

Be A Master of the Universe

By

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Hey friend! You're interested in controlling your destiny and living as a Master of the Universe?

Well, I am too. That's why I put together this work, and that's the purpose of this free little book.

Here are four of my best tips on shutting down negative thoughts that prevent you from mastering the universe.

Be prepared to put in the work and apply these techniques over time. If you do, I promise the secrets to the universe will be revealed to you.

Now is your time to become a master of all things!

First Things First

You can become a master of your own universe. It is all about adapting a new mindset. The combination of how you perceive the world, your understanding of who you are, and your mindset governs how you *interpret* events around you. This short book is all about helping you change so that your understanding and interpretation of events allows you to better manage your mindset and how you respond to problems.

There are mindsets that people have which inhibit their ability to deal with stress, conflict, and other sources of anxiety. These include our beliefs about ourselves, the coping strategies we've learned during our lifetime, ideas about our strengths and skill sets, and conceptions about our ability to induce change.

This book does not suggest that a person can overcome serious mental health conditions by simply putting their mind to it. If you've been diagnosed with a mental health condition that requires professional help, please seek professional mental health providers. The content of this book is no substitute for a relationship with a licensed professional therapist or counselor.

But in this book, I'm going to provide you with four practical, proven techniques or "hacks" that you can integrate into your life. They can help you discover how to become a calming presence for yourself and for others around you.

By the end of this short book, you will have a different mindset capable of tackling any problem. You'll have new ways of empowering yourself to take on the world bravely and confidently.

Get ready to adopt the mindset of a master of the universe.

[Step 1 - Be Aware of the 6 Stages of Anxiety](#)

[Step 2 - Be the Boss of You – ABCD Hack](#)

[Step 3 - Be a Non-Anxious Presence](#)

[Step 4 - Be Self-Differentiated](#)

Step One

Be Aware of the 6 Stages of Anxiety

This first technique is really about gaining awareness and understanding the phases of anxiety that we go through. These stages result from ongoing changes in our lives, and often result from the losses we experience that accumulate. Your losses—of all kinds—can cause a form of grief. Being mindful about these stages empowers you to change how you respond.

This framework has its origins in the work of the renowned psychologist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who worked with people who were dying. She discovered that dying people—and grieving people, too—go through various stages of relating to their reality. What does this have to do with anxiety? Simple. With an overflow of anxiety in your life, it's like death every time something new stresses you out. In other words, anxiety robs you of your life. And, as mentioned above, losses can cause anxiety and a kind of grief. Kubler-Ross had five stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and (ideally, finally) acceptance. Here, we're adding one pre-acceptance item to the list—overthinking—one of the biggest life-robbers of them all.

Remember, the objective here is to be aware and mindful of where you are in this process.

The first thing people will often do is **deny** what is happening around them. Think back to that text message you received and how you responded. The first thing that came to your mind was to act like it didn't happen or it wasn't important enough to merit an immediate response. That is denial.

We all do that as a protective measure. It is a way of drawing boundaries around our personal space and our time. If we were to respond to every stimulus or demand put upon our time every time we received some notification, we'd be distracted all the time. So in some ways, the act of denying is healthy and responsible.

Think of it this way. The things that you ignore don't just go away because you denied them. Instead, they pile up and accumulate over time. This only increases your anxiety. By being aware you're in the stage of denial, you can say to yourself, "I need to take care of this thing right now," and that enables you to act in the moment. You've taken the first steps of mindfulness practice.

Another way of tackling denial is to make a written memo of the thing you put off until later. Say, for example, that text message that came in is important to you, but you need more time than you have at the moment to get into a conversation with the texter. You may need 20 minutes for an in-depth conversation that satisfies your person's need, but your drive home only lasts 15 minutes, and when you arrive home, you'll need to deal with other pressing matters.

At such times, you simply jot down on a notepad, send yourself a voice text, or add the callback to your calendar, and deal with it later. This is one suggestion on how to deal with this act of denial in the moment. There are many ways to deal with it. The point is to be aware and alert to your tendency to put this action item out of your mind instead of storing it on a back burner.

