

WHEN ANXIETY INTERFERES.....

- THE IMPACT OF ANXIETY IN THE WORKPLACE
- SOME POSSIBLE ACCOMMODATIONS
- RESOURCES FOR EMPLOYMENT PROFESSIONALS



**THIS DESKTOP TRAINING IS PROVIDED BY:
THE DISABILITY AWARENESS RESOURCE TEAM –
A STANDING COMMITTEE OF THE MICHIGAN WORKS! SOUTHWEST
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD**

To promote and advise the WDB on strategies to support career pathways, training and employment options for individuals with disabilities, including youth, to gain and retain employment.



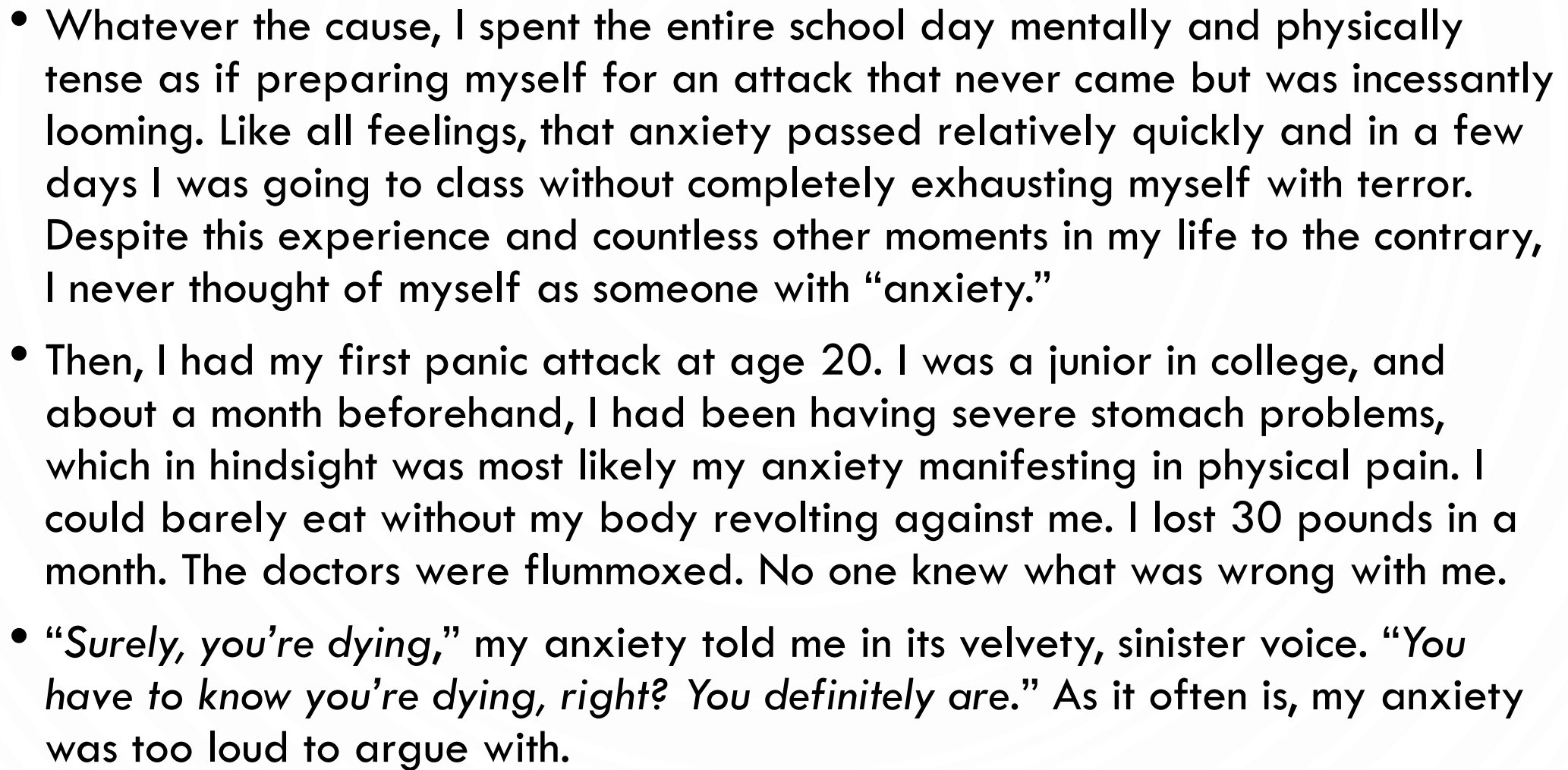
HERE IS A FIRST-PERSON ACCOUNT OF LIVING WITH ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS.....

