ANXIETY COPING SKILLS CHEAT SHEET

Anxiety is a natural emotional and physical response to perceived danger, stress, or uncertainty. It involves feelings of worry, fear, or unease and is often accompanied by physical symptoms such as a racing heart, muscle tension, or restlessness. While occasional anxiety is a normal part of life, persistent or intense anxiety can interfere with daily functioning and may indicate an anxiety disorder.

🔍 UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

Anxiety is a survival response that activates the body's alarm system. While it's normal, chronic anxiety can feel overwhelming and exhausting. The goal is not to eliminate anxiety—but to respond to it in helpful, empowering ways.

🧠 WHAT ANXIETY FEELS LIKE

- Racing thoughts
- Tension or muscle tightness
- Trouble sleeping
- Avoidance behaviors
- Restlessness or agitation
- Difficulty concentrating
- Chest tightness or rapid heartbeat

WORRY VS. ANXIETY

Worry -
- Concerned about an upcoming job interview and preparing thoroughly.
- Feeling uneasy about a big exam next week and studying harder.
- Worried about being late to a meeting due to traffic and leaving earlier than usual.
- Nervous about meeting new people at a social event and planning conversation starters.
- Anxious about forgetting something important for a trip and double-checking your packing list.
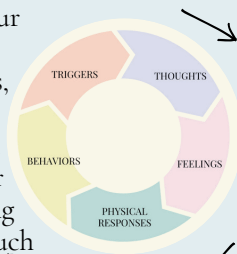
Anxiety -
- Persistent fear of being judged in social situations, leading to avoidance of social gatherings.
- Continuous dread about health, convinced that minor symptoms indicate a severe illness.
- Constantly imagining worst-case scenarios in everyday situations, unable to relax or enjoy activities.
- Experiencing frequent panic attacks without any obvious trigger, making daily activities challenging.
- Overwhelming fear of making mistakes at work, causing sleepless nights and decreased performance.

THE ANXIETY ICEBERG

The Anxiety Iceberg: What you see is only the surface. Beneath behaviors like overthinking, avoidance, perfectionism, or irritability lie deeper emotions—fear, overwhelm, shame, and a need for safety. This visual reminds us that anxiety responses are not weakness—they're protective strategies shaped by past experiences.

ANXIETY ICEBERG

WHAT YOU SEE: irritability, withdrawal, negativity, overly apologetic, low mood, avoidance, nervousness

WHAT YOU DON'T SEE: shame, guilt, fear, past trauma, numbness, rejection, difficulty concentrating, difficulty sleeping, inner critic, low self-esteem, hopelessness, lonliness, intrusive thoughts

COPING SKILLS

🛠️ **Quick Coping Skills (In-the-Moment Relief)**
- **Box Breathing:** Inhale 4, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4
- **5-4-3-2-1 Grounding:** Engage the five senses to anchor in the present
- **Use Cold Water:** Splash face or hold ice to calm the nervous system
- **Positive Self-Talk:** Repeat calming phrases like "I am safe" or "This will pass"
- **Stretch or Move:** Shake it out, stretch, or walk to release built-up energy

🧠 **Cognitive Coping Skills**
- **Thought Reframing:** Challenge negative thoughts (e.g., "Is this 100% true?")
- **Journaling:** Write out worries and counter them with facts
- **Name the Emotion:** Label what you're feeling to reduce its intensity
- **Use "What if" in reverse:** "What if this works out?"

🧍‍♂️🧍‍♀️ **Mind-Body Techniques**
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Tense and release each muscle group
- **Mindfulness or Meditation:** Focus on the breath or present moment
- **Visualization:** Picture a calm, safe place
- **Yoga or Gentle Movement:** Connect breath and body for regulation

Triggers - Stressful events that cause stress and vary by person—like breakups, loss, work pressure, or hormonal changes.

Thoughts - Triggers frequently result in negative thoughts, which can be irrational or exaggerated. Examples include thoughts like "I always mess everything up," "No one likes me," or "I'm worthless.

Behaviors - Our reactions to these thoughts, emotions, and symptoms can exacerbate our anxiety, leading to behaviors such as withdrawal, substance abuse, and neglect of personal hygiene.

TRIGGERS, THOUGHTS, BEHAVIORS, FEELINGS, PHYSICAL RESPONSES

Feelings - Our thinking influences our emotions, and our emotions, in turn, impact our thoughts. For instance, if we feel scared, we might assume there is a reason to be afraid.

Physical Responses - Anxiety affects both mind and body, often causing symptoms like muscle tension, headaches, back pain, and nausea.

