

PATHS TO PEACE

9 Short Ways to a Life of Lower Anxiety



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"Don't worry, Grandma, I'll put you in the best nursing home when you're old, and I'm in the NBA," was my promise as a 9-year old to a Grandma who didn't want to end up in a nursing home in the first place. But she knew what I meant: I would make it big and take care of my family one day.

But I never made it to the NBA. I didn't even make it past my high school team. It was a blow to my ego to miss out on playing after high school, mainly since I used this dream as an excuse not to focus on grades. Being in the bottom 10% in overall GPA for your class isn't bad if a school gives you a scholarship.

But no college did, and I was left without a plan b to start my senior year. Sorry, Grandma.

I didn't want to get into the *oppressed Olympics* because I've had a good life filled with great people, specifically my parents. But, after receiving feedback, I was encouraged to open up about my past to let you know where I'm coming from.

Although my parents gave me everything I *needed*, we struggled financially growing up. We had to buy groceries with food stamps, and living paycheck-to-paycheck is an understatement. However, my parents are inspirational for making life better & brighter despite being broke.

After leaving a bad neighborhood on the south side of Youngstown, we moved to a trailer in northern Appalachia. While I was the only black kid in my elementary school, I know what it's like to be considered white trash *and* the black kid from the inner-city. A quick note on being black: Although I'm half-white, my first "girlfriend" broke up with me because her mom didn't want her dating black people. People told me I had a big nose and extra muscles that made me good at sports. When I got my license, I was pulled over while driving *behind* a police officer. I've been pulled over and frisked more times than I'd like to admit, and I've had my property searched by a police officer without cause. They're not allowed to go into your car and pull your wallet out of the center console the way a cop did to me, but I didn't report it because no one cares. I keep these stories to myself, even though I've had black people tell me I have a better life now, not just because of hard work but because I have *white privilege*!

I'm thankful my parents pumped me with confidence, never to doubt myself or my family. But being poor never bothered me until long after I left home.

I was 26 years old at an investment banking conference, surrounded by entrepreneurs and Ivy-League educated investors who make more money in one paycheck than I do in a year. No one disrespected me, but at the end of each day, I'd go back to my hotel room with a pounding headache because I felt like an imposter. I thought at any moment, I'd be revealed as a fraud, and some rich guy would tell me to *go back to the trailer park where I belong*. Of course, I had no reason to think this, but it made me realize being poor had an imprint on how I see myself.

I won't go into further detail (for legal reasons) about my struggles between sleeping on a couch in a basement to binge drinking and punching holes in walls, but my fear and anxiety of where I come from and uncertainty of where I'm going has at times gotten the best of me.

There's an underlying feeling of anxiety for all of us. The anxious thread points to the awareness of our limitations, vulnerabilities, and recent place atop the food chain.

According to Yuval Noah Harari, author of *Sapiens*, most of our species history involves being in the middle of the food chain. We started to hunt massive game about 400,000 years ago, and 100,000 years ago, we earned the top spot.

Because of our vast jump, Harari likens our species to a dictator who's full of "fears and anxieties over our position." We're insecure because of our gigantic leap compared to other predators whose position evolved over millions of years.

Do you ever feel like an imposter the way I did at a rich guy conference? Our species doubt may be why. Plus, we're aware of our mortality. Even if such realization doesn't bring *you* anxiety, you still have to deal with the same fate belonging to everyone you've ever met, loved, or hated.

You cannot remove negative emotions, only relate to them better. Anxiety is universal and timeless because it comes with imagination and self-consciousness. We can imagine gods, currencies, countries, and fictional characters. The imagination is limitless, and because of this, you can't keep it switched to good thoughts only. You can't have boundless imagination and self-awareness of your faults without having negative thoughts bubble up. As long as we can imagine, we can imagine unhelpful thoughts. And the more we push them away, the less we relate to it.

But despite all the trials, tribulations, and setbacks, we decide how to label life's experiences.

We can say *good* when everything seems terrible. We can love when it feels like no one loves us. We can say *I learned from this* when something knocks you flat but doesn't knock you out.

Since failing Grandma and not making it to the NBA, I graduated from college, became president of a business group, and worked for two Fortune 500 companies. I got married and then officiated my sister's wedding. I sat on the board of a non-profit for farmers while chairing a mentoring program. I started a podcast and traveled the country doing stand-up comedy. Then I ran a marathon.

Although we can't make anxiety disappear, we can dance with it. The tips in this ebook helped me get to that place, and I hope they may do the same for you.

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The Sport of Life

I had dreams of going to college for basketball. Then to the NBA. Neither happened.