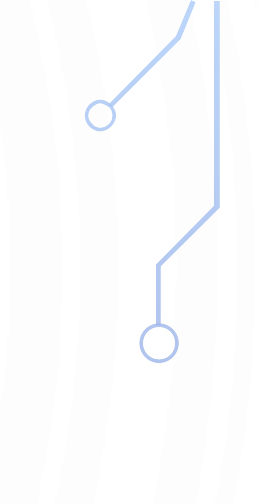
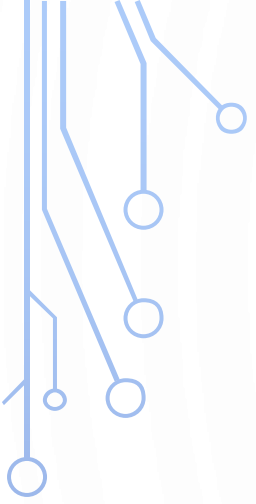
- **Lies My Anxiety Tells Me**

Article by: [Megan Whalen](#)

What it feels like to have anxiety.

My first day of high school was also the first time I realized I was anxious. It was as if a switch had flipped in my mind from calm to off-the-charts petrified. I had been nervous before, but this was a new breed of stress. Walking into the building, I felt a sense of dread I couldn't understand and was helpless to fend off.

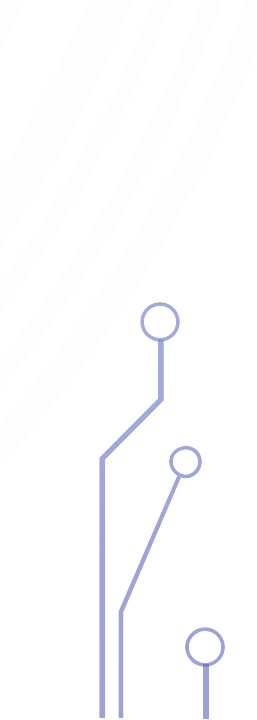

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- Whatever the cause, I spent the entire school day mentally and physically tense as if preparing myself for an attack that never came but was incessantly looming. Like all feelings, that anxiety passed relatively quickly and in a few days I was going to class without completely exhausting myself with terror. Despite this experience and countless other moments in my life to the contrary, I never thought of myself as someone with “anxiety.”
 - Then, I had my first panic attack at age 20. I was a junior in college, and about a month beforehand, I had been having severe stomach problems, which in hindsight was most likely my anxiety manifesting in physical pain. I could barely eat without my body revolting against me. I lost 30 pounds in a month. The doctors were flummoxed. No one knew what was wrong with me.
 - *“Surely, you’re dying,”* my anxiety told me in its velvety, sinister voice. *“You have to know you’re dying, right? You definitely are.”* As it often is, my anxiety was too loud to argue with.

