

# GOING TOWARD

A Pamphlet on the Application of  
The Meaning of Anxiety



Joseph D. Coleman, PhD



To be applied to any human situation

# Contents

The definition of anxiety

A brief history of anxiety

Anxiety in life

*Going Toward*

## *The definition of anxiety*

Anxiety is a reaction to a perceived threat. Anxiety is not separate from you; it is part of you and is essential to you. It is not something to be cured or conquered. Attempts to cure it are akin to trying to cure sneezing or sweating.

We say we're "anxious" when we've noticed the anxiety that was always there; it increased. There are mental and physical responses to increases in anxiety. One may experience increased heart rate, sweating, gripping, pupil dilation, and shallow breathing, among other physical symptoms. One may also experience a feeling of dread, panic, a desire to flee or to fight, and an all-encompassing terror. One usually experiences a combination of physical and mental symptoms.

Essential to the understanding of the meaning of anxiety is the 7<sup>th</sup> word in the definition: *perceived*.

People's perceptions differ considerably. Person A might not experience heightened anxiety until they find themselves running from a bear after losing their company while out on a hike, whereas person B may experience nearly unbearable anxiety upon receiving an email from a colleague. They *perceive* life events differently.

The 8<sup>th</sup> word in the definition is also essential: *threat*.

The *threat* may be to one's physical well-being, personality, or both. Person C may feel threatened only when someone tries to physically harm them, whereas person D may feel an equally intense sense of threat when they receive a pay decrease. Here, person D's *sense of self* is threatened, which can be as terrifying as a physical threat. For this person, their salary may define them and a pay decrease may rock them to the core. Our histories and our culture inform what we find threatening. This is why many people find the sources of their anxiety to be "silly" or "ridiculous." Given this explanation, however, one can see that our anxieties are anything but silly; they simply tell us what we find important. This explains the statement at the beginning of this pamphlet: *Anxiety is not separate from you; it is part of you and is essential to you.* This is also why it's so difficult to pinpoint the source of our anxieties. They originate within us, which means they point us in a direction of growth.

Perhaps you're beginning to see why we should not fear our anxiety or try to "overcome" or "master" our anxiety. Instead, we should be *curious about the source* of our anxiety.

## *A brief history of anxiety*

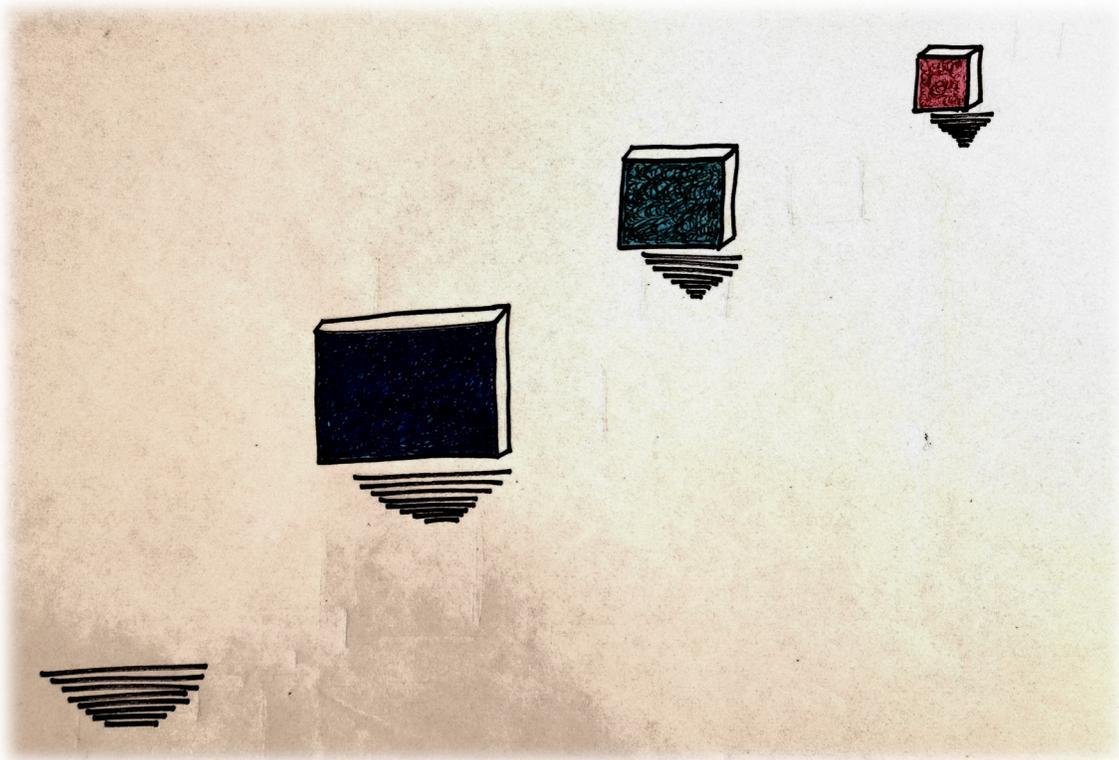
For centuries, it was believed that being rational was the key to overcoming challenges.