When you feel anxiety creeping into your mental space, ask yourself, "Am I denying something that

deserves my attention?” If the answer is yes, find time for it, whether it involves a person, is an item on your to-do list, and especially if it is something that will nag at you until you get it done. It’s the latter that creates heavy anxiety.

Often, after we have spent different time denying the reality something that demands our attention, we become **angry**. This is a natural response to any stimulus that we find unpleasant or distasteful. Our natural tendency is to assign blame to someone for making us feel this way or putting demands upon our time and energy.

Anger is a natural reaction to a *perceived* threat. The emphasis here is on perception because the threat may not be real. Remember, fear is false evidence appearing real. You perceive a threat to who you are as a person and your body responds with a strong emotion that instructs your brain to go on the defensive. Anger is often related to how you regard yourself.

Let’s say you consider yourself to be a nice person, but someone describes you as a bully. The gap between how you perceive yourself and how the other person perceives you is the content of your anger. In this example, there is no physical threat to your well-being. There is only your *perception* that you’ve been misunderstood. That perception of the other person alone is enough to cause changes in your emotional state. You get angry.

You are not the only one who responds with anger to perceived threats. Social scientists say that most people don’t learn how to manage their anger until they’re in their 40s. That’s four decades of living before most of us

become effective anger managers. Therefore, becoming mindful and getting a hold of anger requires a lot of practice. You can't reverse four decades of mindlessness with a few minutes of mindfulness.

The way anger shows up in many people's bodies is through edginess, which is a mild form of anxiety that resides in you. Some people like to use the word "manifestation" to describe when something comes into being or comes alive within you. When anger manifests itself inside your body, your awareness allows you to tame the emotion at once.

Here's how to do it: when you feel anger manifesting itself inside of you, stop for a quick moment and ask yourself, "What is the threat that I feel at this moment?" By asking yourself this question, you create space for your mindfulness practice to get activated. You can experience a positive impact on how you feel right then and there. Just remember to ask yourself the question.

Even though we attend to our anger and come to grips with it, the source of that anger, or trigger, may still be present. It didn't go away. That's when we begin **bargaining**. We tell ourselves that "the thing" will take care of itself if we just give it time.

The essence of bargaining is to say to yourself, "If I do this, maybe this will happen." You strike up an imaginary deal with yourself instead of taking responsibility for your actions. Such bargains result in more anxiety because you haven't dealt with the source of your stress and worry.

A bargain can be effective if you give yourself honest terms. Let's say you want to quit smoking and you've

been struggling with this for a long time. You can strike a bargain with yourself to smoke one less cigarette per hour every day. It is an honest bargain with reasonable terms.

When you think about it, you strike bargains with people every day. These can be the models for taming your anxiety. You strike a bargain with your employer to show up for work every day and to do your job for your shift, which includes a lunch break so you can get something to eat. You strike a bargain with your partner to do your share of the chores around the house on a certain day. You strike a bargain with your children to provide them with the essentials of a safe and healthy life.

The more you maintain your side of the bargain and the terms that you agreed upon, the less anxiety you feel. The key is to uphold your side of the bargain as you agreed. It is natural to feel like not doing it, but that increases your anxiety slowly but surely, and usually backfires when you attempt shifting the blame away from yourself. Resist the temptation to create bargains you cannot keep. By doing so you are managing your anxiety.

You may find yourself feeling **depressed** with all the commitment you have. Depression is a serious condition that often deserves treatment by a mental health professional. If you are unable to carry out daily tasks, lack energy to get out of bed in the morning, feel hopeless, or lack meaning and purpose in your life, you might be experiencing depression.

When these symptoms last for more than a few days, turn your attention to getting help. This book makes no

attempt to diagnose any mental health condition. That is solely the purview of a mental health professional or your primary care physician.

However, if you are experiencing an acute, that is, a brief dulled response to doing the normal tasks of daily living and you know it will pass momentarily, it may be your body saying it's time to act. This is an important part of mindfulness that you should respond to quickly in order to avoid a mental health crisis. By respond we are referring to acknowledging your feelings of sadness or low energy, then acting accordingly.

