Unwinding Anxiety

What’s in it for me? Reprogram your brain to untangle anxious thought loops.

Ever get so worried that you can’t fall asleep? Do you experience panic attacks in busy places? Today, we’re experiencing what has been called an “anxiety epidemic.” Never have so many people been diagnosed with a level of anxiety that negatively affects their quality of life. But in order to treat anxiety, we need to understand how it works. When we feel anxious, obsessive worrying kicks in. We think about it endlessly and try to problem-solve. But that doesn’t work. In fact, worrying is just a way of distracting us from our anxious feelings. There is hope, however. By learning how to remedy anxiety with mindfulness, you’ll be able to look forward to a less anxiety-ridden future. In these blinks, you’ll discover

why curiosity is your superpower; how to identify the triggers behind addictive behavior; and why willpower-based methods don’t work.

Anxiety is controlled by our survival brains.

Imagine you were one of the shoppers who ran to your nearest supermarket in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Your goal? To pile your shopping cart as full of toilet rolls as possible. But what’s going through your mind as you race through the supermarket, stockpiling yeast and rice and enough baked beans to last your family a full year? Chances are, not much is going through your mind at all. You see, when we’re anxious, our rational brains shut down. We’re responding, instead, to our powerful and primitive survival brains, which evolved to protect us from danger. In this case, the danger was COVID-19. The survival strategy, for many, was buying toilet paper. The key message here is:

Anxiety is controlled by our survival brains. Humans have two parts to their brains, which evolved at different times. The “old” part includes the autonomic nervous system, which regulates our primitive survival responses. If early cave dwellers encountered a saber-toothed tiger, their fight, flight, or freeze systems would be activated, giving them a better chance to survive. Around a million years ago, another part of the brain developed: the prefrontal cortex. This part of our brains is responsible for planning, reasoning, and predicting. It allows us to find patterns, and adapt our behavior according to past experience. Anxiety occurs when the prefrontal cortex doesn’t have enough information to predict exactly what will happen. That’s why the start of the COVID-19 pandemic presented the perfect storm for anxiety. There was so much we were uncertain about. Would we find a vaccine? Were asymptomatic people spreading contagion? In the beginning, no one really knew. Even trusted authority figures like health professionals were feeling their way in the dark. Anxiety emerges from our survival brains, but it doesn’t actually have a useful evolutionary function. Unlike fear, it doesn’t chase us out of the way of the saber-toothed tiger. It just keeps us awake at night staring at the ceiling, cycling through hypothetical future scenarios in which the tiger devours us. So how can we learn to stop feeling anxious? Usually we try to talk or reason our way out of it, but anyone who’s ever experienced a panic attack knows that that’s useless. Anxiety and stress shut down the rational part of our brains. In order to untangle our anxiety, we’re going to have to learn to rewire our survival brains.

Anxiety and worry are addictive.

What comes to mind when you think of addiction? People huddling in doorways, shooting up heroin? Gamblers playing slot machines until they’ve blown through all their savings? These stereotypical images of addiction make it seem like something unusual, or something that only happens to people in extreme circumstances. But addiction is actually a part of all our daily lives. Think of the extra pair of shoes you couldn’t help buying even though you’re short on cash. Or the fact that you can’t stop scrolling through social media even though you have an assignment due. Or the fact that you can’t stop worrying, even though you know it’s just making you anxious. Yes, that’s right. Worry is also an addiction, a behavior we can’t stop indulging even though it feeds our anxiety and harms our well-being. Here’s the key message: Anxiety and worry are

addictive. Like with all addictions, worrying provides a temporary escape from difficult feelings. Imagine you start to feel anxious. It's an uncomfortable feeling, so you immediately start worrying about it. You imagine doomsday scenarios, or plan ways to make the feeling go away. Worrying is seductive, because it seems like you're working toward a solution. Most of the time, however, you're actually spinning your wheels. All worrying does is distract you from the negative emotion you felt in the first place. That distraction temporarily numbs the difficult feelings, and therefore feels more rewarding to your brain than the original emotion did. These rewards stem from our "old brains," which helped ensure our survival by developing a reward-based learning system. For example, if a cave person discovered some nutritious food and ate it, his brain would flood with dopamine, making him feel good. That meant he'd be more likely to remember where he found the food, and to repeat the behavior. Similarly, if your brain learns that worrying provides temporary relief, then whenever you're anxious your brain will trigger worry. It becomes a compulsive habit, over which you have no control. But the problem is that worrying actually makes you feel more anxious – which, in turn, causes you to worry some more. This vicious cycle can seriously affect your well-being. But luckily, as we'll see in the following blinks, we can break the cycle and, by doing so, free ourselves from anxious thoughts.

