FREE GUIDE · ANXIETY

Anxiety and overwhelm: find the top of your curve before you tip

Why anxiety builds the way it does, how to spot it early, and how to build your own ladder of strategies for green, amber and red.

On Tuesday your manager criticised your report, the car made a funny noise and your mum rang with a detailed account of her neighbour's hip operation, and you handled it all beautifully. On Friday you couldn't find the other sock and burst into tears.

It isn't the sock. This guide is about why anxiety and overwhelm build the way they do, how to spot them early, and how to build your own plan for each stage.

Anxiety is a smoke detector

Anxiety is your brain's smoke detector. It's designed to go off a bit too easily, because a false alarm is cheaper than a fire. Feeling anxious means your system has detected *possible* threat. It doesn't mean there is danger.

For some people the detector is set very sensitive, often because their brain learned, somewhere along the way, that the world needs watching closely. That made sense at the time. The question now is whether it still fits.

A useful line to keep in your pocket: **that's just the feeling. It's not a fact.** The feeling is real. It isn't necessarily telling you the truth about what's happening.

The curve and the tipping point

Picture a hill. At the bottom you're calm and settled. As stress, tiredness, noise, worry and demands build up, you climb. At the top there's a tipping point, and once you go over it you slide down the other side until you reach the bottom: the panic, the explosion, the tears, the shutdown.

Here's the crucial thing: **once you've tipped over, it's too late to think your way out.** Stress takes the brain's "hang on a minute" system offline. That's biology, not weakness. So the aim isn't to stop the slide once it's started. It's to know where the top of your curve is, and to notice you're approaching it before you tip.

Green, amber, red

- **Green:** settled, thinking clearly, able to laugh things off. This is where learning happens.
- **Amber:** the climb. Shorter fuse, faster reactions, tighter body. You can still think, but it's getting harder. *This is where you can still do something.*
- **Red:** over the top. Fight, flight, fawn or freeze. Nothing clever is going to work right now.

Most people don't notice amber. They go from "I'm fine" to "I'm furious" or "I can't breathe" with no idea how they got there, because the climb happened on autopilot. So the first job is to get to know your amber.

I often describe it as a scale from 1 to 10. For a lot of people, steps 1, 2 and 3 now trigger 7, 8, 9 and 10 automatically: the first flutter in your chest and, before you know it, you're at full panic. On autopilot you're a passenger, watching a video of yourself escalating with no power to stop it. The aim is to catch yourself at 1, 2 or 3 and say: "Okay, brain. Let's take a moment to think." That's you steering, instead of autopilot.

Try this: find your amber

Think back to the last time you tipped into red. Rewind to the hour before. What was happening in:

- **Your body?** Jaw tight, shoulders up, hot face, churning stomach, racing heart?
- **Your thoughts?** Speeding up, going round in circles, all-or-nothing: always, never, everyone, nobody?
- **Your behaviour?** Going quiet, snapping, doing ten things at once, picking up your phone?
- **Your tokens?** How much sleep, food and patience did you have left that day?

Those are your early warning signs. They're different for everyone, and they're worth knowing as well as your own phone number.

Emotions are waves

A single wave of emotion rises, peaks and falls away. Many ease sooner than we fear, although some, like sadness, can linger. But when you fight a wave, by pushing it down or feeding it with more thoughts, it doesn't go away. The next one arrives before the last has fallen, and they stack. That's how people explode about something tiny after weeks of "coping": they've been holding back waves, and holding back waves costs a fortune in tokens.

- **Let it come.** Name it, even silently: "That's anxiety."
- **Let it peak.** Breathe through it. Waves pass.
- **Let it go.** Don't chase it with "and another thing…"
- **Don't let them stack.** Talk, write, walk, cry. Let some out before they build.

Build your ladder

What helps at green won't help at amber, and neither will help at red. So you need a ladder of strategies, one for each colour, and it needs to be written down while you're green, because in red you won't be able to think of anything.

