

How to Turn Bad Anxiety Into Good Anxiety



By [Kira M. Newman](#) | [Greater Good Magazine](#)

Anxiety can feel like a heavyweight that we didn't ask to carry. Who wouldn't love to get rid of it?

But neuroscientist Wendy Suzuki wants to challenge the way we look at our anxiety. In fact, her new book is called [*Good Anxiety: Harnessing the Power of the Most Misunderstood Emotion*](#).

If you're skeptical, so was I. But Suzuki's point is that anxiety is a natural human emotion, one that evolved to serve a purpose. We feel anxious when there is some kind of danger; it primes our body to fight or flee from that danger, in hopes that we'll end up better off (i.e., alive). In the same way,

our modern anxieties can be a warning signal for things that are wrong: not enough rest, too much multitasking, isolation from others. Our anxious energy alerts us to change our lives for the better, she argues.

“If we simply approach it as something to *avoid, get rid of, or dampen*, we not only *don't* solve the problem but actually miss an opportunity to leverage the *generative power* of anxiety,” she writes.

To do that, we first need to turn down the volume of our anxiety, so that we can listen to what it has to say. Meant for people with everyday anxiety (not anxiety disorders), *Good Anxiety* explains how to do that in order to make your life more productive, creative, and connected. In our Q&A, Suzuki highlights some of the ideas from her book.

Kira M. Newman: How is good anxiety different from bad anxiety?



Wendy Suzuki, Ph.D. ©
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Photography

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xiety is the feeling of fear or worry typically associated with situations of uncertainty

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I call the book *Good Anxiety* because the emotion of anxiety, which is part of our normal human emotional landscape, and that underlying stress response that comes when we have anxiety, evolved to protect us. In fact, as we evolved, it was critical for our survival because back in those times, most of our threats were physical threats to our lives—lions, tigers, and bears. If there was that crack of a twig that launched you into anxiety, then it was absolutely critical that you had this stressful fight-or-flight response so that you could either fight the bear or run away from the bear.

Good anxiety comes with a better awareness that anxiety is protective, and going through all the exercises and using the tools in my book allows you to take advantage of what anxiety originally evolved to do, which is to put us into action that will give us a better outcome.

Today, I'm the first to acknowledge that nobody is feeling particularly protected by their anxiety, but the reason for that is that we have the equivalent of twigs cracking all around us all the time: the weather reports, the news cycle, Instagram, all of these things are perceived as threats and cause for worry, fear, anxiety.

□KMN: What is the difference between good and bad anxiety in

the body?

WS: Chronic Anxiety and stress are very, very bad for basically all our systems in our bodies. High levels of the stress hormone cortisol can first damage and then kill cells in two key areas of the brain that we need for optimum performance: the hippocampus (critical for long-term memory) and the prefrontal cortex (critical for focus and decision making). But it's not just the brain. Chronic anxiety has detrimental effects on your heart, on your immune system.

Good anxiety is basically, going back to 2.5 million years ago, how it evolved to be helpful; it is that warning system that helps put you into action, but then it subsides. Most people have all heard of the fight-or-flight system—that's the stress system, it makes your heart rate go up and you can run away really fast. Well, people don't realize that through evolution in parallel with the fight-or-flight system evolved an equal and opposite part of our nervous system that's nicknamed the "rest-and-digest" part of the nervous system, or parasympathetic nervous system. It's basically the de-stressing part of our nervous system. That is what we need to activate to bring ourselves back to equilibrium when we're in a stressful state.

KMN: You have a whole section of the book with lots of different tools to help us decrease bad anxiety. How do we figure out where to start?

WS: Let me give everybody my top two go-to's for using the tools to decrease anxiety because they're fast, they're easy, they work, and there's a lot of science behind them, including science that I've done in my lab.

So tool number one is breathwork. Just simple, deep breathing. I recommend a box breathing approach: inhaling on a four-count, holding at the top for four counts, exhaling on a four-count, holding at the bottom for four counts. This works

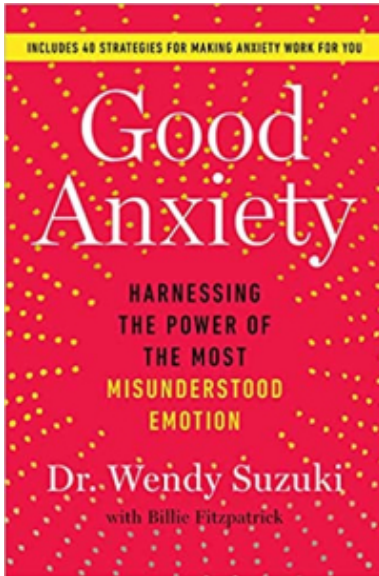
because it is literally activating that parasympathetic nervous system. There's a reason why monks for hundreds and hundreds of years have turned to breathwork to calm themselves down, to get into a meditative state. They may not have known the term "parasympathetic nervous system," but that is exactly what that deep breathwork is doing.