Understanding the psychology of your destructive habits is key to breaking them.

John had what seemed like a drinking problem. Every night he'd drink six to eight shots of whiskey, pass out, and begin again the next evening. But when he looked more closely at his addictive habits, John realized that, in fact, anxiety was fueling his drinking. He was anxious about his workload, so he drank to experience temporary numbness and distraction. But, of course, the drinking only made things worse. He was stuck in a destructive cycle known as a habit loop. When John started to mindmap his habit loops, he began to understand his own mind much more clearly and get more perspective on his life. The key message is this: Understanding the psychology of your destructive habits is key to breaking them. The first step in understanding your own anxiety is

simply mapping your own habit loops. What kinds of situations trigger anxiety or other difficult feelings? And with which behaviors has your brain learned to respond as a way to soothe or distract you? Do you get angry, or try to numb yourself with Netflix? And what is the result of these behaviors? Write down as many habit loops as you can think of. This can be a very exciting process of discovery. You may feel like you finally understand your motivations and blind spots. But don't fall into the trap of immediately trying to fix and change your habit loops. Unfortunately, the impulse to fix and change can become a habit loop in itself. That's why people become addicted to self-help books. In order to change our habit loops, we have to discard old tools that don't actually work. For example, if you've ever tried to use willpower to stop comfort eating, you'll know it doesn't work – or not consistently, at least. This is because when we're feeling stressed, our rational, reasoning brains shut down. And this is precisely the part that regulates impulse control. Substituting a damaging behavior for another, better one also doesn't work for everyone. The same thing goes for trying to control your habit by controlling your environment – for example, by making sure there's no ice cream in the freezer for binge eating. The problem here is that these strategies don't actually change the fundamental habit loop; they just try to distract or divert you. Habits are deeply ingrained in our brains. In order to change them, you'll also have to change how you think about them.

Mindfulness is a key tool in untangling anxious habit loops.

Imagine waking up every day and having to learn how to eat breakfast or use your phone all over again, with all your knowledge wiped out overnight. It would make life completely untenable. Our brains are skilled at committing behaviors to our muscle memory, so that we can do them without thinking. In fact, a 2010 Harvard University study found that we live on autopilot about 50 percent of the time. While this can be useful, it also means that we lose awareness of our thought processes. That means that we can't interrupt destructive habit loops – because we don't even know they're happening! The key message here is: Mindfulness is a key tool in untangling anxious habit loops. The scientific name for the part of the brain that kicks into gear when we're on autopilot is the Default Mode Network (DMN). Whenever we're

daydreaming or worrying, this part of the brain is activated. It also switches on when we engage in perseverative thinking, or having obsessive, disturbing thoughts. More specifically, those things activate a hub of the DMN called the posterior cingulate cortex (PCC). The PCC is similarly activated when people are craving something to which they're addicted. Such perseverative thinking is a major reason why it's so hard to recover from depression and anxiety disorders. By obsessively worrying and beating ourselves up, we end up creating a low mood, which just reinforces those negative thoughts. How can we interrupt this destructive cycle? One of the best ways is to spend less time on autopilot. The practice of becoming conscious of our thoughts is known as mindfulness. Contrary to popular belief, mindfulness isn't about emptying our minds and becoming Zen masters. It's simply about learning to become aware of what's in our minds. The author and his team ran an experiment in which they tested whether regular meditation and mindfulness training affected people's brains. MRI scans revealed that experienced meditators had a much less active DMN. They then ran a further experiment to see whether mindfulness training could help people stop smoking. Sure enough, it reduced the activation of the PCC – the hub in the brain that turbocharges obsessive and addictive thoughts. Mindfulness training will be a key tool in interrupting your own habit loops — and untangling your anxiety. The next blink explores how to put it into practice.

"Rather than changing or not having the thoughts and feelings that make up our experience, mindfulness is about changing our relationship with those thoughts and emotions."

We can't change our habits without changing how we think about rewards.