- **Green:** things that keep your bucket full, and the deeper work like reflecting and planning.
- **Amber:** three quick, physical things that take under five minutes and almost no thought. A walk round the block. A glass of water and something to eat. Five minutes outside. Pat your head and rub your tummy, then swap hands: it forces your thinking brain to switch on.
- **Red:** safety and time. Somewhere quiet. Breathe out slowly. Hold something cold. Don't make decisions. Don't send messages. Wait for it to pass, then be kind to yourself afterwards.

If you get panic attacks

A panic attack is the smoke detector at full volume: racing heart, tight chest, breathlessness, dizziness, a sense of doom. It's horrible, and it isn't dangerous. It peaks and passes. Many people find a coping card helps: a small card that says what you notice, what it is, and what you can do. "My chest is tight and I can't catch my breath. This is a false alarm. I am not in danger. I can breathe out slowly and wait for it to pass." If you've never had symptoms like these before, or you're not sure what they are, get checked by a doctor.

Boom and bust

Some people don't have a gentle curve; they have a seesaw. Good days, they do everything. Then they crash for days. The boom days are causing the bust days. The fix feels wrong but works: do less than you think you should on good days, and leave some tokens in the bucket.

Sometimes the volume needs turning down first

If anxiety is so loud that you live permanently in amber and red, there's no green to practise in. It's like learning to swim in a storm. For some people, medication turns the volume down far enough to learn and practise new skills. That isn't cheating or failing; sometimes it's what makes everything else possible. It's a decision to make with your doctor.

Medication is often the easiest way to change how the brain is running. Learning new habits is harder, but arguably more powerful, because you end up with your own cheat sheet for managing yourself. Many people do best with both.

A conversation with your brain

"Brain, I think we're climbing."
"We're fine. We just need to finish this."
"Jaw's tight, shoulders are up, and we've snapped at two people. I think we're in amber."
"…Maybe a bit."
"What's on the amber list?"
"Five minutes outside."
"Great. This will still be here when we get back."

When to get more help

If anxiety is stopping you doing things you want or need to do, or panic attacks are frequent, it's worth getting support. Anxiety is very treatable. If you're in crisis, call NHS 111 and choose the mental health option, or Samaritans on 116 123. In an emergency, call 999.

Worksheets

You'll find these printable worksheets at the end of this PDF:

- **My amber signs**: spot the climb in your body, thoughts and behaviour

- **My ladder**: your green, amber and red strategies, written down while you're green
- **Coping cards**: short cards for the moments when thinking goes offline

Further help

- NHS: generalised anxiety disorder: symptoms and treatment.
- NHS: panic disorder: what panic attacks are and what helps.
- Anxiety UK: support and information.

Written by Dr Monica Berntsen, HCPC-registered Consultant Psychologist and Neuropsychologist. This guide is for general information and isn't a substitute for individual assessment or treatment.

Want some help with this?

I offer online therapy across the UK. Get in touch at drmonicaberntsen.com/contact and I'll suggest the best next step.

Read this guide online, and find more free guides, at drmonicaberntsen.com/resources.

WORKSHEET 1

My amber signs

Think back to the last two or three times you tipped into red. Rewind to the hour before and write down what you noticed.

Body (jaw, shoulders, breathing, stomach, heart)

Thoughts (speed, themes, all-or-nothing words)

Behaviour (going quiet, snapping, rushing, phone)

Tokens (sleep, food, pain, how full the bucket was)

My top three amber signs

WORKSHEET 2

My ladder

Fill this in while you're green. Keep it somewhere you'll see it: the fridge, your phone, your wallet.

GREEN: what keeps me green, and what I'll do while I'm here

AMBER: three quick, physical things that take under five minutes

RED: what keeps me and others safe until it passes, and what I won't do (e.g. send messages)

Afterwards: how I'll be kind to myself, and what I'll learn

WORKSHEET 3

Coping cards

Write a card for each stage. Keep them short enough to read when thinking is hard.

Card 1. When I notice… (early signs) | This is… | I can…

Card 2. When I notice… (stronger signs) | This is… | I can…

Card 3. When I notice… (peak) | This is… | I can…