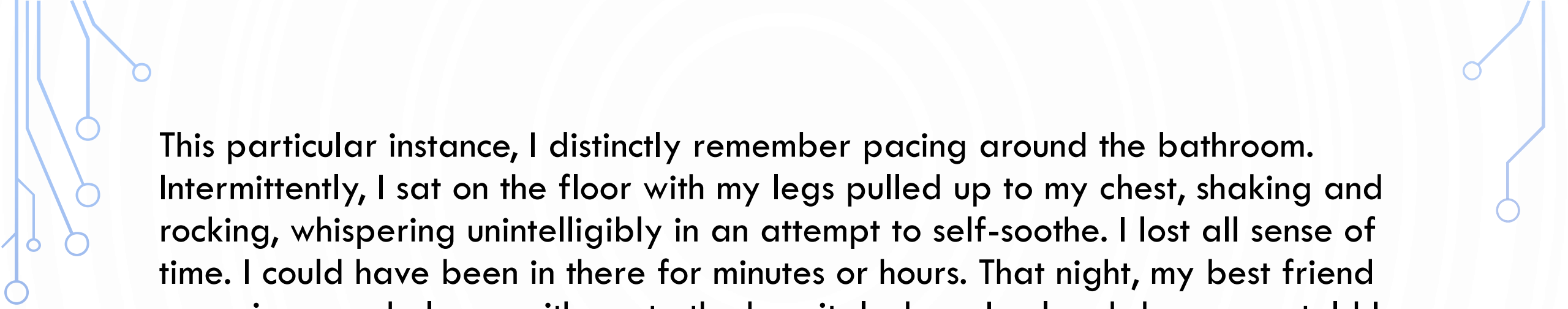


And one night, the idea that I was dying overwhelmed me. I was convinced whatever was going on inside of me could not be fixed. If the doctors couldn't figure it out, that meant it was incurable. And so began the panic attack.

AN IRRATIONAL RESPONSE

For me, a panic attack feels like this: You want to run away, as far as away as possible, but there's no safe harbor waiting for you because the threat is in your own head. You have lost control of everything. Life is careening off into a void and there is no coming back.