Imagine someone offered you the option of eating either a plate of boiled broccoli or a slice of cream cake. Your brain would probably be screaming at you to take the cake. That's because the cake has more calories. That means your brain gets a bigger dopamine "reward" when you eat it. And there's also an emotional reward. Most of us associate cake with fun and parties and celebration. We have countless

associations etched into our neural pathways. That’s why it’s so hard to get yourself to choose broccoli instead of cake. The cake is much more rewarding. And the more rewarding the habit, the stronger it is. Here’s the key message: We can’t change our habits without changing how we think about rewards. The problem is that our brains often store outdated ideas about how rewarding a behavior is. To take the cake example, our brains associate cake with fun and childlike delight. But the reality is that mindlessly cramming a piece of cake in your mouth because you’re stressed or sad won’t make you feel like that kid at the party. It will probably give you a brief dopamine hit, but leave you feeling cranky and bloated when the sugar rush wears off. When we live our lives on autopilot, our brains get stuck on these outdated notions of how rewarding particular behaviors are. But when we bring some mindfulness to what we’re doing, we have the chance to assess what the real rewards are in the present moment. When you notice yourself performing a habitual behavior like smoking or procrastinating, ask yourself, “What am I getting out of this?” What does your cigarette actually taste like? How do you feel when you’re smoking, and once the nicotine leaves your body? Focusing on the actual experience will likely show you that the "rewarding" behavior is not that enjoyable in the moment. That will immediately make the habit easier to break. The stronger the reward, the stronger the habit. If the brain realizes that a behavior isn’t as rewarding as it thought, it will be less likely to want to do it. Remember, this isn’t an intellectual exercise. It’s not about trying to talk yourself out of doing something you enjoy. Rather, it’s about observing the reality of the situation, and how the behaviors feel. It’s about discovering that the enjoyment may have been illusory.

Cultivate a compassionate mindset.

Focusing on our habit loops can be a very uncomfortable process. After all, we’ve spent years trying to numb ourselves against difficult feelings and distract ourselves from them. Now we’re giving them our full attention, and examining them under a microscope. It can be even more discouraging if you feel like you’re not making progress. After all, you can see clearly that your behaviors don’t have real rewards. So why do you keep indulging them? This impatience is natural, but it’s not helpful. After all, you may have had these habit loops for decades. You can’t

expect them to disappear overnight. The key message is this: Cultivate a compassionate mindset. Many of us have become used to trying to change our behavior by criticizing ourselves harshly. This becomes a habit loop all on its own. More likely than not, the critical loop will be activated as you try to unlearn your habits. You'll think to yourself, "I'm such a loser, I can't change," or "This is never going to work." Unfortunately, these loops will actually serve to keep you stuck. You become trapped in a cycle of despair and self-flagellation that will keep you on autopilot survival mode. When you feel like that, it can be helpful to practice taking yourself less seriously. You could think something like "there goes my silly brain again." Remember that your brain is just trying to help you. It's seeking out dopamine rewards that temporarily cushion you from difficult feelings. Practice being compassionate toward yourself and the survival behaviors that you cultivated to try to get through stressful situations. And remember that failure is part of the process. In fact, it's the greatest teacher of all. Researcher Carol Dweck has argued that some people have fixed mindsets – they believe their intelligence and talents are innate and finite. Other people have a growth mindset. They believe they can learn and grow as they go along. The latter crowd is much more resilient. They see mistakes as a chance to develop. When you're unlearning habit loops, it's essential to adopt a growth mindset, and see everything as an opportunity for development. Did you binge after weeks of healthy eating? Good – that's a valuable reminder for your brain of how much better it felt to eat well. Are you feeling restless and frustrated with your old habits? Great – that shows how eager you are for change.

Curiosity is your anxiety-busting superpower.