I started bodybuilding and put on weight. Friends still playing high school sports asked me, "What are you training for?" I told them for no reason other than being healthy.

A friend said, "I don't understand training when you're not playing a sport. What's the point?" I kept training for a few more months but adopted the same mindset. I wound up not touching a weight for years.

Even when I was exercising, I'd rationalize any and all types of food intake. Chips? Yeah, I work out. Cake? Yes, I worked out. A whole 12-inch pizza to myself? Sure, I'll get back to working out. Lies.

It would take the equivalent of running 3.5 miles to burn off one slice of pizza. When you understand these numbers, it's difficult to compensate for a bad diet with exercise.

High-calories themselves aren't as important as the type of food you're eating. All calories aren't created equal. The body digests 19 grams of sugar from an apple different than 17 grams of refined sugar from a chocolate bar.

When I learned this, I still didn't focus on my diet. I thought, "My diet doesn't matter. I'm not playing a sport."

Later, I came across Kyrie Irving doing Yoga on Instagram.

"Wow, wouldn't it be amazing if being healthy was your job!" I thought. After thinking a bit more, I asked myself, "Why is being healthy for your job only for pro-athletes?"

A few months earlier, I showed up to work hungover from a mixer the night before. I wasn't able to lift my head off of the desk to check my email. I realized what I put in my body affects me in all aspects of life, even if it's preparing for a phone call or writing an answer to a colleague. I was paid to do the best I could. Showing up compromised fell short.

After this moment of clarity, I tricked myself into a mind game. I told myself life is a sport. The game is to do everything in my power to fuel for the sport of life.

I downloaded the "[FitMenCook](#)" app and later their sister app "[MealPrepPro](#)." I've cooked for myself for years since.

I cook once a week, and it takes about four hours. I prep meals for the week, freeing me to focus on other things. It lets me not snack on candy, chips, and other junk. It keeps me from over and under eating to ensure I have the right fuel.

To live well, you must eat well. Most of the food available in our western diet is skewed towards sugar and refined foods, but it's not impossible to eat whole foods.

The litmus is: Can I kill it? Can I grow it? Can I cook it myself? If you follow these guidelines while cutting out refined sugar and alcohol, your entire life will change as a result.

Move

When I move, I'm okay. When I don't, I'm not.

Dr. Rhonda Patrick explained that [chemicals released in the body cause depression](#) when you don't move.

Movement is a requirement. For most of our species's history, this wasn't an option or a fitness program. It was move or get eaten. Or lose the chance to eat.

The COVID-19 pandemic shattered the idea of needing a gym membership, the right shoes, or the right equipment to start. Entrepreneur Derek Sivers said, "If more information was the answer, then we'd all be billionaires with perfect abs."

Knowing is different than doing. You have access to the internet, which means you can find free videos, blogs, and apps to tell you what to do at any level. There are exercises you can do without getting out of bed.

When I was younger, an artist would stop by our church every year to share his story. When he was younger, he became a quadriplegic due to an accident at work. His handicap didn't stop him from pursuing a marriage, having a child, and starting a career as a painter!

He would paint pictures by moving a brush held in his mouth, since the only form of movement was from his neck up. He chose not to allow his handicap to keep him from pursuing a better life and expressing it.

Even the slightest movement creates momentum and momentum leads to better and brighter days.

Move On

My high school basketball coach would make fun of me when I'd say *woulda, coulda, or shoulda*. He was right because wishing life would be different than how it is comical.

What's the point of comparing your current situation with a nonexistent hypothetical?

I was playing basketball in a church league as a kid, and my team won the tournament. My 28-year-old friend who played on the team we beat said, "we would have won if we would have hit our shots!" with certainty and conviction.

He couldn't see how ridiculous his line of thinking was because of his emotional state and my answer to his point was, "yeah... that's how you win the game."

Drafted in 2007 as the 22nd overall pick by the Cleveland Browns, Brady Quinn had sports commentators critical of his draft selection. Quinn was potentially a first overall pick the year before as a junior. However, he decided to come back and play his senior year at Notre Dame. An analyst asked him, "How does it feel to have lost millions of dollars?" He answered the question with another question: "How did I lose millions of dollars I never had?"

You would have been a billionaire if you started Google in 1998. You should have invested in Facebook when it was \$38 a share in 2012. You would have been 7'6 if your parents were Yao Ming's.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty, but the fact remains the only existing moment is this moment in time. Don't allow what you regret but can't change cloud out what's in front of you.

Space

My number one advice to incoming college freshman students is to start a mediation practice and take astronomy 101.