The new micro-death stage I've added to Kubler-Ross's list is **overthinking**, sweating over every troubling thing that's happened, particularly aspects we cannot change or control, over and over, and facing that ever-lingering, anxiety-producing question: what's next?

This is where overthinking really complicates our lives. We become overly concerned with guessing, analyzing, and over-preparing for the future, which we cannot predict. (Part of this is the trap of scenario-building, which we discussed in the Introduction.) Our inability to live comfortably with the unknown triggers an endless cycle of overthinking.

In a nutshell, overthinking is the mind's technique for problem-solving by analyzing, ruminating, guessing, worrying, and trying to control an uncontrollable scenario. The anxious brain has an insatiable appetite for overthinking. It can shift into warp speed thinking about every possible scenario. A busy mind ties up all of your cognitive faculties leaving you very few resources for basic processing.

The thing that turns this whole set of stages around is **acceptance**. What do you accept? As paradoxical as it may sound, you accept the unknown. You must get comfortable not knowing what is coming next. That's what non-anxious people do. They accept that whatever comes next, they can manage it. You will, too.

When you accept your situation, you treat your experience as true and deserving of your immediate attention.

Acceptance is the enemy to anxiety because it is an honest effort to deal with your current circumstances as best you can with the resources that you have. If those resources are not sufficient to handle the source of your anxiety, you can seek additional help.

For most of us, this is the most difficult stage to work through because it often requires that we admit our helplessness. But once you accept life as it is and maintain a mindful perspective, you will experience your anxiety slowly fading away. (At least for a while, because these stages repeat themselves in our lives again and again, not necessarily in a prescribed order, and we need to remain aware of them and seek acceptance once more.)

Consider this example. You visit your family doctor for a routine checkup and learn you have high blood pressure that requires medication. The doctor reports you will need this medication indefinitely, even if you lose weight and change your diet, because the condition runs in your family. This is how the stages of anxiety play out.

First, you will **deny** you need the medication. You will plead to the physician for more time to allow your blood pressure to settle down or insist that your blood pressure reading is inaccurate.

Next, you will get **angry** at the physician or yourself for letting your condition get out of control. After all, you had perfect blood pressure up until now. You might take your anger out on the cat, dog, or your family members. Perhaps, you will blame your spouse for cooking unhealthy meals.

Then, you will strike up a **bargain** with yourself to change your lifestyle in order to reverse your condition. You might join a gym or commit to walking 30 minutes a day to improve your fitness. Maybe, you'll keep the prescription for a month to see if your blood pressure goes down.

When that doesn't work, you'll become **depressed** about the whole situation. Your family, friends, or coworkers might comment that you've become sullen and less engaged. Your normal bright light may appear dim.

After a time of reflection, you'll come to grips with your diagnosis and **accept** the doctor's conclusion. You'll pick up the prescribed medication and take your daily dosage as the doctor ordered.

When you believe you've got a handle on the situation, your brain will shift into **overthinking** as you ponder how taking the medicine will change your life. Will you become addicted to it? What are the side effects? Can you take it every other day and get the same

benefits? What if your insurance doesn't cover it? The questions are endless.

If you stay in overthinking, you'll experience full-blown anxiety all the time. You must find your way back to **acceptance**. You'll do that by admitting you're helpless in this situation, the doctor is right, and taking the medication is the best way to maintain optimum health. Once you learn to accept what is known to your doctor, that the medicine works, you'll lose the anxiety and get on with living calmly.

With this new understanding of the stages or expressions of anxiety, and the goal of acceptance, let's look at some techniques that will help you create your own anti-anxiety formula.

Anxiety Journal

A major contributor to stress and worry is the lack of time for yourself and the constant pressure to live up to other people's norms. One way to break the cycle is to engage in journaling, which is a place for talking to yourself privately. A journal is a way to be yourself and to bring your whole, most authentic self to life.

A particularly effective way to bring more consciousness to your everyday sensation of stress and worry is to write down what's bothering you. The anxiety you feel is likely there because you have a lot going on at once, and therefore, you can't pinpoint the exact cause. Maintaining an anxiety journal will help you nail down and identify the specific events, tasks, or even interactions with people that set you off, and the way you respond to them. With that data, you can become proactive in managing your stress and anxiety.