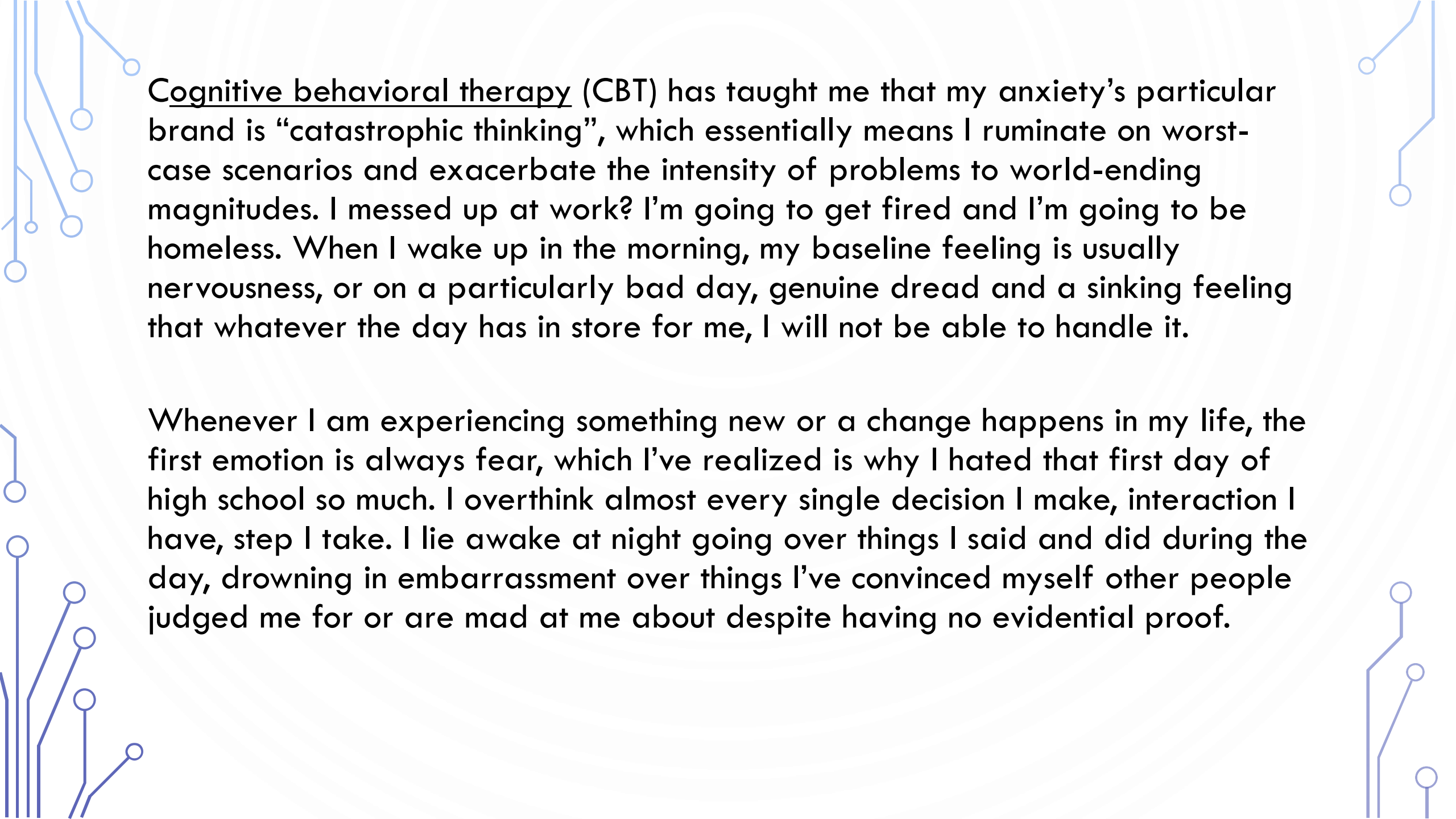




This particular instance, I distinctly remember pacing around the bathroom. Intermittently, I sat on the floor with my legs pulled up to my chest, shaking and rocking, whispering unintelligibly in an attempt to self-soothe. I lost all sense of time. I could have been in there for minutes or hours. That night, my best friend came in an ambulance with me to the hospital where I calmed down, was told I had a panic attack, was asked if I wanted Xanax (which I refused and now realize THAT response was probably a mistake; I should have shouted “*YES PLEASE!*” from the rooftops and gratefully accepted the medication) and was sent on my way.

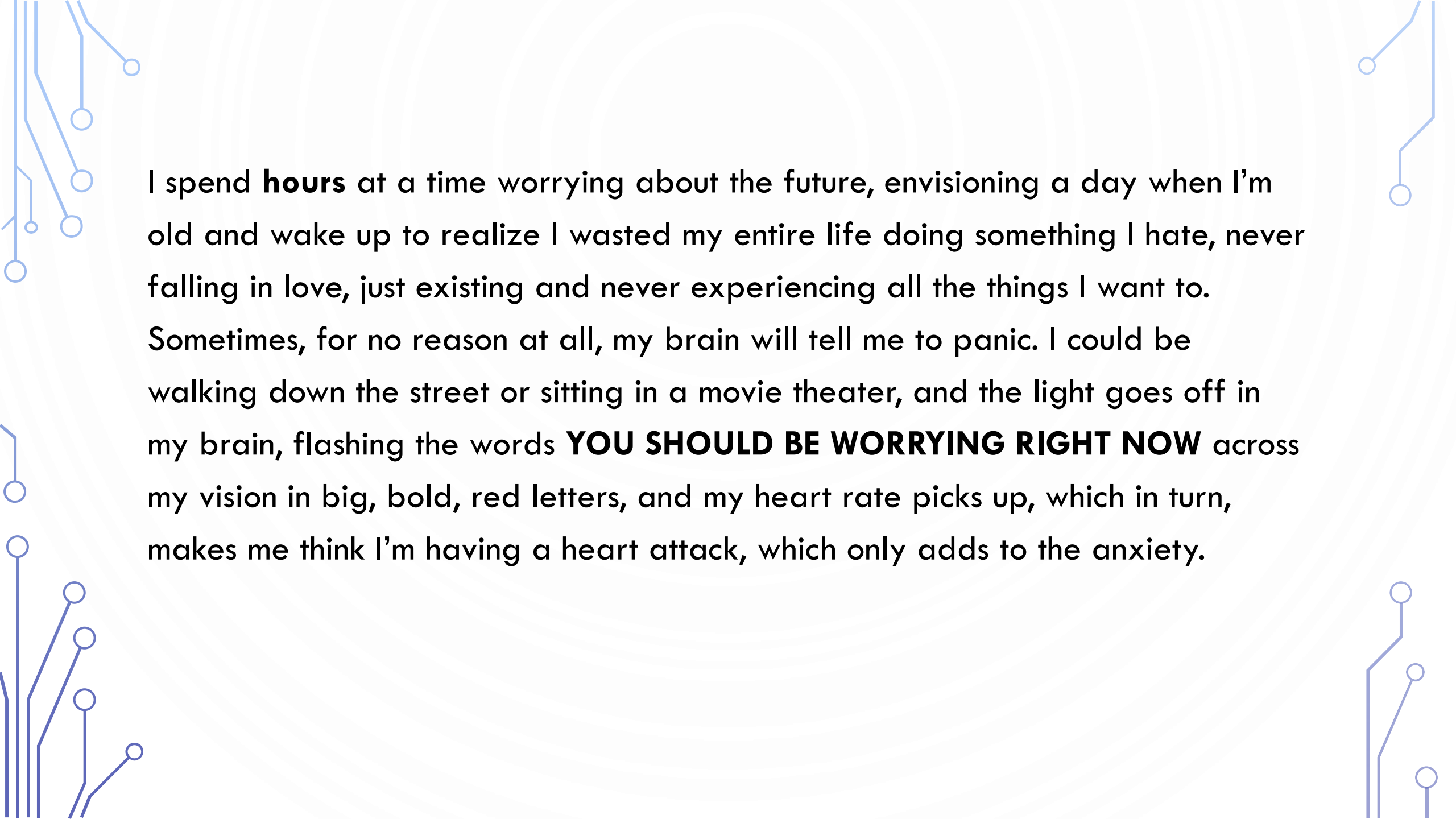
However, that moment sparked a realization in me: I wasn't just anxious. I had anxiety. And it had gotten out of hand.



