



9 Rules To Hack Relationship Anxiety

A workbook to help you harness anxiety, secure confident connections and protect the love you deserve.

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9 Hacks For Relationship Anxiety

In the months leading up to the publication of my book, *Hack Your Anxiety*, I found myself thinking a lot about how people experienced anxiety, and what areas of their life they felt were most impacted by it. What I kept hearing over and over was that it was people's relationships that seemed to be driving their highest anxiety.

Having spent the past two decades helping people work through anxiety and cultivate more satisfying relationships, I knew too well the common insecurities people faced in their search for meaningful connection, and had spent years honing key strategies to help. Just before my book came out, I compiled these 9 "hacks" in an article called, "What to do when your relationship causes anxiety" for my blog.

The article struck a chord with thousands of readers around the world.

People need guideposts to help them work with the poignant anxiety so often spurred by love.

That's why I created this workbook, expanding these key concepts and adding questions for you to consider as well as suggestions for how you can apply each of their principles to your relationship anxiety.

Now it's time to hack your relationship anxiety. Relationship confidence and satisfying connections are waiting for you.

Warmly,

Alicia



A WORKBOOK TO HELP YOU Feel Empowered, Confident & Secure

I help people, lots of them. Sensitive, empathic, and gifted people who are often in relationships that feel uncomfortable and confusing.

Most of the time, they mistake their anxiety for a symptom rather than a tool, and can feel pretty spooked by anxiety cropping up in relationships when all they want to feel is secure and loved. Worse, they worry their anxiety is strangling the love they want, often redoubling efforts to avoid anxiety and get themselves under control.

Being more attuned to how anxiety complicates their lives, rather than how it steers them, anxiety sufferers can fall prey to insecurity and doubt when anxiety strikes, feeling frustrated with themselves when they can't just relax. Deep fears of inadequacy or feelings of doom can confuse them, and leave them worrying something is really wrong with them on top of everything else. Sound familiar?

It's time to start rethinking relationship anxiety, so you can start using it to your advantage and stop its chokehold on your relationship confidence.

If your relationship is causing you anxiety, here are 10 hacks to help you harness anxiety and use it to secure the love you deserve.

01. Make Friends With Your Relationship Worries

Relationship anxiety can be common, especially if you or your partner is prone to worrying, or struggle to communicate clearly. But that doesn't mean relationship anxiety is a bad thing, even if it can be uncomfortable and confusing.

Relationship anxiety can help keep you honest about the delicate and complicated process of determining how you are feeling in your relationship. Nothing is wrong with you if you feel anxiety; anxiety just plays dirty to jar you out of complacency to protect the things that matter most. So long as you don't let yourself be your anxiety, it can teach you a great deal about your relationship.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS...

- How has your anxiety been dangerous, or hurt you? In what ways have you tried to resist and avoid anxiety? How has being afraid of your anxiety escalated it and confused you?
- How often do you fear you can't handle your anxiety, or that something is wrong with you for feeling it?
- How has your anxiety helped, served, or protected you? What are some ways that your relationship anxiety tunes you into the things you care about most?
- According to science, how you think about relationship anxiety itself can help determine how it will affect you. What might a more positive attitude toward anxiety look like in your life?
- What could your anxiety teach you if you could be curious and envision it as a tool?

ASSIGNMENT...

Visualize how you could bring more curiosity, acceptance, and even gratitude to your relationship anxiety, and allow it more space to breathe. Try personifying it as a dedicated, but prickly "friend" looking out for your best interests, rather than an evil tyrant looking to steal your happiness? Rather than pushing it away or becoming afraid, a mindset of curiosity will help invite anxiety into your and help prepare you to listen to the messages it is trying to signal.

02. Discover The Common Themes In Your Relationship Anxiety

Having reframed anxiety and gotten to know your relationship sensitivities, now you're ready to acknowledge and name the relationship anxiety you're feeling (this actually lowers your distress according to research). Are you feeling a normal amount of protective anxiety, or is there something more significant worrying you? Understanding how you are feeling, and where your anxiety is coming from is key to understanding how to use it effectively.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS...

- How do you feel anxious in your relationship? If this doesn't come easily to you, think back to previous relationships with past partners, friends and family. Then, write a list using the prompt, When I think about my relationship I feel... and fill in feelings (i.e. worried, safe, scared, secure, anxious, alone, loved, cared for, calm).
- When you think about your relationship, what worries you? Write a list using the prompt, When I think about my relationship I worry that... and fill in your thoughts about what has happened, what is happening, and what might happen in the future.
- And if those worries were true, or if you continued to feel the way you are feeling, then what would happen? And how do you feel anticipating that? How much does this anxiety define the feelings you're experiencing in your relationship now?

ASSIGNMENT...

Spend some time considering the ways relationship anxiety signals something you care about deeply. Prioritize your answers, and find the patterns in your answers. What key themes emerge that are worrying you most? And how much are you worrying about your anxiety?