Similar to a diary, an anxiety journal is the record of your anxiety level and detailed information that you can reflect upon later in order to create next steps of managing yourself. Unlike a diary, which is simply a record of events, the journal includes more depth and reflection.

The process is easy: when you feel stressed or worried, jot down the date, time, and feelings you have at that moment. You can make it as precise as you like by assigning a rating to how you feel with one being little anxiety and five being high anxiety. You should also jot down the impact rating, so you'll know how anxiety affects you. For example, one might represent “slightly distracted” and five might be “so distracted you are unable to concentrate.” And to give you more info, add another data point that records your response to what happened to you.

Here's what a journal entry might look like:

Got a message from my supervisor asking if I can work late today. Feeling about 3/5, slightly resentful now since I'm already carrying more than my share of the workload. Migraine's getting worse just thinking about it. Feels like 4/5 level of worry. Now, I can't enjoy my time off thinking about the job. It's about 3/5 level of anxiety.

Jot down an entry describing how you feel whenever you notice a stressful or worrisome sensation in your body. Keep writing in your anxiety journal for several days or a week, keeping as much detail as you need to help you reflect later. Afterward, review your notes and

look for common threads. If you find patterns, the better off you are in terms of taking corrective action.

1. Are there related causes to your stress and worry?
2. What is the impact of your anxiety on your ability to get things done?
3. What is your typical response, i.e., your mindset and behavior?
4. How is that working out for you?
5. What do you need to change about your response to lessen your anxiety?

All the data you collect in your anxiety journal is valuable information for your reflection and analysis. Sometimes, simply writing down these events is enough to relieve you of anxiety because it gives you a clear picture of what you're going through. Doing the analysis turns unconscious thoughts and actions into concrete events and behaviors.

Keep in mind that maintaining a journal is a discipline that you will develop over a few weeks. If you're lucky, you may discontinue the practice once it becomes a mental habit. Then you can regulate your anxiety without writing things down.

The good thing about identifying patterns is that you can narrow it down to specific people, places, or activities that trigger your anxiety. Once you have identified those particular triggers, you can then establish boundaries that limit your exposure to them.

Let's say your boss does text you at odd hours when you're off the clock, which causes you heart palpitations. You can take actions to lessen the event's impact upon you. Maybe, you need to stop responding to your boss

when you are off duty. Or maybe, it's time to initiate a conversation with your boss and share your concerns about their messages and timing.

Feel free to modify the structure of the journal to satisfy your needs and particular situation. The important thing is to keep the journal handy and be ready to capture your experiences and responses in real time. If you wait until later, you risk your memory failing you, which happens more when you're stressed out. Allow yourself as much flexibility as you need and don't make the process overly rigid. By establishing consistency, however, you have a better chance of identifying the patterns that are affecting your anxiety levels.

From a practical standpoint, you may find it helpful to number your pages, which discourages you from tearing out pages that you later find troubling. It is also a good idea to write in ink to prevent yourself from erasing any "mistakes." You can strike through any words you choose to revise, or feel are inaccurate descriptions of what's going on. But keep in mind such pieces are often communications from your unconscious directed to your conscious mind.

Today's world is full of anxiety-producing events, such as the Russia/Ukraine war, political elections, climate issues, threats to women's and voters' rights, and mass shootings throughout the country. No one is immune to these events' impact even though they occur great distances away. Include these events in your anxiety journal because they are happening to you. You might call them anxiety-adjacent events.

If you feel you don't have enough time to journal in the manner described above, there's a shortcut. Write down the events in a word or two and then a rating. You should still put down the time and date with each entry in order to make it chronological. Another hack is to doodle in your journal. This is especially effective if you like to draw or illustrate or have a talent for artistry.

Many people find journals to be ineffective or a waste of time. If you are such a person, don't worry. Knowing that a journal is simply a tool to help you unravel difficult emotions and reactions in order to invest in your life may give this exercise more meaning and change your outcomes.

The beloved television host, Montel Williams, encouraged people to keep a gratitude journal, which they wrote in at the end of the day. Listing three or four things you are grateful for that happened during the day can turn your anxiety into joy. Try it!

