the living room. If I sat on the leather couch, I had to peel myself off, so I lay on the carpet next to him with my arms and legs spread out. The first week Dad joked and told stories. The second week he fell into a deep sleep and never woke up.

My mortality thing

A few weeks after the funeral, my mom went through the house like a roadrunner, packing up Dad's things. "I can't stand that his clothes are here and he's not," she told us. We each got to pick things to keep. I chose his football jersey and his favorite sweater. On bad days I wrapped them around me, comforted by the familiar smell of tobacco and soap.

A lot of kids have an immortality thing. They think they're invincible. I never felt that. From age eleven on, death was real to me. Our grief was like an invisible elephant in the room. A lot of our family conversations involved my dad. "Remember when we went there and Daddy said—?" Just mentioning his name would make us go quiet. The sadness was so heavy we'd each have to go away and deal with it. It felt so personal we didn't want to talk about it. Without meaning to, we were drifting apart.

Any kind of loss filled me with dread. My grandmother sold her farm and it felt like I'd lost another living breathing thing. My best friend was late to meet me at the mall, and by the time she showed up, I was shaking, convinced she'd been kidnapped.

It got so that every time my mom left the house, I wanted to throw my arms around her knees, like I used to when the babysitter came. Even if it was only a quick trip to the grocery store, I'd get a wave of panic in my chest. *What if she gets into a car accident? What if that was the last time I'll ever see her?*