

WORKING WITH MORAL ANXIETY, SCRUPULOSITY AND HYPERVIGILANCE

**A practical workbook for
noticing anxiety patterns,
reducing reassurance-
seeking, and practising
uncertainty.**

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Before You Begin

This workbook is for people who experience intense anxiety, guilt, doubt, or hypervigilance around questions such as:

- “What if I’ve done something wrong?”
- “What if I’m a bad person?”
- “What if I’ve hurt someone and don’t realise it?”
- “What if I can never be certain?”
- “What if this feeling means something is wrong?”

Some people experience this in a religious form, sometimes called scrupulosity. Scrupulosity usually involves intense fear, guilt, doubt, or compulsive checking around morality, sin, purity, punishment, or being “good enough”.

However, similar patterns can continue even after leaving religion or no longer believing in God. In secular contexts, the anxiety may focus more on harm, responsibility, identity, relationships, politics, or being a “good person”.

The content may change, but the anxiety pattern can remain.

For example, the fear might shift from:

“What if I have sinned?”

to:

“What if I am immoral, harmful, manipulative, selfish, unsafe, or bad?”

This workbook is not about proving that you are definitely good, safe, innocent, rational, forgiven, or certain.

In fact, trying to prove those things over and over can sometimes keep anxiety going.

Instead, this workbook is about learning to:

- notice anxiety patterns
- recognise checking, reassurance-seeking, confession, rumination, and avoidance
- practise tolerating uncertainty
- respond to guilt and fear in more proportionate ways
- act according to your values without needing perfect certainty first

How to Use This Workbook

You do not need to complete this workbook perfectly.

You may find it helpful to:

- choose one exercise at a time
- start with the least distressing examples
- repeat an exercise several times before moving on
- stop if you become overwhelmed
- bring anything difficult to therapy or another trusted support

The aim is not to remove every anxious thought or uncomfortable feeling.

The aim is to practise a different response:

“I can feel anxious, guilty, uncertain, or uncomfortable, and I do not have to solve, check, confess, apologise, or reassure myself right now.”

Over time, this can help your nervous system learn that anxiety is not an emergency and uncertainty does not have to control your life.

Common Traps

Because this workbook is about anxiety, certainty, and compulsions, it is possible for the workbook itself to become part of the cycle.

That does not mean you are doing it wrong. It simply means there is another pattern to notice.

Here are some common traps to look out for:

Turning the workbook into reassurance

“I filled it in, so now I know I’m okay.”

The aim is not to use the workbook to prove that you are safe, good, or certain. The aim is to practise responding differently when anxiety asks for certainty.

Common Traps (cont.)

Trying to do uncertainty perfectly

"I failed because I still checked."

Practising uncertainty does not mean you will never check, confess, apologise, research, or seek reassurance again. It means you are slowly building more choice around those urges.

Using values as a new moral test

"If I really valued kindness, I would never feel angry."

Values are not a way to become morally perfect. They are directions you can return to, imperfectly, while still being human.

Over-analysing the worksheets

"I need to understand exactly why I had this thought."

Understanding can be helpful, but it can also become another form of rumination. Sometimes the practice is to notice the pattern, write down enough, and then stop.

If you notice yourself using the workbook to chase certainty, try to pause and return to the main aim:

"I do not need perfect certainty before I am allowed to live my life."

Using This Workbook Safely

These exercises are intended to be used gently and gradually.

If an exercise feels overwhelming, you can pause, return to grounding, or come back to it later. You do not need to push through.

Consider using this workbook with professional support if:

- your anxiety feels unmanageable
- you have OCD, complex trauma, panic attacks, or dissociation
- you feel detached, unreal, or outside your body
- the exercises trigger flashbacks or intense distress
- you feel driven to complete the workbook perfectly
- you are using the workbook for hours at a time to try to feel certain
- you are having thoughts of harming yourself or someone else

This workbook is educational and reflective. It is not a substitute for therapy, diagnosis, medical care, or crisis support.

If you are experiencing thoughts of harming yourself or someone else, or you feel unable to keep yourself safe, please seek urgent support.

In the UK, you can contact Samaritans on 116 123, call NHS 111, contact your local crisis team, or call 999 if there is immediate danger.

The Anxiety Cycle

Anxiety often works in a loop.

A common cycle looks like this:

1. Trigger

Something sets off anxiety. This might be a memory, a conversation, a thought, a body sensation, something you read, or something you watched.

2. Threat story

Your mind/body interprets the trigger as dangerous or morally significant.

For example:

- “Maybe I did something wrong.”
- “Maybe I’m a bad person.”
- “Maybe I need to confess.”
- “Maybe I can’t trust myself.”
- “Maybe I need to work this out before I can move on.”