Step Two

Be the Boss of You – ABCD Hack

This technique is great for people who desire to be more assertive in life, but is useful for anyone who feels bullied, taken advantage of by others, and wants more respect. With this technique, “boss” means standing up for yourself as a full-fledged adult. There are four parts that anyone can do with a little effort.

The ABCD hack is powerful and lets you take charge of yourself in ways you didn't learn from your parents or school because these four tactics are not taught. However, you can learn them quickly and immediately use them. The key elements are **a**cting, setting **b**oundaries, having **c**onfidence, and showing **d**eference.

A – **Act** according to your values.

Your first step is to know your core values, which are your guiding principles for living and making decisions on a regular basis. The best core values arise from convictions to live life with integrity, honesty, fairness, and deep connections to other people. These are the foundations of a non-anxious person's core values. How do you choose your core values? They are based on your experiences and beliefs which have proven themselves to endure through time, and which result in positive outcomes.

First, take a look around your life and identify major themes which guide you. If you have trouble identifying your major themes, it is fair to look to people

you admire who live principled lives and observe what themes guide them. For example, you may admire President Abraham Lincoln for his courage and determination, and then adopt these two characteristics to be among your core values.

One way to identify the core values of people you admire is to read their biographies, especially their autobiographies. These sources allow you to see how your heroes work from the inside out, what principles have guided their lives, and what emerge as core values. By reading about successful people's lives, you also learn about the obstacles they overcame and the mindsets that enabled them to cross the finish line.

Second, write down the major themes that arise from your homework. In addition to writing down the individual words, define what they mean in your own terms. You want to include as much detail as you can so when you return to this core document, you have an immediate reference to reinforce these core values.

Third, post your core values in a place where you can read them readily and frequently. Keep them in a prominently visible place, such as on your bathroom mirror or your office desk in a frame. But don't let them become the wallpaper of your life, or mere decoration. You need to refer to these often as a way of making them real and meaningful.

Some people develop what is known as a personal mission statement. A short one-sentence statement of your life's purpose that you memorize and say frequently will have a remarkable impact upon your behavior. A personal mission statement is your way of saying what you are on this earth to do. Each of us has a personal

mission, but it is up to us to discover that mission. Ideally, your mission will arise from the gifts and talents you were born with or have developed over time that you use in the service of others.

Let's say that you love spending time with children and have a natural ability to talk to children, so they listen to you with their full attention. Your ability to work with children may signal some purpose such as being a schoolteacher, child psychologist, or a pediatrician. Once you've determined how you want to use your ability to work with children, then you can pursue that purpose in a way that fulfills your promise. It may become your profession, hobby, or second vocation.

Knowing your core values is linked to reducing anxiety, which is often rooted in not knowing what to do in a given situation. When your core values are locked in, you can refer to these at a moment's notice and quickly decide how you want to act. You can use your core values as a mental tool for self-soothing and calming yourself down when you feel anxiety arising within you.

B – Establish good **boundaries** around yourself and your time.

Boundaries are mental guide rails or markers around you that separate you from other people. It can also be imaginary physical space. The main idea is to know where you draw the line between you and others. Begin by getting clear on your personal rules regarding relationships. When you know your personal rules, you can establish limits on how close you allow yourself to be to other people.

Having boundaries allows you to communicate what you will and will not do with other people. Specifically, boundaries enable you to say “No” to things that are not in your best interest. You alone draw the line, and it is up to you to enforce your boundaries.

A lot of anxiety arises from a lack of boundaries around your time. Each of us has 24 hours in a day and must use the time wisely in ways that align with our core values. When someone asks you to do something with your time that violates your time boundaries, you have the power to politely say “No” without feeling guilty or remorse.

Other important boundaries include sexual boundaries, which are easily violated by people seeking to take advantage of you. It is vital that you do all within your power to prevent people from violating your sexual boundaries. The best thing you can do is to be firm when saying “No” and act accordingly. Don't say “Yes” when you mean “No.” Be clear with others when protecting your boundaries related to intimacy. Find those you trust to confide in if those boundaries are ever threatened or crossed.