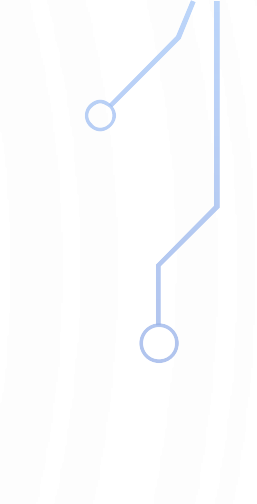
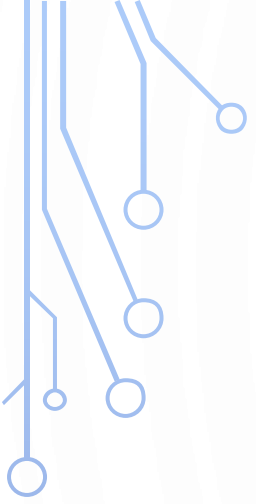


Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has taught me that my anxiety's particular brand is "catastrophic thinking", which essentially means I ruminate on worst-case scenarios and exacerbate the intensity of problems to world-ending magnitudes. I messed up at work? I'm going to get fired and I'm going to be homeless. When I wake up in the morning, my baseline feeling is usually nervousness, or on a particularly bad day, genuine dread and a sinking feeling that whatever the day has in store for me, I will not be able to handle it.


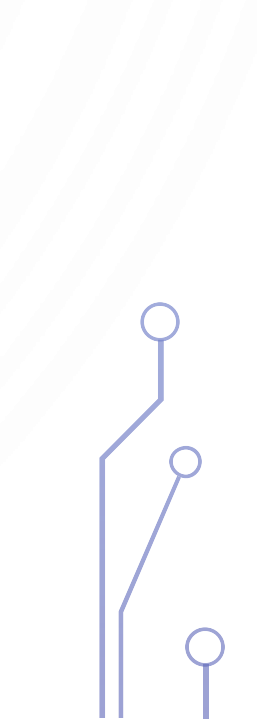
Whenever I am experiencing something new or a change happens in my life, the first emotion is always fear, which I've realized is why I hated that first day of high school so much. I overthink almost every single decision I make, interaction I have, step I take. I lie awake at night going over things I said and did during the day, drowning in embarrassment over things I've convinced myself other people judged me for or are mad at me about despite having no evidential proof.

