Anxiety is unpleasant. It often feels as if you’re separated from ordinary life bya pane of glass. The doubt and confusion it causes are the hardest to deal with:“Why is this happening to me?”“Am I going mad?”

“Is my brain damaged?”“Will this last forever?”An anxiety disorder is difficult to understand unless you’ve experienced itfirsthand. An anxiety disorder is not the kind of garden-variety stress everyoneloves to talk about.You hear people remark, “Yeah, I’m so stressed too” and “Hey, who isn’tanxious—why are you complaining?” There’s a big difference between anxietyand that kind of stress, and most people don’t understand how all-consuminganxiety can be. They have no idea how terrifying a panic attack can feel or howuncomfortable a sensation like unreality can be. Your doctor may have asympathetic ear, but unless they have experienced anxiety, they may neverreally ‘get’ what you are going through.People who don’t understand can often lose patience. They might say thingslike, “Come on, pull yourself together!” or “Just snap out of it!”You try to explain to your very best friend that you can’t make the wedding, andthey think you’re being selfish or you’re not thinking of them on their big day.Your buddies want to go on a short hike, but you know that it’s way too far out of your safe zone. They don’t understand that you feel so shaken by anxiety that it’s hard enough to think about leaving your house, not to mention having to walk in the wilderness, miles from a hospital.In these situations, you want your companions to understand you’re not avoiding them, but unfortunately, that’s how it comes across. You need someone to understand how scary this damn thing feels, someone who can reassure you that you’re not losing your mind.It can be very hard to admit you have anxiety. How do you share with someone that sometimes you feel so out of control? That sometimes your mind fills with bizarre and shocking thoughts. You worry that if anyone knew what was going on in your head, they would call to have you locked up and your kids sent to a foster home.So you make another excuse to get out of a social engagement, and in themeantime your sense of self-worth really takes a thrashing. You beat yourself up over it constantly:“I mean really … what the heck is wrong with me?! Why can’t I just get up in the morning and not obsess about this anxiety and the day ahead?I used to be so carefree, and now I worry about having to sit still whilegetting my hair cut!” I’m not going to go on about this. You already know exactly how it feels. I mention it just to point out that it’s perfectly normal to feel this way. You’re notalone. You’re not “losing it,” and you don’t have a serious health problem.Anxiety can play tricks on your mind. Of course, if you do have a healthconcern, please make sure you get all the necessary examinations so that youcan rule out those conditions.But chances are excellent you’re “simply” suffering from anxiety. I know you wish the doctor would just find some subtropical disease to explain all these sensations. At least then you could go about treating this or that disease.If, on the other hand, you’ve been diagnosed with anxiety, then in all likelihoodthat really is what it is. Trust that diagnosis and don’t second-guess it, fearingit might be something much worse.You feel the way you do because of high levels of stress hormones in your system. We’ll go through this in more detail later in this book, but basically our body’s fight-or-flight response has gone a bit trigger-happy and is wreaking mental and emotional havoc