TRAUMA INFORMED THERAPY CHEAT SHEET

Trauma-informed therapy is an approach that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery. It emphasizes safety, empowerment, trust, and client voice—while avoiding re-traumatization.

CORE PRINCIPLES

- **Safety** – Emotional and physical safety come first
- **Trust & Transparency** – Be consistent, clear, and honest
- **Collaboration** – Healing is co-created, not directed
- **Empowerment & Choice** – Clients guide the pace and direction
- **Peer Support** – Shared experiences reduce shame
- **Cultural Awareness** – Recognize identity, history, and power dynamics

TYPES OF TRAUMA

- **Acute:** One-time events
- **Chronic:** Repeated or long-term exposure
- **Complex:** Interpersonal, layered trauma
- **Historical/Collective:** Generational trauma due to oppression
- **Vicarious:** Trauma from witnessing or hearing others' experiences

HOW TRAUMA AFFECTS THE BRAIN

Trauma isn't just emotional—it changes how the brain processes stress, memory, and safety. These changes are **survival-based,** but they can make daily life feel overwhelming, even long after the danger has passed.

- **Amygdala (Alarm System):** Becomes overactive, making you more sensitive to threats, even when you're safe.
- **Hippocampus (Memory Center):** Can struggle to organize memories, leading to flashbacks or confusion about what happened and when.
- **Prefrontal Cortex (Thinking Brain):** May go "offline" during stress, making it hard to focus, make decisions, or regulate emotions.

These effects aren't permanent—and with the right support, the brain can **rewire**, heal, and learn new patterns of safety and connection.

THE TRAUMA ICEBERG

The Trauma Iceberg: What you see is only the surface. Beneath behaviors like anger, withdrawal, or people-pleasing lie deeper wounds—fear, shame, grief, and unmet needs. This visual reminds us that trauma responses are often protective, not problematic.

TRAUMA ICEBERG

WHAT YOU SEE: Coping Behavior – Stress and trauma responses

hypervigilance   anger
dissociative behaviors
hyperarousal   lying
withdrawal   self-harm   sagotaging

feeling incompetent   flashbacks   chronic depression
insomnia   body memories   rage
panic attacks   overwhelm
suicidal thoughts
isolation   lonliness
feeling worthless   WHAT YOU DON'T SEE: Wounds of trauma

TRAUMA RESPONSES

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

The window of tolerance is the zone where intense emotional arousal can be processed in a healthy way, allowing you to function and react to stress or anxiety effectively. It allows you to respond to the demands and stress of everyday life without much difficulty.

HYPERAROUSAL
Anxious, angry, out of control, overwhelmed. Your body wants to fight or run away. It's not something you choose these reactions just take over.

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE
When you are in your window of tolerance you feel like you can deal with whatever is happening. You might feel stress or pressure, but doesn't bother you too much. This is the ideal place to be.

When stress and trauma shrink your window of tolerance, it doesn't take much to throw you off balance.

Working with a practitioner can help expand your window of tolerance so that you are more able to cope with challenges.

HYPOAROUSAL
Spacey, zoned out, numb, frozen. Your body wants to shut down. It's not something you choose. These reactions just take over.

- Hypervigilance or startle response
- Emotional numbness or shutdown
- Difficulty concentrating
- Flashbacks or nightmares
- Avoidance of reminders or people
- Physical symptoms without clear medical cause

THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES:

Trauma-informed therapy is not a single method, but can include multiple evidence-based modalities, such as:

- **EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing)** – Helps reprocess traumatic memories using bilateral stimulation
- **Sensorimotor Psychotherapy** – Connects somatic awareness with talk therapy to release trauma stored in the body
- **Internal Family Systems (IFS)** – Focuses on healing wounded "parts" and accessing Self-energy
- **Trauma-Focused CBT** – Combines cognitive restructuring with trauma processing
- **Somatic Experiencing** – Uses body-based awareness to release survival energy
- **Narrative Therapy** – Helps clients rewrite their trauma story with agency
- **Mindfulness-Based Therapies** – Promotes grounding, present-moment safety, and emotional regulation

Each of these can be adapted through a trauma-informed lens focused on consent, pacing, and emotional safety.