C – Have **confidence** in yourself. Trust your decisions and live with the consequences. Admit mistakes and do better the next time.

Confidence is the ability to trust yourself and maintain a deep appreciation for your ability to do things and believe in yourself. You develop confidence over time by doing difficult things well. This occurs by learning to accomplish small tasks which eventually grow into big tasks. At the same time, you master simple

objectives and keep pushing yourself until you master difficult objectives.

Another word for confidence is “grit.” It is a quality of being able to stick to something from beginning to end no matter how hard or painful it is. When it comes to confidence. We are speaking about emotional pain associated with learning new things that require a lot of effort. We're not encouraging physical pain as a measure of growing confidence.

By growing your confidence you can minimize anxiety associated with stress and worry because as your confidence increases, you begin to sense the next steps of any given task. And even if you don't know them, you are confident enough to ask for help. That brings us to our final element of the ABCD method.

D – **Defer** to experts or mentors when you need help.

Ask for help, or defer, to the people who are more expert than you when you need assistance on any given topic. Many people are available to help you figure out the next steps in every aspect of living. Your task is to find the right person who you can trust and consult with in order to find solutions to problems.

People often turn to their closest friends for answers to difficult problems. This can be helpful, but often is not highly effective because your friends may not be skilled or trained in the area that you need help. Often, they are at the same level of knowledge and wisdom as you.

Seek out people who are living at the level of skill and achievement that you aspire to be. They may be a family member who is well accomplished or someone in

your company who holds the job that you aspire to do down the road. Consult with them and ask them about their strategies for creating and accomplishing their goals. Such people can become your mentor.

For complex problems in your personal and interpersonal relationships, you may need a professional counselor to guide you and help you formulate the best courses of action. Take advantage of this vital resource as a means of minimizing the anxiety that arises when you feel you are in over your head with stress and worry. Licensed professional counselors help you navigate sticky issues, that if left unresolved, create enormous anxiety.

Each element in the ABCD method requires time and attention. Work on each one individually and collectively until you have a good handle on each part. By mastering this hack, you will experience a significant decline in anxiety and increased proficiency over your life.

Step Three

Be a Non-Anxious Presence

When people gather in groups, nothing inherent in the group causes anxiety. The individuals who join the group with anxiety spread anxiety among the others. Why is this? Because anxiety is contagious, and if left unchecked, quickly attaches to anyone and everyone. The key to avoid anxiety's intoxicating power is to be a non-anxious presence.

The person is non-anxious when they are capable of being non-reactive when other people around them are caught up in an emotional whirlwind. The non-anxious person has the presence of mind and spirit to remain calm, even challenging or confrontational, and separate from the others in order to lower the anxiety of the group. Also, a non-anxious person willingly risks being disliked, but keeps their connection with the others.

Consider another anxious person, John, who always strives to do the right thing. He goes out of his way to make sure his people are comfortable and doesn't mind bending over backwards to make someone happy. When his partner gets upset and angry over events in the news, John realizes he can either get upset, too, or remain neutral, and therefore, bring calm to the room. During the pandemic, John's mother died, and his other three siblings gathered to make the final arrangements. The anxiety in the room was thick, and his siblings got into an intense emotional argument, lashing out at one another, and crying.

John maintained his calm in the midst of his siblings' outbursts and asked them if he could negotiate with the crematory alone. He managed the arrangements and later helped his siblings reconnect. He accomplished this without taking sides or pretending to be "the grownup" in the group.

How did he manage that? What are the key components to a non-anxious presence?

Number one, remember who you are, what you stand for, and how you manage yourself when you are your best self. In other words, call upon your self-soothing inner self to make itself visible in the midst of chaos. Act as if the storm is not swirling about you.

You can only be a self-soothing person in the storm by practicing being a self-soothing person when the atmosphere around you is less stormy. When minor annoyances take place in your immediate environment, practice being non-reactive. Let them slide and tell yourself all is well. You choose not to be annoyed.

This is the time to reinforce your principles and values. Refer to them. Keep them handy as a source of strength and determination.

Second, pay attention to others' concerns and points of view, but maintain your own clarity about your own point of view. You are bound to zero in on whose anxiety is dominating the space by watching their body language and listening to their vocal tones. Your focus on the big picture allows you to calm your own inner world and act responsibly, not reactively.