3. Anxiety and urgency

Your body responds with fear, guilt, shame, panic, dread, or hypervigilance. It may feel urgent to solve the issue immediately.

4. Compulsion or safety behaviour

You do something to reduce the anxiety or gain certainty.

This might include:

- checking
- asking for reassurance
- confessing
- apologising repeatedly
- researching online
- replaying memories
- analysing your motives
- avoiding anything that triggers the feeling

The Anxiety Cycle

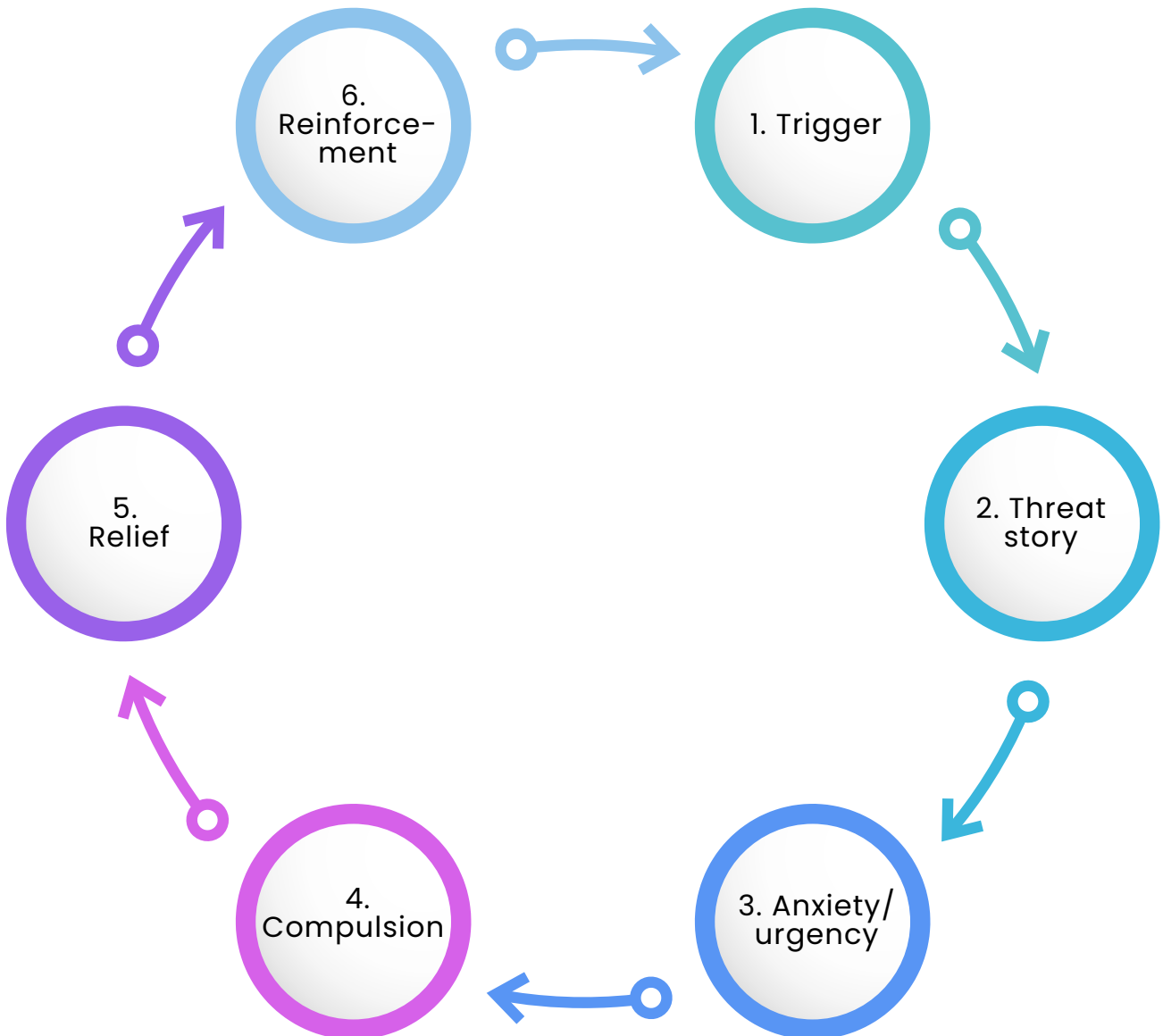
5. Short-term relief

You may feel better for a short time.

6. Long-term reinforcement

Your brain learns: "This fear must have been important because I had to do something to feel safe."

The anxiety then returns, often stronger or more convincing.



1. Mapping Your Anxiety Cycle

Purpose

This exercise helps you understand what happens when anxiety gets triggered.

You do not need to change anything yet. For now, you are simply learning the pattern. Try not to complete this perfectly. A rough map is enough.