In Practice

- Use invitational language (e.g., "Would it feel okay to explore this today?")
- Watch for nonverbal cues of overwhelm or shutdown
- Normalize trauma responses as adaptive, not broken
- Anchor clients in the present with grounding exercises
- Focus on stabilization before deep processing

INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS PARTS WORK

BASIC PHILOSOPHY

- **IFS** an evidence-based model that fosters healing and self-development by recognizing and addressing the diverse parts within a person's mental system.
- **Multiplicity of the Mind:** This is the foundation of IFS, which posits that our mind is composed of multiple, distinct parts, or sub-personalities, each with its own perspective, interests, memories, and viewpoint.
- **The Self:** The Self represents the core essence of an individual, distinct from the parts influenced by life experiences. It embodies qualities such as calmness, curiosity, compassion, courage, confidence, creativity, clarity, and connectedness – known as **the 8 Cs.** IFS asserts that everyone possesses a Self that remains intact and cannot be damaged or lost.
- In Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy, the 'Self' is metaphorically seen as a **'bus driver'** guiding the person's life. The 'parts' (Managers, Firefighters, Exiles) are considered the passengers on this bus.
- However, when a part **(Managers, Firefighters, Exiles)** feels threatened, it may seize control, resulting in imbalanced emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.
- The aim of IFS therapy is to restore the Self to its leading role, enabling the individual to handle life's challenges with clarity and resilience.

IFS - SUBPERSONALITIES

Exiles are aspects of our mind that carry past traumas and negative emotions like fear, shame, or sadness. To protect the individual from these intense feelings, other parts of the mind push exiles out of conscious awareness, effectively "exiling" them.

Managers are proactive mental aspects that suppress exiles and maintain control. Common types include the critic, which uses self-criticism to keep the person in check, and the caretaker, which prioritizes others' needs over their own.

Firefighters are reactive parts of the mind that distract from emotional pain by triggering impulsive behaviors like overeating, substance use, or anger to numb or avoid discomfort.

MANAGERS

The Pleaser - Tries to make everyone happy and avoid conflict. This might involve agreeing with others even when the individual doesn't really feel the same way or doing things they don't want to do to keep others happy.

The Critic - A mental component that constantly judges and criticizes individuals to encourage improvement and avoid mistakes. Those with a strong Critic may frequently feel inadequate or believe they could have done better.

The Caretaker - The Caretaker focuses on meeting others' needs over the individual's own to maintain peace and avoid conflict. Someone with a Caretaker manager might consistently look after others, often at the expense of their own needs and desires.

The Planner - This manager part is always thinking ahead and planning for every possibility to prevent unexpected outcomes. A person with a dominant Planner manager may spend a lot of time worrying about the future and creating contingency plans for various scenarios.

The Perfectionist - Drives individuals to pursue high or unattainable standards to evade criticism or failure. Those with a strong Perfectionist trait may excessively review their work, fearing mistakes will lead to negative feedback.

The Workaholic - Drives individuals to stay busy with work, often at the expense of personal relationships and self-care, in an effort to avoid feelings of inadequacy. For instance, those influenced may work late, sacrifice leisure time, and struggle with work-life balance.

EXILED PARTS

The Invisible Exile - This part feels unseen or unheard. For example, a person with an Invisible exile may struggle to express themselves or feel ignored, often due to past experiences of their thoughts or feelings being dismissed.

The Abandoned Exile - This part carries feelings of abandonment or rejection. For instance, a person with an Abandoned exile may feel intense loneliness or fear of rejection stemming from early experiences of being left alone or feeling unsupported.

The Worthless Exile - This part holds a belief in the person's fundamental unworthiness or inadequacy. Someone with a Worthless exile might constantly feel like they're not good enough, stemming from experiences of criticism or failure.

The Traumatized Exile - This part holds memories of traumatic experiences, along with associated feelings of fear, horror, or helplessness. A person with a Traumatized exile might have intense reactions to reminders of the trauma, even if they don't remember the experience.

The Shamed Exile - This part carries feelings of shame or guilt. For instance, a person with a Shamed exile might feel deeply flawed or undeserving of love and happiness, often due to experiences of humiliation or shaming.

The Neglected Exile - This part holds feelings of neglect or deprivation. A person with a Neglected exile might feel constantly unfulfilled or overlooked, often stemming from experiences of not having their needs met.

FIREFIGHTERS

The Controller - This part deflects discomfort by projecting blame onto others. Instead of experiencing their own discomfort, the Blaming firefighter might cause the person to fault others. For example, if someone feels inadequate at work, they might blame their colleagues for not providing enough support.

The Dissociative Firefighter - This part leads the individual to dissociate or disconnect from reality to escape feelings of pain or discomfort. For instance, someone with a Dissociative firefighter might feel detached from their body or surroundings when they become upset or overwhelmed.