The third component is to “find the vulnerable child” in the anxious person. No, there’s no actual child likely in your space. But there is likely to be someone who has reverted to their inner child and its needs. If you extend empathy to that person, you’ll be able to put yourself in their place and recall how it felt to be cared for when you needed special attention. That is the “vulnerable child” you want to find now. Allow yourself to show “the child” some love and care by not getting critical or reactive to them due to your own thoughts that they’ve done something wrong. They are not “guilty” of anything, except being human.

Imagine instead there is likely an innocent reason the anxiety is surfacing. By assuming there is an innocent reason, you can then relate to the person without ratcheting up the anxiety. Finding the vulnerable child empowers you to calm the child, and therefore, remain non-anxious yourself.

Next, keep an open mind and be curious. Ask yourself, “What is happening?” What is happening inside of you? Be curious about others and ask them open-ended, non-judgmental questions that tease out the safe conversation. Don’t ask questions intended to get people to see things your way. Only ask questions that you don’t have answers for. In John’s situation, he might ask his siblings, “What am I missing?” Or “I wonder what is going on that caused the argument?”

A non-anxious person doesn’t interrupt other people as they are speaking. Being non-reactive means staying calm and listening deeply even when the other person says something disturbing. You act as if your emotions are glued to your seat and take the difficult

conversation sitting down. Instead of interjecting, you make room for all people to be heard fully.

The final piece of the non-anxious puzzle is to assure people (and yourself) that they have what it takes to meet the challenges that are the source of the general anxiety. By staying calm and reminding people of their own inner strengths, you bring down the emotional temperature in the group.

In the face of personal anxiety, that is worry and stress, your goal is to be a non-anxious presence for yourself. After all, your anxiety originates within you, and even when you are alone dealing with a problem, anxiety is chomping at the bit to reveal itself.

How do you assume the posture of a non-anxious presence? Practice the same five hacks described above. If you commit yourself to living non-anxiously when things are small, you'll naturally assume a non-anxious presence when things get out of hand.

Step Four

Be Self-Differentiated

An ongoing source of tension and frustration for many people is the idea they must be close to their family, especially as they strike out on their own. Families put a lot of pressure on people to remain close emotionally and to stick together. Such pressure is a source of great anxiety that often lasts a whole life.

Countering this pressure from your family demands a different mindset and relational posture. Viewing your family as a group of individuals you choose to be close to, not as persons with God-given rights to be close to you, helps you establish a more acceptable emotional distance. This shift in perspective lowers your anxiety when you think and relate to your family. The way of relating is called differentiation.

When we seek self-differentiation, we live as individuals who are connected to our family, but not tied to them at the hip. For most people, learning to be self-differentiated is a foreign concept. For this reason, most people spend their lives questioning why they struggle being close to people with whom they may not enjoy being around nor wish to have relationships with at all. This section will unpack self-differentiation, its impact on anxiety, and help you establish connection with family and friends that feels right for you.

How a lack of self-differentiation causes anxiety

Being in a family is like being on a seesaw. Families act as a system which seeks to remain in balance and

operate by both spoken and unspoken rules. As long as everyone abides by the rules, which are usually established by the parents (more specifically, often, the father), the seesaw stays in balance. But when one person attempts to skirt those rules, according to their own sense of individuality, that tips the seesaw up or down, causing the family to respond so the seesaw stays balanced.

Individuality is a sign of maturity and a healthy personality. However, many families are less interested in family members doing things that don't fit established patterns and rules. For example, if there is an unspoken rule that everyone will make their bed up in the morning in order to avoid punishment, when one family member doesn't make up the bed, another may do so in their place in order to protect the member who broke the rule. The same type of protection will get played out in other aspects of those two persons' lives within that family and throughout their whole lives because it becomes a pattern they learn to play by. And everyone else plays along.

When one person does less than required, it gets balanced out by another person who does more than required. There is nothing particularly unnatural about that process, but it naturally establishes a unique connection between the two people, which prevents them from being individuals who carry their own share of the load in the family. Rather than living as two different people, they become dependent on each other for things they may do for themselves. Being able to live your own, separate person is what we call differentiation.