03. Tease Out The Difference Between Your Rational & Irrational Worries

Relationship anxiety can be just about you, and the various insecurities you bring to every relationship, or relationship anxiety can reflect stresses in your particular relationship. Determining reasonable relationship anxiety from your own insecurity is important, and not always as simple as it sounds. The clearer you get on what's driving your anxiety, the easier this will be to answer.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS...

- In determining your key relationship fears, sorting rational, reasonable worries from irrational, unreasonable ones is critical. If you aren't sure, ask yourself where is the evidence? my anxiety is reasonable. Irrational anxiety tends to be powerfully felt but lack evidence to support it.
- Another angle to tease out rational from irrational anxiety is to ask whether a worry is probable, or simply possible. Applied to the common fear of plane crashes, it is possible for a plane to crash, but not probable.

ASSIGNMENT...

Take a moment to weigh factual evidence against your core relationship anxieties. How reasonable and likely is your anxiety to transpire? How reasonable are your feelings about it? Whereas, what relationship anxiety is powerfully felt, but likely overblown or outsized given the evidence in your relationship? Aim to tease out (and hold onto) the rational anxiety, and discard (reframe) the irrational as overblown and unlikely. What reasonable relationship anxiety is left?

PRO TIP...

The more generalized your feelings of insecurity are in your life, the more likely these feelings will exacerbate your relationship anxiety, and confound it. This is where you can create narratives that feel true but don't fully reflect the realities of your situation. By contrast, the less generalized your insecurity, the more likely your relationship anxiety stems from your relationship.

04. Confront The Ghosts From Your Past

Experiences from childhood and previous relationships can flare and complicate current relationship anxiety if you don't notice and confront their presence. Unresolved conflicts from the past can confuse anxiety's signal, add to your anxiety load, and drive irritability, impatience, and over-reactivity. Confronting these ghosts from the past requires nothing other than recognition – both that you've been triggered by a similar situation, and that the current situation is similar but not the same as the past. Identifying these distinctions can reduce anxiety, and allow for focus to the actual problems at hand, like your communication, the time you're spending together, or how you are feeling.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS...

- What relationship anxiety seems “outsized” for the current situation and reflective of other similar situations from the past, or “buttons”?
- What anxiety in your relationship feels familiar, or similar to painful situations from the past?
- If both are at play, how much of your anxiety could be driven by “ghosts” from the past, and how much reflects your current situation, independently?

ASSIGNMENT...

If you suspect “ghosts” from the past are at play, the key is focus on them and call them out. Look to sort which feelings belong to the past and which belong to the present, and name them. Naming (and placing in context) your feelings is one of the most powerful way regain control of them, so you can direct their energy where it is needed most: your present relationship.

05. Learn How General Life Worries Creep Into Your Relationship

Anxiety is a squirrely emotion that doesn't always "respect boundaries" when it comes to various areas of our life. If you are anxious in one area of your life, it isn't hard to feel anxiety in other areas too. This is called overgeneralization, and it is a common symptom of elevated anxiety, where anxiety from one area of life bleeds into another. If you are feeling anxiety and stress in other areas of your life – even good stress like when you are striving for growth and success – your relationship could be bearing the brunt of your increased focus on other priorities.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS...

- Does your relationship anxiety feel like the kind of anxiety you feel in your professional life?
- Does your relationship anxiety remind you of any familiar family dynamic?
- Does your relationship anxiety remind you of a conflict you wrestle with in yourself?

ASSIGNMENT...

As you reflect on your relationship anxiety, are there similar ways this same anxiety exists in other areas of your life? As you find commonalities, aim to detangle them. Sort out work, personal, or family anxiety from your relationship anxiety, and see what relationship anxiety actually remains. This will help further distill the relationship anxiety most deserving of your focus.

06. Tune Into *Your Voice*

Beware of family, friends, religious, and societal pressures that can be very real, and flare relationship anxiety. Insidious and often tough to differentiate from our own values, expectations absorbed from others can create inner conflicts, that can confuse and often obscure deciding whether this is the right relationship, or what it would take to make it so. Distilling your own desires from those of well-meaning others is critical to being able to understand, and channel, your relationship anxiety effectively.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS...

- Are there people in your life who tend to amplify your relationship anxiety?
- Does anyone in your life feel more anxiety about your relationship than you do?
- Do any of their worries for your relationship ring louder in your mind than your own?
- What particular worries of others could be amplifying your current relationship anxiety?

ASSIGNMENT...

As you reflect on your relationship anxiety, and the impact of well-meaning and loving people in your life, identify anxieties that leave you feeling more insecure, and also relate to people around you. These are now available for letting go (and even the idea of releasing these beliefs should garner a sense of relief and space). since they're neither resonant nor serving you. If you find relationship anxiety you can reattribute to others, go ahead and do so this week. These are the expectations and burdens that are ok to let go - you've carried them long enough.