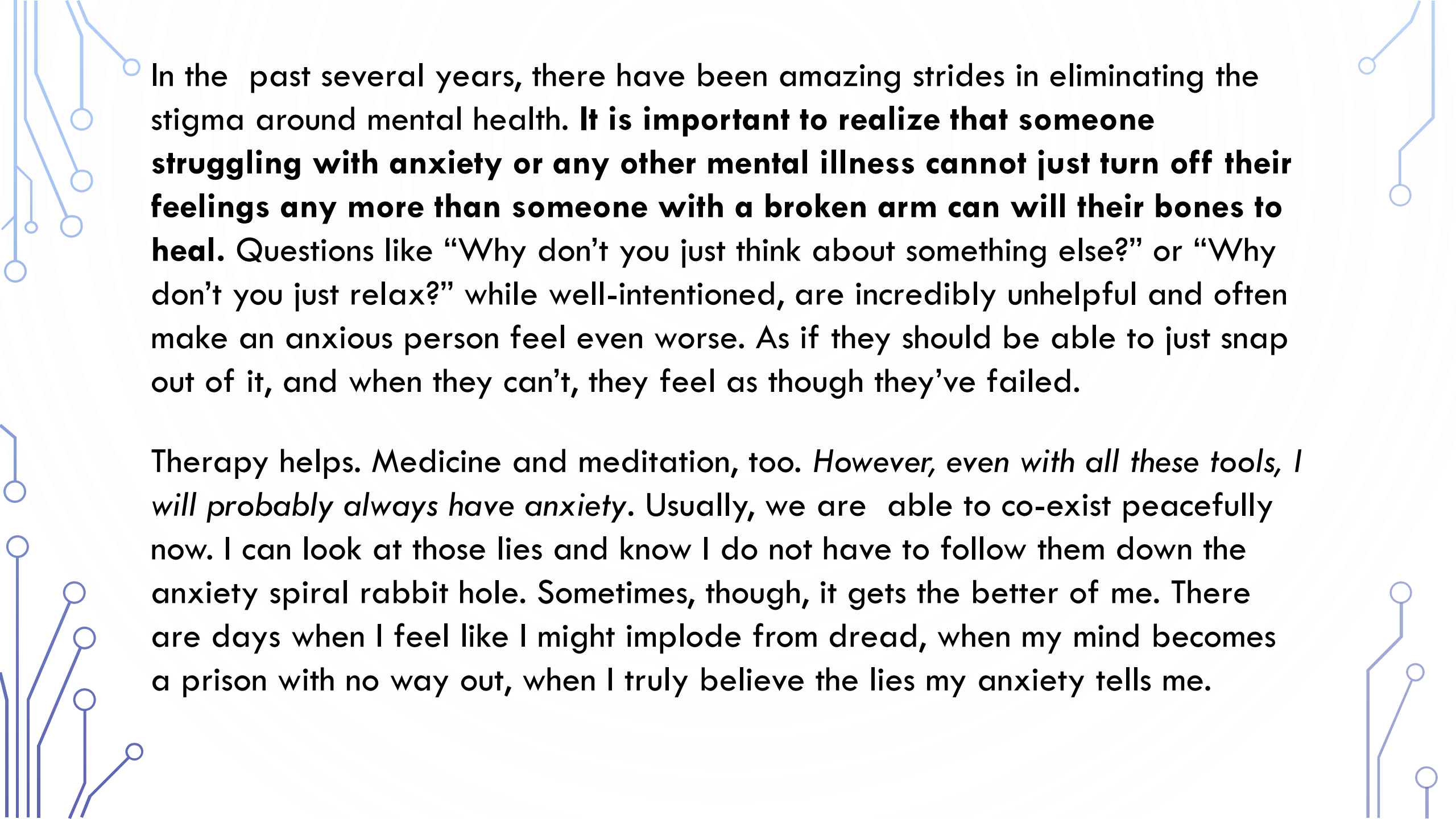


I spend **hours** at a time worrying about the future, envisioning a day when I'm old and wake up to realize I wasted my entire life doing something I hate, never falling in love, just existing and never experiencing all the things I want to. Sometimes, for no reason at all, my brain will tell me to panic. I could be walking down the street or sitting in a movie theater, and the light goes off in my brain, flashing the words **YOU SHOULD BE WORRYING RIGHT NOW** across my vision in big, bold, red letters, and my heart rate picks up, which in turn, makes me think I'm having a heart attack, which only adds to the anxiety.



ON TOP OF ALL OF THIS, WHEN I AM IN AN ANXIETY SPIRAL THERE IS ALWAYS A LEVEL OF GUILT AND POWERLESSNESS THAT OFTEN IS EVEN WORSE THAN THE ANXIETY ITSELF. FOR EXAMPLE, MY ANXIETY SPIRALS OFTEN LOOK LIKE THIS:

- I'm extremely anxious right now and I can't stop it.
 - My life is horrible, I can't stand this feeling.
 - I am going to feel like this forever.
 - I'll never be happy again.
 - I'm a failure. Everyone else has their life together.
 - I'm going to mess up my life if I make the wrong decision.
 - No one likes me. They're all just pretending.
 - My anxiety makes me unlovable.
 - This time the anxiety is never going to go away.
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In the past several years, there have been amazing strides in eliminating the stigma around mental health. **It is important to realize that someone struggling with anxiety or any other mental illness cannot just turn off their feelings any more than someone with a broken arm can will their bones to heal.** Questions like “Why don’t you just think about something else?” or “Why don’t you just relax?” while well-intentioned, are incredibly unhelpful and often make an anxious person feel even worse. As if they should be able to just snap out of it, and when they can’t, they feel as though they’ve failed.