Lack of differentiation, or (per the example above) one individual doing more than their share of caring

about the rules and the other individual doing less than their share, leads to anxiety. The pattern doesn't stop with the immediate family. Instead, the individuals will unconsciously play out that pattern in other relationships throughout their lives.

Other dynamics that cause a lack of differentiation include keeping secrets between family members and creating family triangles. The latter is a three-way relationship that draws in a third person because the first two people are unable to sustain their relationship in a healthy way on their own.

People often confuse their lack of self-differentiation with being close to family but being close entails connection and good personal boundaries. Undifferentiated people tend to live with poor boundaries and either allow people to violate their personal space or they get into the habit of violating others' personal space, either physical (like misusing others' belongings) or emotional (like taking others' patience for granted).

The pressure to conform to family rules and remain on a balanced seesaw causes great anxiety even after you leave your family's home. Because you pack yourself wherever you go, you carry the pressures of the family with you even when you swear to yourself you will leave all of that baggage behind.

Take the four-minute test

Here is a simple test for determining whether you are self-differentiated. When you return home to your family of origin, sometimes called the nuclear family, put yourself on a clock. The clock starts the minute you

enter the front door. How much time passes before you return to the role you played or the patterns you maintained when you lived at home? An undifferentiated person returns to those roles and patterns immediately. In order to consider yourself self-differentiated, you need to resist falling back into those roles and patterns for at least four minutes. As easy as this sounds, it is surprisingly difficult to resist the power of the family seesaw.

Self-differentiation defined

To be self-differentiated means you are connected to your family and a true individual. Self-differentiated people have the ability to connect emotionally with their family, but think and act as an individual. Knowing the difference between thoughts and emotions is the hallmark of self-differentiation. A self-differentiated person recognizes their emotions, but maintains the ability to think clearly and not be overtaken by their emotions. Moreover, the self-differentiated person doesn't let other people's emotions dictate their own.

A self-differentiated person can speak up for themselves when under pressure by the family to conform to the family's way of thinking and feeling. Also, a self-differentiated person can resist the anxiety that accompanies the pressure to live according to the family rules of closeness.

The psychologist Roy Paul Taylor offers the following questions to further determine whether you are self-differentiated.

1. Do you always see your partner as the problem?
2. Do you mostly work on letting go of problems rather than solving them?

3. Do you let feelings fester until they explode?
4. Do you feel pulled to match your partner's emotional state, such as when they're in anger, crisis, or sadness?
5. Do you conceal how you really feel about things?
6. Do you console yourself through substances or other unhelpful methods?
7. Do you say what you know others want to hear?
8. Do you talk to your friends about your relationship problems instead of your partner?
9. Do you have affairs?
10. Do you lose yourself in your partner?
11. Do you have sex you no longer want?
12. Do you agree to things you have no interest in doing?
13. Do you demand, directly or indirectly, compliments and praise?
14. Do you seek to control others instead of controlling yourself?
15. Do you concern yourself with the needs of others but disregard your own?

A self-differentiated person answers “no” to these questions.

When you work on your level of differentiation, you will experience more confidence, a sense of balance within yourself, pride in how you handle difficult situations, more assertiveness, and other personal growth. All of these changes contribute to more calm in your life and less anxiety.

How to improve your self-differentiation

1. Treat your family as you do other people outside of your family constellation. As an adult with other people around you who are not your family, assume those same thoughts and emotions when in the presence of your family instead of reverting to the ones from your childhood.
2. Decide who you want to be as an individual and live accordingly. What kind of partner do you want to be? What kind of boss do you want to be? What kind of employee do you want to be? Are you living according to your own rules or someone else's? Answer these questions honestly and make the changes needed to ensure you're living according to your own standards.
3. Develop tolerance for the emotional pain that accompanies standing up for yourself when others insist you think and feel the way they want you to be. This short-term pain will pay dividends in the long run.
4. Remember to consult the experts. Seek the help of mental health professionals who can help you develop more differentiation. You'll need a therapist who understands family systems theory in order to help you grow in this area.