If something seemed irrational, it was to be overcome with rationality and reason; perhaps you've tried such an approach: "This is stupid. Why can't I just get over it?" There was no room for irrational experiences (i.e., perceived threats). While this view kept anxieties from interfering during the period of industrialization, it did not satisfy questions of meaning, as it cheapened human experience and thought.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard sensed that this emphasis on rationality left humans feeling isolated. He sensed the burden to sweep away irrational worries like trash in the street. To him, anxiety was a *prerequisite* for growth and was therefore something to be wrestled with. It was unavoidable and could not be rationalized away. He felt that confidence, for example, was not the removal of doubt, but was instead the attitude that we can move ahead *despite* doubt.

His was an existential view of the meaning of anxiety. It relates to our place in the world and the meaning of life and of suffering. Because we know we'll die, we have at

least some anxiety at all times. Anxiety is therefore *normal* and *helpful*. It's a constant nudge to keep living. Anxiety promotes survival and growth. Creative acts, interpersonal conflicts, and resolutions of love are fueled by anxiety. We move forward not only despite anxiety, but also *because of* anxiety. *Our* world thirsts for this view.



## *Anxiety in life*

Try asking yourself these questions:

Do you try to rationalize your worries away? Do you shy away from that feeling of dread? Do you beat yourself up for not being able to snap out of it, or get over it, or figure it out? Do you worry? Do you tell stories internally?

Your life may be full of anxiety-provoking thoughts and tasks. How do ‘*perceive*’ and ‘*threat*’ influence how you think? Have you considered this before?

Do you perceive messages, evaluations, or reactions from other people as threats? Surely we all do, but why would *you*, and why in *the ways that you do*? Can you embrace anxiety, *which means embrace yourself*, as one would embrace the sight of a lighthouse in a stormy sea?

Perhaps you find relaxation techniques useful. Perhaps you know which topics increase your anxiety. But, you may not have considered the essentialness of anxiety and its profoundly normal and guiding nature. When considering how we should approach anxiety, let’s think of it this way: Kierkegaard’s view champions an individual’s ability to do one thing: *Go Toward*.



## *Going Toward*

To avoid anxiety is to shrink your world. To *Go Toward* anxiety is to expand your world and your sense of self.

If I have to give a presentation in 5 minutes, I do it. After it's done, I am the same 'I' as before, but now I am an 'I' who can do *that*.

### Crude numbers game #1:

1. I before = 90 points
  - Anxiety-provoking task = 10 points
  - *Go Toward* the task
2. I after = 100 points
  - *I am now more of a person*

My sense of self has expanded. This breeds confidence and lessens anxiety. Next time, I feel less anxious and more capable.

*Going Toward* does not necessarily mean being active or physically or verbally moving toward something or someone. Remember: The other is not the source of the anxiety, *you are* (because *you've* perceived a threat). Thus, *you can't go wrong if you Go Toward.*

I hate when people get angry with me; this increases my anxiety. I see my friend's facial expression and I think they're mad at me. In this case, I *Go Toward* the anxiety by *not* badgering them about their potential anger. I don't fight the anxiety; I let it wash over me.