Therapy helps. Medicine and meditation, too. *However, even with all these tools, I will probably always have anxiety.* Usually, we are able to co-exist peacefully now. I can look at those lies and know I do not have to follow them down the anxiety spiral rabbit hole. Sometimes, though, it gets the better of me. There are days when I feel like I might implode from dread, when my mind becomes a prison with no way out, when I truly believe the lies my anxiety tells me.

The background features a light blue, wavy, circular pattern. In the corners, there are decorative blue circuit-like lines with small circles at the ends, resembling a stylized network or data flow.

THAT WAS POWERFUL.

IMAGINE ALL THAT SPIRALING, ANXIOUS SELF-TALK GOING ON WHILE YOU ARE TRYING TO WORK, OR WORSE, IN THE ANXIETY PROVOKING ACTIVITY OF A JOB INTERVIEW OR FIRST WEEK ON A JOB.

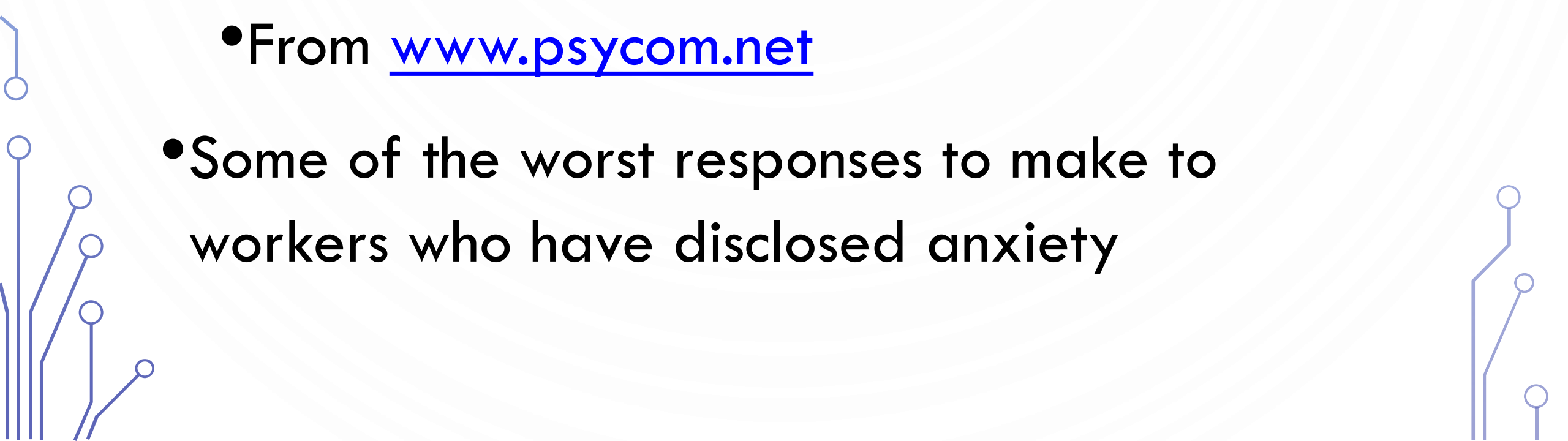
ANXIETY PLAYS OUT DIFFERENTLY FOR EACH INDIVIDUAL

AT WORK, YOU MIGHT OBSERVE:

- Absences
- Tardiness
- Can't remember things
- Lack of focus
- Frequent breaks are needed
- Increased mistakes
- Lack of attention to detail
- Endless apologies
- Double – checking work
- Physical symptoms, such as weight loss, weight gain, stuttering, appearing tired, reports of sleeplessness
- Short tempered or extremely passive



OF COURSE, WE WANT TO HELP. WE WANT TO SAY THE RIGHT THING.