07. Understand How Anxiety Spins Out Of Control

If you and your partner are fighting more, communicating less, or starting to feel strained by irritation and doubt about your relationship, your anxiety's energy likely isn't being put to its best use. Worse, anxiety can become hidden in a variety of other relationship symptoms like boredom, avoidance, and finding constant fault with your partner. Anxiety doesn't subside until the problems it signals are addressed. When anxiety's energy isn't channeled into problem-solving solutions, it festers, and can eat away at your confidence bit by bit.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS...

- Are there particular relationship worries you tend to ruminate about, obsess over, or struggle to move beyond a seemingly perpetual feedback loop?
- Are there relationship worries you feel uncomfortable surfacing at all, or solutions that particularly frighten you?
- Do you feel stuck among a variety of imperfect choices, none of which you want to accept?
- How might your frustration with your partner's shortcomings reflect anxiety about yourself?

ASSIGNMENT...

The no-win aspects of anxiety can be helpful to identify. Not just because naming anxiety helps diminish it, but because getting at the 'why' of our anxiety delivers needed clarity and control. If you are truly stuck between a rock and hard place, and can't see a solution that could possibly work – or feel acceptable – aim to investigate the assumptions underpinning your assessment. What 'have-to's and unreasonable expectations might be operating in the shadows, and constraining your choices? Could your scary predictions be flawed? What options are actually in your control? What might you do if you weren't afraid?

This is the rubber hitting the road when it comes to using anxiety – determining the choices we have, rather than the ones we wish we had.

08. Take Back Control Of Your Relationship Anxiety

Instead of trying to diminish or ignore your relationship anxiety, recognize the motivation it delivers to do something about the problem. Are you worried about communication, constant unresolved fighting, betrayals of trust, or a lack of safety? Tuning into your reasonable and actionable concerns can deliver the confidence you need to take constructive action, even if it scares you.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS...

- What dynamics in your relationship are you most worried about? Does communication need improving? Does fighting need to stop? Are you wrestling to understand and forgive a betrayal? Do you feel unsupported, or unsafe?
- What solutions are in your control?
- What resistance can you predict, and what could you do to sidestep it?
- When and how could you begin?

ASSIGNMENT...

Chances are good you know what aspects of your relationship are the most challenged, and in need of improvement. You likely also sense what solutions are needed, and what aspects of them are in your control. You might be able to visualize your first few steps, and even predict roadblocks... this is where staying focused on solutions within your control, and taking forward action matters more than the ultimate outcome. Taking control of what's in your control is how you give your anxiety the outlet it needs to fuel growth, momentum, and confidence

09. Taking Care Of Yourself Makes It Easier To Control Anxiety

Life's demands, and the stress that accompanies them, can easily deplete our resources, leaving us vulnerable to excess anxiety and more sensitive to relationship anxiety. Relationship anxiety can escalate when we feel excessive stress, are frustrated with ourselves, or otherwise stuck in any way. Yet anxiety works best and keeps you focused on your highest priorities when you have the resources to channel it productively, and also experience it in moderation: not too little that you don't notice it, and not too much that you feel overwhelmed. When this sweet spot of anxiety feels elusive, focused self-care can help.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS...

- How well do you take care of yourself – body, mind, and soul? Are any areas particularly out of balance?
- Less than 7.5-9 hours/night risks increasing anxiety and negativity. How well and long do you sleep?
- How nutritious is your diet, especially with regards to alcohol, caffeine, and sugar, all known to exacerbate anxiety?
- Breaking a sweat for as little as 15 minutes boosts brain power and mood that can help mobilize anxiety. How much do you aerobically exercise?
- Naming and sorting anxiety takes time, practice, and space. Do you have enough quiet, reflective downtime?

ASSIGNMENT...

Focusing on any areas of self-care that feel out of balance, which is most in need of attention and also accessible to tackle? Once you've identified a doable target area, decide what positive change you can make starting today to put focus back on yourself, and strengthen your resources.

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“Take Control Of Anxiety By Tuning Into It

Dr. Alicia Clark is a licensed psychologist specializing in anxiety and relationships, and helping people take control of their lives. She is the author of *Hack Your Anxiety: How to Make Anxiety Work for you in Life, Love, and All That You Do* (Sourcebooks), which has sold over 5000 copies since it debuted on Amazon as a number one new release.

Alicia is the creator and teacher of numerous anxiety courses, and her presentations on stress and anxiety have been sought after by numerous professional conferences and organizations.

She has been named one of Washington's Top Doctors by *Washingtonian Magazine* and has served as adjunct clinical faculty at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. Her work has been featured in national media outlets including the *New York Times*, *Psychology Today*, and *O, the Oprah Magazine*. She lives in Washington, DC with her husband and two children.



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