The Impulsive Firefighter - Engages in impulsive behaviors, like shopping sprees or reckless driving, to distract from pain or vulnerability. For instance, a person might shop after a stressful day to avoid confronting their stress and discomfort.

The Rageful Firefighter - This part uses anger and rage in an effort to block the individual from feeling vulnerable or hurt. A person with a Rageful firefighter might become suddenly and intensely angry in response to perceived criticism or rejection.

The Self-Harming Firefighter - This part resorts to self-harm as a means to distract from emotional pain. For example, an individual with this firefighter might engage in cutting, burning, or other forms of self-injury when they feel overwhelmed by emotional pain.

The Addictive Firefighter - This part employs addictive behaviors to numb or divert attention from feelings of pain, discomfort, or vulnerability. For instance, someone with an Addictive firefighter might turn to excessive drinking, drug use, or overeating when they feel upset or overwhelmed.

INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS PARTS WORK

INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

1 **Find** – The first step is to find the different sub-personalities or "parts" that make up your internal system. Through a process of self-exploration and introspection.

2 **Focus** – Once you have identified your parts, it is important to focus on each individually. This will help you better understand their unique perspectives, beliefs, and emotions.

3 **Flesh out** – The next step is to flesh out each part by giving it a name and further exploring its characteristics. This will help you better understand how each part functions within your internal system.

4 **Feel toward** – It is important to start developing a feeling toward each of your parts. This can be done by exploring your emotions towards each part and considering how each part feels towards you.

5 **Friend** – This step aims to develop a more positive relationship with each of your parts through practicing forgiveness, compassion, and understanding.

6 **Fear** – The final step is to work through any fears you may have about your parts or your internal system. This includes addressing fears that may hinder you from developing a healthy relationship with your parts.

FLESH OUT STAGE QUESTIONS

In the 'Flesh Out' stage of Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy's '6 F's', the goal is to deeply explore and comprehend a specific part. This phase usually involves a dialogue process where you inquire about the part and actively listen to its responses. Here are examples of questions that can guide this stage:

ORIGINS - When did you first become a part of me? Can you show me or tell me about when you first took on this role?

PURPOSE- What is your role or purpose in my system? What are you trying to accomplish or prevent?

CONCERNS - What are you worried about? What do you fear might happen if you don't do your job?

BELIEFS - What beliefs do you hold about me, others or the world.

DESIRES - What do you wish for? What do you want me to understand or know.

FEELINGS - What emotions are you carrying? How do you feel about the role you've been playing?

RELATIONSHIP WITH PARTS - How do you relate to my other parts? Are there parts you work with, conflict with, or protect?

PARTS MAPPING

This process aids in revealing the roles, relationships, and dynamics among different parts and their interactions. Here's a comprehensive breakdown of the parts mapping procedure:

IDENTIFYING PARTS -This may encompass managers, firefighters, exiles, and other parts known to the individual. These parts can embody various thoughts, feelings, beliefs, behaviors, or memories, so identifying them may require some time.

CREATING A VISUAL REPRESENTATION - Once identified, these parts can be visually represented. This representation could range from a basic sketch to a detailed diagram, tailored to the individual's choice. Each part is symbolized by something meaningful such as an image, color, or shape that resonates with the person.

DEFINING ROLES AND CHARACTERISTICS - What are the characteristics of each part. What is its function? What are its typical behaviors, feelings, or thoughts? This process helps to clarify the nature and purpose of each part within the internal system.

ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS - This step involves identifying the relationships between parts and how they interact, conflict, or cooperate with each other. Are there parts that protect or hide other parts? Understanding these dynamics can offer a deeper understanding of the individual's internal system.

LOCATING BURDENS - Burdens are the painful emotions, beliefs, or memories that a part might be carrying. Identifying these burdens can help in understanding why a part behaves as it does, and where healing might be needed.

UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM AS A WHOLE - With the completed parts map, the individual can now step back and see the whole picture. They might notice patterns, themes, or dynamics that weren't clear before. This overarching view can provide valuable insights into their internal system and guide the therapy process.

UNBURDENING YOUR PARTS

Unburdening is an essential part of the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model. It refers to the process of releasing the emotions, beliefs, and memories (the burdens) that a part carries, particularly the exile parts. Unburdening can lead to healing and transformation for the parts and for the overall system. Here's how the process might look, with an example:

Connection to the Exile - Once the protective parts (managers and firefighters) have granted permission, you can start connecting with an exile. For instance, imagine an exile burdened by shame from a childhood incident of public humiliation.