- Here is some insight into what does NOT help!
 - From www.psycom.net
 - Some of the worst responses to make to workers who have disclosed anxiety
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“THINGS WILL BE BETTER IN THE MORNING”

DITTO: Tomorrow is another day or Cheer up

- This sentiment is often issued in a heartfelt manner intended to be helpful. However, to someone with a major depressive or anxiety disorder to whom every moment of every day is an excruciating ordeal, it feels like a slap in the face. Furthermore, it makes the person saying it appear to have no desire to really relate to nor understand what mental illness feels like.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE

- Rather than offer unwanted and unhelpful advice, validate the person's feelings, no matter how elevated or exaggerated they seem: "That must really be rough to feel you messed up so badly. I'm here to listen."
- It can be difficult to speak to someone dealing with a mental illness—not because of what they are experiencing, but because it's hard to find the right words and it's easy to feel like you are not saying or doing enough to help. The above statements are rarely made out of malice, but rather because it can be easy to fall back on clichés when you are struggling to find the right words. Try to use the substitute language listed and work hard to be present and let your peers, coworkers, and loved ones know that you are listening to them.

JUST DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT

- DITTO: Calm down! or Don't sweat the small stuff
- The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADA) cites that 40 million adults have a diagnosable anxiety disorder, so it is helpful to know the best ways to help someone who is suffering rather than to act like they're making a mountain out of a molehill.²
- You wouldn't dream of saying to someone with his or her leg in a cast, "You don't need a cast. Put your foot down!" So why do so many find it acceptable to say a person with an anxiety disorder, "Just don't worry about it?"
- The put-down results in trivialization of what someone feels. This type of language can make the person feel as if he or she is making a choice about these difficult emotions. People with anxiety disorders know they worry a lot.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE

- The key is not to seem judgmental.
- Use a supportive phrase such as “This must be so hard for you,” or “I’m here if you want to talk about how you feel.”
- Sometimes less is best. Empathy, yes; offering solutions, not always welcome.
- Just showing you have empathy and want to lend an ear and not lecture or taunt is the calming influence that can help the person versus alienate or cause further anxiety. And when the individual is feeling calmer, perhaps he or she will be open to discussing options for seeking help.

ACCOMMODATIONS THAT MAY HELP AT WORK

- Provide additional breaks or flexible time
- Limit new work assignments
- Allow for a support animal
- Allow work in a quiet environment
- If possible, some 'work at home hours'
- Allowing time for medical appointments/therapy
- Reduced work hours

MORE POTENTIAL ACCOMMODATIONS

- Encourage in person conversations (avoid email)
- Explore apps for anxiety (see www.Askjan.Org)
- Add light to the workspace
- Add white noise to reduce distractions
- Uninterrupted work time
- Change in supervisory approach: i.E. Setting today's priorities, learn what part of the day is most productive and schedule more difficult tasks then;
- Create a job share or job partner

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE WORKER WITH ANXIETY DISORDER

- Practice self-care: eat healthy foods, get some exercise, maintain a sleep routine
- Take advantage of employer assistance programs for support, counseling, advice
- Find a treatment provider you respect
- Follow your treatment plan
- Ask for help
- Stay organized

DISCLOSURE OF ANXIETY DISORDER

- Should you Tell Your Employer?
- It's your decision to tell your employer about your anxiety disorder. Some people do so because they need accommodations, others want to educate people about their condition, and some do not want to hide their illness.

If you have a physical or mental disability and are qualified to do a job, the [Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 \(ADA\) protects you from job discrimination.](#) Being qualified means you must satisfy an employer's requirements for the job and be able to perform essential functions on your own or with reasonable accommodation. An employer cannot refuse to hire you because your disability prevents you from performing duties that are not essential to the job. [Find out more about employment rights.](#)

KEEP IN MIND...

- Anxiety disorders don't always stand alone. PTSD and substance use disorder may be additional factors. Treatment professionals may be working on multiple needs for an individual.
- Not all jobs are a good match for a person with anxiety. Sometimes the best we can do is help identify a job where there is less disruption from anxiety and the worker can be successful
- Anxiety is a qualifying disability for vocational rehabilitation services
- Generalized anxiety may be covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- www.adaa.org – the Anxiety and Depression Association of America
- www.anxietycoach.com
- <https://www.helpguide.org/home-pages/anxiety.htm>

****Diagnoses should be made by a licensed, trained professional**