Mediation gives you enough space to realize how boundless your consciousness is. Learning about the cosmos gives you a perspective of how small you are relative to everything else.

We live in one of a hundred billion solar systems making up our galaxy, which is part of a billion galaxies in the known universe.

Meanwhile, our planet moves over 100,000 mph through what is, in all intents and purposes, infinity.

The universe is a vast mystery. Our minds, the tool we use to observe mysteries, may be as limitless.

Given the immense density in us and the universe, It's understandable why we'd want to seek control, with being self-conscious of how vulnerable we are.

Tension arises when we pretend as if we're not vulnerable and shrink our perspective down to our own point of view. Overwhelming thoughts of "I" create a slippery slope of angst against a backdrop of forever.

Having the perspective of space allows us to take ourselves less severe. Realizing we're part of a bigger picture and shareholders of the divine lets us believe wherever we came from transcends the negative aspects of life which shrink our perspective.

Make it About Them

It was nerve-racking to sell insurance as a 19-year-old, meeting strangers at networking events to drum up business. I sold something expensive, complex, and invisible to people who had insurance longer than I'd been alive.

At one mixer, I was overwhelmed with fear. "What if no one wants to talk to me? What if they don't believe in me? What if they don't like me?" I kept thinking.

Then I realized the theme through my entire line of thinking was me.

I then shifted my thinking towards everything but me. It was like a weight vest lifted off my shoulders. I told myself, "At this event, I'm going to make it about the other person."

Taking the focus off me also took the pressure off, as I was there to serve and learn how to contribute to the conversation, not to dominate it.

I took it to the extreme. I wouldn't tell people who I was or what I did unless they asked. Not everyone did, which was telling. But most people liked the interest I showed them and returned the favor.

It felt good telling people about myself when they were ready to hear it, which is different than shoving how I want them to see me down their uninvited throats.

You may not be a salesperson going to mixers, but you have at least one friend. Making it about the other person is a practice you can try them on. Try it as long as you can before someone mentions it to you (in 8 years of doing this, not one person has caught on).

Making the conversation about them forces your curiosity. It begs questions of what's on their mind? What happened in their day? How do they see the world?

These are valuable questions because the other person is living a life we haven't. Life is too short to figure it out on your own. The universe is made up of more what's not you than what is you. And still, we often place ourselves in the middle of the whole universe, including its infinite mysteries and unknowns.

How could this not be overwhelming and anxiety-provoking? The aid to this is to shift focus away from yourself and on to other people. You'll learn more and feel lighter as a result.

Monitor HRV

There was a four-day stretch where I'd go to bed at 12:30 AM, sleep for four hours, and wake up telling myself, "mind over matter."

I'd then take a cold shower, telling myself, "mind over matter."

After showering, I'd workout telling myself, "mind over matter."

From there, I'd start work until about five o'clock at night, spend time with family, then work on projects at night, starting at 8:00 -9:00 PM.

On about the fourth day, I started to feel a slight tingle in my throat.

This was an opportunity to test my mind and convince myself I wasn't sick and see it manifest in my physical health.

The following day, not only did I not want to get out of bed, I couldn't.

I was out of commission for about three days, where all I could do is lay in bed.

I couldn't believe my perceived productivity ended up swept away by illness in one fell swoop.

I realized mind over matter is only valid in a specific context.

Looking back at the experiment, I was able to push my body further than I thought I could before. But I put my immune system into a compromised state and ended up paying the price.

It was good to push my body, but it was terrible when I attempted to maintain the same willpower under dire circumstances.

As a stand-up comedian, I learned certain bits work at specific parts of your set, at a

particular time, in front of a particular audience.

I can place my funniest bit right after a failed new joke to redeem myself. Or I can say my best joke to get laughs rolling right before an edgy bit on a set at a church. My whole set is received differently by switching the context of the jokes.

Context also applies to our mind and body.

There's a time and place when you can implement "mind over matter," where you push yourself further than you thought possible. Still, the context of your health and wellbeing dictates if it's productive. You must ask yourself, "What matter of mind am I in to push myself?"

I answer this question by monitoring my heart rate variability (HRV).

HRV gives you an indication of how well you're recovering from both physiological and psychological stress.

Athletes have monitored their heart rate for decades to better understand the level of work their heart is doing. HRV monitoring takes it to another level by monitoring your heart rate and each beat's variation.

The heart doesn't beat like a metronome, beating at the same pace the same way. Your heart beats more like a drummer who's going on a solo riff than the drummer in the Little Drummer Boy.

The variation between each beat is telling. A consistent variation means your body is working towards recovery. If the variation is sporadic, it signals your body is in a more recovered state.