Witnessing the Exile's Story- After establishing a connection with the exile, invite it to share its memories or narrate its story. The exile might reveal a memory of being ridiculed by classmates following a mistake in a school play.

Experiencing the Exile's Emotions - From the perspective of the Self, remain present with the exile's emotions without becoming overwhelmed. You might experience profound feelings of shame, embarrassment, and a belief such as "I am always the subject of ridicule."

Unblending from the Exile - If you begin to merge with the exile's emotions or beliefs, remind yourself that you are in the Self, and these emotions and beliefs belong to the exile, not to your core identity. Say to yourself, "I notice a part of me feels intense shame, but that is not the entirety of who I am."

Compassionate Witnessing - From the standpoint of the Self, observe the exile's pain with compassion, understanding, and acceptance. This compassionate witnessing alone can be profoundly therapeutic for the exile. You might express, "I see how much pain you are in. I am here with you.

Unburdening the Exile - Once the exile begins to trust you, inquire if it is willing to release its burden. This often involves revisiting the memory and providing the support that was needed at that time. In this scenario, you could visualize the Self entering the memory and comforting your younger self, advocating for them, or helping them find humor in the situation.

Confirmation and Integration - After unburdening, check in with the exile about its emotional state. It may express feelings of relief, lightness, or peace. You can then reintegrate this unburdened part back into your internal system. Freed from the burden of shame, it can assume a new positive role, such as fostering joy or creativity.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION CHEAT SHEET

Quick Scripts & Tools for Clear, Calm Conversations

QUICK RESET (USE BEFORE YOU TALK)

☐ **Pause and breathe** (slow exhale).
☐ **Ask:** "What do I want from this conversation—repair, clarity, support, or a plan?"
☐ **Choose your tone:** calm, brief, respectful.

THE BEST ALL-PURPOSE SCRIPT

When _____ (specific situation), I feel _____ (emotion), because _____ (impact/meaning), and I need/would like _____ (clear request).

Example:
"When plans change last minute, I feel anxious because I don't have time to adjust. I'd like a quick heads-up when possible."

TALK LIKE THIS (CLEAR + KIND)

Use specific facts: "Yesterday / when you said…"
Name one emotion: "I felt disappointed."
Make one request: "Can we agree to…"
Invite teamwork: "What would work for you?"

LISTEN LIKE THIS (SO THEY FEEL HEARD)

Use 3 steps:
1. Reflect: "So you're saying…"
2. Validate: "That makes sense because…" (doesn't mean you agree)
3. Clarify: "Did I get that right?"

Helpful phrases:
- "Help me understand."
- "What matters most to you here?"
- "What do you need from me right now—listening, reassurance, or problem-solving?"

QUICK CHECKLIST (BEFORE YOU HIT SEND OR SPEAK)

☐ Is it specific?
☐ Is it respectful?
☐ Did I name what I feel and what I need?
☐ Did I make one clear request?
☐ Am I regulated enough to talk?
Reminder: Clarity is kindness. Boundaries are communication. Repair builds trust.

BOUNDARIES IN ONE SENTENCE

I'm not available for _____ (behavior). I am available for _____ (respectful alternative).
Examples:
- "I'm not available for yelling. I'm available to talk when we're both calm."
- "I'm not able to discuss this late at night. I can talk tomorrow after dinner."

REPAIR AFTER CONFLICT (FAST FORMULA)

Own it: "I'm sorry for _____."
Name the impact: "I can see that it made you feel _____."
Share the need: "I was feeling _____ and needed _____."
Plan: "Next time, I'll _____. Can we try _____?"

IF YOU'RE GETTING ACTIVATED (STOP THE SPIRAL)

Say one of these:
- "I want to talk about this, and I need a short break to calm down."
- "Let's pause and come back at ____."
- "I'm starting to shut down / get overwhelmed."
- "I'm feeling reactive right now and I don't want to say something I'll regret. Can we take a 10–20 minute break and then come back?"
- "I care about this conversation. I need a moment to regulate so I can listen and respond respectfully—let's restart in ____ minutes."

Rule: Take a break + come back. No disappearing.

AVOID THESE "CONVERSATION KILLERS"

☐ "You always / you never…"
☐ Mind-reading ("You just want to…")
☐ Character attacks ("You're selfish.")
☐ Bringing up 5 old issues at once
☐ Fixing when they asked for listening
☐ Texting heavy topics (when possible)
Swap with:
"In this situation…"
"I'm worried that…"
"What I'm needing is…"