Children famously have a stage in which they ask questions about everything they observe in the world. Why do cats have long tails? Why do their parents drink wine, but they can't? They're naturally curious about everything they see. But as adults, we start to restrict our curiosity to filling information gaps – like when we're stuck in traffic and need to know how long it will take to clear. Seeking specific information that we're missing is known as deprivation curiosity. Childlike curiosity about everything and anything is called interest-based curiosity. This is the kind we need to cultivate. The key message here is: Curiosity is your

anxiety-busting superpower. Interest-based curiosity is the love of learning new things, without any particular goal in mind. It’s an expansive way of seeing the world that keeps you attentive to the details of what’s happening. It also helps you to remember new information. Experiments at the University of California–Davis have shown that when people are curious, the dopamine pathways in their brains fire up, activating the connection between the reward centers and the hippocampus, which is the part of the brain associated with memory. Cultivating your natural curiosity is an essential tool for breaking anxious habit loops. The next time you’re in a panicky state, try letting out a loud “Hmmmm” sound. That’s right – the sound you make when you’re interested in something and trying to work out what it is. Instantly, that act will propel you into a curious mindset, and make you ask questions like “What’s going on here?” It might also make you feel a little foolish, which is a good thing. Curiosity and playfulness go well together. Change – even positive change – can be very challenging. Remember, our survival systems love certainty. If you’ve been anxious your whole life, it probably felt cruddy – but at least you always knew what to expect. As you start to break old habits, your survival brain might become alarmed by this strange, new terrain. That's where curiosity comes in. Instead of giving in to the stress, use a curious mindset to simply observe how you’re feeling and track your bodily sensations. Curiosity feels good. Your brain will realize that curiosity is what’s known as a BBO, or a bigger, better offer. It’s much more rewarding than the anxious state you used to inhabit all the time.

“From helping us learn to survive in the world to bringing the joy of discovery and wonder, curiosity really is a superpower.”

Practice anxiety sobriety one day at a time.

Participants in Alcoholics Anonymous programs who want to get sober are taught to take it one day at a time. Instead of casting their minds forward to a lifetime of sobriety, they ask themselves, “Can I stay sober today?” Anxiety sobriety requires a similar approach. The future is full of uncertainty. Thinking about how to break your future anxious habit loops will only make you anxious right now. Instead, you need to ask yourself, “Can I do my mindfulness exercises and cultivate curiosity today? Or in

the next hour?” Here’s the key message: Practice anxiety sobriety one day at a time. Whenever you do start to tense up, or wonder how you’ll survive even one day, remind yourself that you’ve developed important tools to help you break difficult habits. You should have faith in your own abilities and resilience. You may well come up against difficult feelings, or even panic attacks, but the way you deal with them has changed. The best way to deal with an anxiety loop in the moment is actually to lean into it. This process can be explained using the RAIN system. First, you recognize the difficult feelings that are arising. Next, you consciously accept them, and allow them to be there. Then you investigate the sensations in your body, and the emotions bubbling up. And lastly, you note what’s going on, and simply observe yourself in the process. RAIN uses your curiosity superpower to help your brain transition out of its anxious, panicky state. Breathing exercises are another great way to transition through anxious phases. Breathing helps you to stay focused on your body, instead of trying to think your way out of the situation. Breathing slowly and deeply makes us feel relaxed in the moment. It sends important messages to our brain that we’re actually safe and don’t need to be on high alert. Some days, you may feel as if you’ve made no progress at all, and think that you’ll be trapped in anxious thinking forever. But by now you’ve learned to recognize that despondency and self-criticism are just another survival mechanism. Every time your brain espouses a view starting with an extreme like “always” or “never,” that should tip you off. Instead of getting lost in the despondency cycle, you can bring in a bigger, better reward like curiosity, or kindness, or simply laughing at yourself. You don’t need to plan how to do that forever, or even for the whole day. Right now, in this moment, are you able to become curious about your feelings and sensations? Good. Your anxiety sobriety has begun.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Anxiety is a compulsive, habitual behavior. When we’re anxious, our abilities to think rationally shut down. That means we can’t talk our way out of anxiety. Instead, we need to learn how to reprogram our survival brains, and find more rewarding behaviors to replace anxious worrying. By practicing mindfulness techniques, we’ll become conscious of our thinking and stop living on autopilot. Actionable advice: Next time someone cuts you off in traffic, try telling them you love them. The author noticed that road rage on his

way to work put him in a foul mood that he carried with him throughout the day. It affected his work at the hospital and his attitude to his patients. He tried an experiment: Instead of shouting back at people who honked at him in traffic, he practiced sending them loving, kind thoughts instead. The results were immediate. He started arriving at work feeling jubilant and open, instead of angry and constricted. Loving kindness feels better than aggression. And for that reason alone, it’s worth practicing. Got feedback? We’d love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Unwinding Anxiety as the subject line, and share your thoughts!