I first used the iPhone app [HRV4Training](#), which uses the flash on your phone to take a pulse on your fingertip in the morning.

I tested to see if the insights were accurate by pushing myself when it suggested I rest. Sure enough, I fell sick soon after going too far.

I've moved to the [HeartWatch app](#) for iPhone, which connects to my Apple Watch and records my heart rate throughout the day. It also integrates with the [AutoSleep app](#) to track sleeping and waking heart rate, giving me a daily HRV to show how I've recovered from the previous day.

I've also measured impact due to psychological stress. At times, I've changed my meditation routine from 60 minutes a day to throwing my practice out the window, and those changes have shown up on my HRV.

I've noticed if I don't take at least 20 minutes a day to focus on my breath and pay attention to when my mind drifts, my HRV ratings for the next day go down.

It's crucial to mention each rating is tailored to you. The only data your HRV is compared to is your own data from the previous days leading up to your reading.

It's one of the most accessible and measurable ways to visualize how you're recovering from mental and physical stress. Once you measure, you can adjust.

Color

I downloaded the [HeartWatch](#) app for Apple Watch to monitor my heart rate throughout the day.

One Saturday, I dusted off a coloring book under my coffee table and started working on it.

After about a half-hour, I moved on to something else. After looking at my daily heart rate at the end of day, I noticed a deep dip in my resting heart rate at 11:30 A.M.

“What was I doing then?” I thought. I realized my heart rate dipped to its lowest point during the day when I was coloring.

I’d heard adult coloring books helped lower stress in people. Now I had evidence this was the case through my own biometrics.

You can find coloring books at a dollar store. They also don’t need a charger! I put mine under the coffee table, so when I’m on the couch relaxing or waiting on someone, I color instead of pulling out my phone to check Instagram or watch TV. I flex my creative muscle instead of vegging out and offsetting my attention to something or someone else. This is a cheap and creative way to lower stress.

Show Up Early

A friend who's in the United States Army told me, "In the military, we say if you're not 15 minutes early, you're late."

This shocked me at first. But I realized if it's physically possible to show up on time, why wouldn't 15 minutes be as achievable?

The following week, I decided to get to work 15 minutes early (or open my laptop 15 minutes before work if at home) and take off 15 minutes early if I had a meeting or appointment.

A few days into my decision, I realized I was less in a rush or feeling anxious. The 15-minute rule gave me buffer room for error.

There were times I forgot something at home and had to go back. Or I forgot I needed to stop at the gas station. Or I was stuck in traffic.

There were times I'd be 5 minutes early to my destination because I spent 10 minutes dealing with an unexpected situation. If I would've left to arrive on time instead, I'd be a consistent 10 minutes late.

Give room for the unexpected because there are times where nothing goes as expected.

The 15-minute rule gives you a margin of error and allows you to act in the proper way. Proper may mean taking a detour, driving the speed limit, or taking time for yourself when you show up before other people.

When my friend brought this rule up, another friend said, "But what if I show up early and the other person shows up late? Then I wasted time." How could it be wasted time if you have 10-15 minutes to yourself? In the age of overstimulation, time for yourself is an opportunity more than a liability.

When have you had the chance to sit, with nothing to do but wait? The 15-minute rule allows you to sit in the case of the unexpected.

This rule comes down to discipline. Are you prepared for the commute? Are you organized and set up before starting work? Are you factoring in a margin of error for the unexpected? The rule demands prioritizing and making sure you're ready to go well before you have to.

Drive the Speed Limit

I was invited to talk to business school students at my Alma Mater, Youngstown State, about a career in marketing.

A speaker should never end a presentation on "are there any questions?" because it's awkward when there aren't any. It's better to open up Q&A before the final slide. Once you get the last slide, always finish with a call-to-action for your audience to implement something practical due to your presentation.

My call-to-action for the students had nothing to do with marketing but everything to do with practicing micro-changes.

The first call to action was to show up early. Whether for class, a job, or showing up at a birthday party, I challenged them to prioritize the near future and prepare for it.

The second call to action was to drive the speed limit. To merely do what you're supposed to do. This challenge reinforces the first one while discouraging taking shortcuts to get there.

When I (try to) drive the speed limit, it's like a mental war in my mind. I realize I'm not doing what I'm supposed to. I go back and forth if I'm going to make it to my destination on time. I have stories floating in my head about what the person next to or behind me is thinking. This is a microcosm of the day-to-day thoughts bouncing inside the mind. Driving the speed limit is a practice to catch the conversations in your head while doing what's right.

I've failed time and time again with these challenges. But it's low-hanging fruit you can start right now to cause changes in the way you show up and how you get there.