Number two go-to is moving your body. I'm not talking about marathon running—I'm talking about going outside, walking around the block, walking around your dining room table if you are isolating. Moving your body is activating a whole bunch of neurochemicals released in your brain. I like to say that every single time you move your body, it's like you're giving your brain a wonderful bubble bath of neurochemicals, including dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins. I'm sure people have noticed that when they go for a walk, they go outside when they can't take it anymore, they feel better when they come back.

I start with the breath because it's easiest to do. You can do it in the middle of an anxiety-provoking situation, and nobody even knows you're doing it (it's hard to do some jumping jacks in the middle of an anxiety-provoking situation, that's a little bit awkward).

KMN: What interesting research about anxiety would be helpful for readers to know about?□

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[Good Anxiety: Harnessing the Power of the Most Misunderstood Emotion](#) (Atria Books, 2021, 304 pages).

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These have turned out to be significantly effective for the immediate reduction of anxiety levels, which is great. YouTube gives you free access to hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of short and long yoga, breathwork, even short movement exercises. Not to mention songs if you just want to stand up and dance, which is one of my favorite ways to move your body, especially if you're all alone dancing in your living room.

Have these things in your back pocket so you're not searching on YouTube as your anxiety attack is developing. It can be five, 10 minutes of this activity that can significantly decrease your anxiety levels.

KMN: What do we tend to do in those moments when we're starting to feel anxious that is counterproductive?

WS: I think it's very common to start to be anxious about being anxious, so you have a meta-anxiety going on. You're feeling yourself going into anxiety and that just makes you even more anxious and brings you down into the void of anxiety even faster.

The goal or the promise of *Good Anxiety* is that when you start to feel that—instead of saying, “Oh no, I’m starting to feel anxious, what do I do?”—you have 10 possible things that you can do right now (depending on the situation) that you’ve already tested, that you know you can do, that you know you like, that can immediately work. Pull it out of your back pocket, use it right there, and that will quell your anxiety.

KMN: What do people do once they’ve turned down the volume of anxiety? □

WS: Step two is learning about what that anxiety is telling you about your values, your life, your lifestyle. You can ask yourself: *Why did I get anxious? What caused that? What can I understand about this that I could address in the future, perhaps in a different way?* Once you turn the volume down on anxiety, it allows you to step back and learn and contemplate what this anxiety is telling you about your values, about how you’re living your life, about the patterns in your life.

That thing that causes me anxiety may never change. I’ve had many of my anxieties from the time that I was very little. I talk a lot about my own anxieties since I covered them in the book, and one of the oldest that I talk about is social anxiety. I was a very, very shy, awkward kid. All through high school and college, I always had that fear of asking questions in class, and to this day I get scared of social situations.

So I find myself thinking, “OK, well that’s always going to be there, how can I make that easier for myself?” So, go with friends, make sure I have somebody (either a new friend or an old friend) that I can talk to that eases my way in. While I have social anxiety and it always makes me nervous to make new friends, I have this human desire to be part of a social group, and my dear friends are some of the most comforting elements in my whole life.

KMN: And the third step in this process is to reap the

benefits of anxiety? What does that mean?

WS: There are six different gifts or superpowers that I talk about, and the easiest one to understand and implement for anybody is the superpower of productivity that comes from your specific anxiety.

Here's how that works. A very, very common manifestation of anxiety is that "what if" list that comes in your head: *What if I get sick with COVID, what if I don't get an A, what if I can't remember what the professor said on this part of the test?*

The superpower that comes with that anxiety-induced what-if list is shifting that into a to-do list. So, you're worried about failing a particular exam. Obviously, to-do: Find a friend to study with, find a tutor, study these particular three lectures that were confusing to you.

Everything, including existential threats of global warming—*what if the world gets too hot?*—there are 10 things that everybody can do to decrease their carbon footprint, and it takes a single Google search to figure that out and to actually do it. I haven't been confronted with anything that it doesn't work for.

Good anxiety is using the activation energy of that anxiety-induced stress response to get something done, to take that warning signal and do something with it, whether that's a study for that test, or make that appointment for your vaccination if you choose to do so, or consult your financial advisor if you're worried about money. In completing the to-do, you help resolve that feeling of anxiety, and it makes you more productive.

KMN: What else would you like readers to know?

WS: I guess I would say that my wish for everybody who reads the book and dives into all the tools is that they come out

with a more fulfilling, more creative, and overall less stressful life in bringing these tools and approaches into their lives to flip their bad anxiety to good. That's what I found as I've practiced these tools, and so that is what I hope for all of the readers.

About the Author



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Kira M. Newman is the managing editor of *Greater Good*. Her work has been published in outlets including the *Washington Post*, *Mindful* magazine, *Social Media Monthly*, and Tech.co, and she is the co-editor of [The Gratitude Project](#). [Follow her on Twitter!](#)