### Crude numbers game #2:

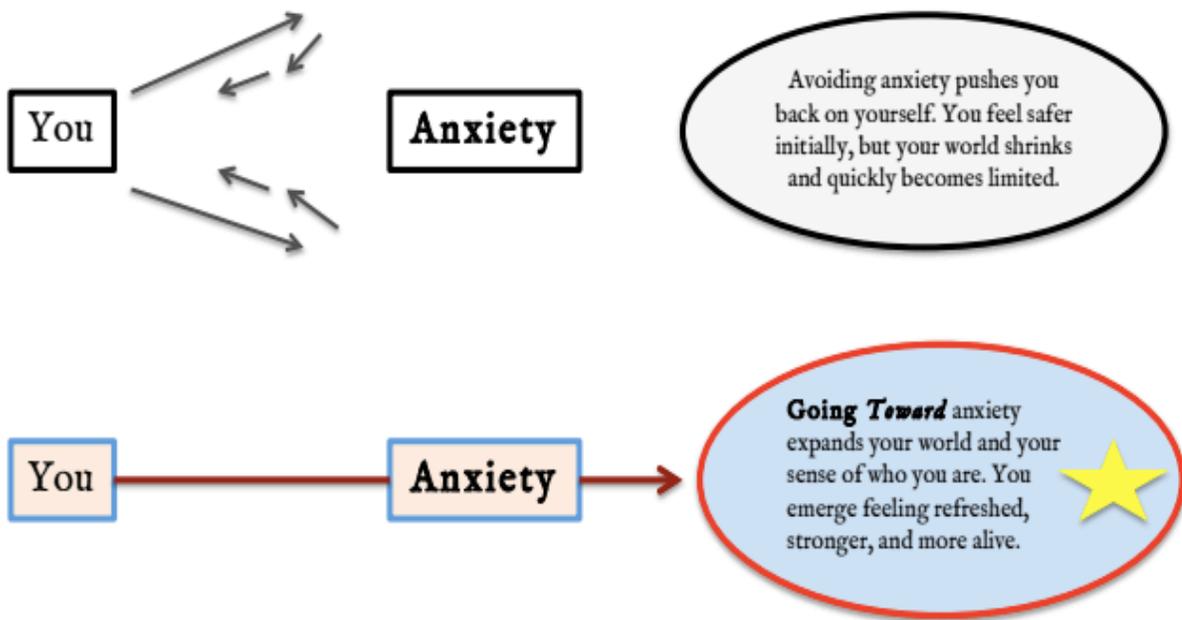
1. I before = 90 points
  - Anxiety-provoking task = 10 points
    - Allow myself to be anxious. Wait to see if they're mad/*permit* their anger
  - *Go Toward* the task (by *doing nothing*)
2. I after = 100 points
  - *I am now more of a person*
    - I have a new option: *Not* reacting

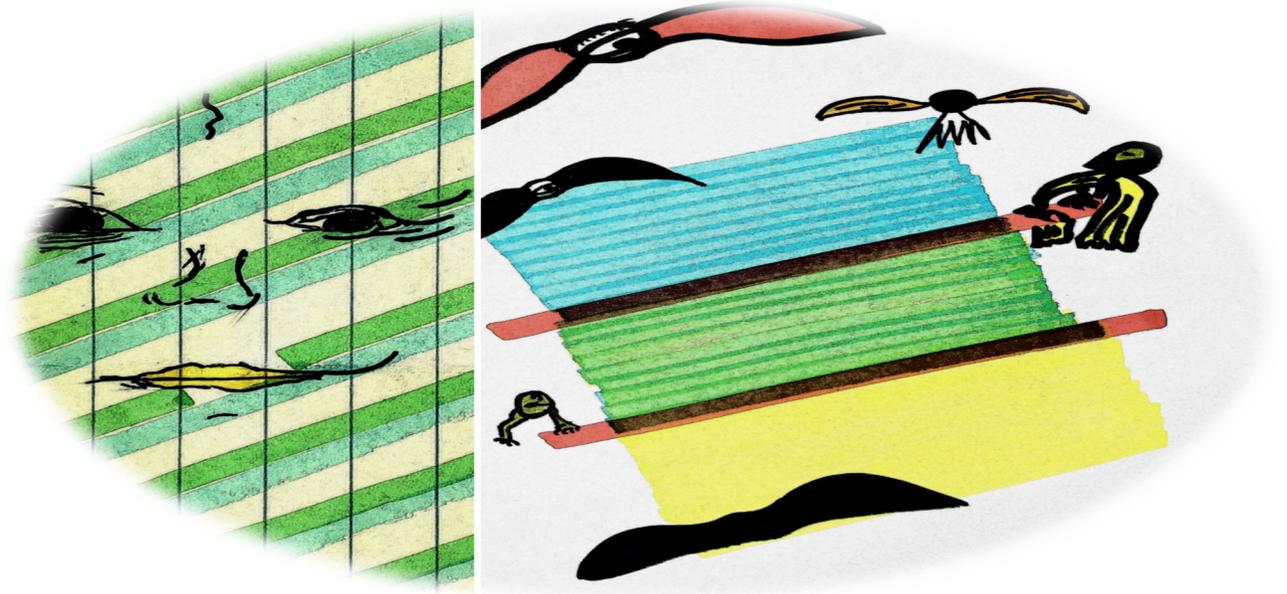
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Apply it!

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## Going *Toward* Anxiety





If you would like to discuss anxiety in more detail and in a therapeutic or coaching context, please send me a message.

(917) 283-2284. [joe@libertypsychotherapist.com](mailto:joe@libertypsychotherapist.com).