When to use this

Use this after an anxiety spike, especially if you notice yourself wanting to:

- check
- confess
- research
- apologise
- analyse
- ask for reassurance
- replay something in your mind
- avoid something

Instructions

Fill this in as honestly as you can.

Try not to use it to solve the anxiety. The purpose is to observe the cycle.

1. What triggered the anxiety?

Examples:

- a memory
- a conversation
- a body sensation
- a thought
- something I read
- something someone said

1. Mapping Your Anxiety Cycle (cont.)

2. What did my mind say this meant?

Try to write the fear story, not the "correct" answer.

Examples:

- "Maybe I'm bad."
- "Maybe I need to confess."
- "Maybe this feeling means something is wrong."
- "Maybe I need to work this out before I can move on."

3. What feelings or body sensations did I notice?

Examples:

- guilt
- shame
- dread
- heat
- tension
- numbness
- panic
- nausea
- tight chest

4. What did I feel urged to do? Tick any that apply:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ask for reassurance | <input type="checkbox"/> Check my feelings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Google or research | <input type="checkbox"/> Analyse my motives |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Replay the memory | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid something |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confess something | <input type="checkbox"/> Try to replace the thought with a better thought |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Apologise | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: | |

1. Mapping Your Anxiety Cycle (cont.)

Reminder:

You are not trying to decide whether the fear is true. You are noticing the pattern.

5. What did I actually do?

6. Did it bring relief? If so, how long did the relief last?

7. What might this be teaching my brain?

Examples:

- "Doubt is dangerous."
- "I need certainty before I can move on."
- "Anxiety means I must act."
- "Feeling guilty means I did something wrong."

2. Spotting Secular Compulsions

Purpose

Compulsions are things we do to reduce anxiety, guilt, or uncertainty.

Many who leave religion completely can feel that they have cut all ties to their moral compulsions. However, secular (non-religious) compulsions often seamlessly take their place and are not always obvious. They may focus on morality, harm, identity, relationships, politics, or responsibility and can look sensible, responsible, moral, thoughtful, or caring.

The difference is often not the behaviour itself, but the function it is serving. It can be helpful to ask, is it helping me act according to my values, or is it mainly trying to get certainty and relief?

This exercise helps you notice which behaviours might be keeping the anxiety cycle going.

Instructions

Read through the list and tick any that feel familiar.

- Replaying conversations to check whether I said something wrong
- Asking others whether I am a good person
- Asking others whether I did something wrong
- Confessing thoughts, feelings, or doubts to reduce guilt
- Over-apologising
- Googling moral, psychological, religious, political, or relational questions
- Checking whether I feel guilty, anxious, compassionate, loving, or sincere enough
- Trying to work out whether my motives were pure
- Avoiding people, conversations, books, films, or topics that trigger doubt
- Mentally arguing against intrusive thoughts
- Trying to prove I am not harmful, selfish, manipulative, abusive, or bad
- Searching for the “correct” answer before making ordinary decisions
- Asking myself the same question repeatedly, even after I have already answered it
- Other:

2. Spotting Secular Compulsions (cont.)

Which compulsions do I use most often?

Which ones give me the most short-term relief?

Which ones seem to make anxiety worse in the long run?

What might feel scary, risky, or uncomfortable about reducing one of these behaviours?

If I reduced one of these by 5%, what would be a gentle first step?

3. The No-Solving Window

Purpose

When anxiety feels urgent, it can seem as though you must solve the fear immediately.

This exercise helps you practise delaying the compulsion.

You are not trying to feel calm. You are practising not obeying the urgency.

When to Use This

Use this when you feel an urge to:

- check
- confess
- ask for reassurance
- research
- replay a memory
- apologise compulsively
- analyse your motives
- work out whether you are good or bad

Instructions

Step 1: Notice the urge

Say to yourself:

“I am having the urge to solve this.”

Or:

“My anxiety is asking for certainty.”

Step 2: Set a timer

Choose a delay:

1 minutes 5 minutes 10 minutes 20 minutes Other

Start small if needed. Even delaying for one minute counts as practice.

3. The No-Solving Window (cont.)

Step 3: Do not do the compulsion during the timer

You may feel:

- anxious
- guilty
- restless
- unfinished
- tense
- agitated
- doubtful

That is allowed.

The aim is not to remove the feeling. The aim is to practise letting the feeling exist without immediately obeying it.

Step 4: Do something ordinary while the feeling is there

Choose something simple, not something that becomes another way of checking whether you feel better.

Examples:

- make a drink
- wash a cup
- walk around the room
- return to work
- listen to music
- sit and breathe
- stroke a pet
- step outside / look out of a window
- tidy one small area.

Step 5: Choose intentionally

When the timer ends, ask:

“Do I still choose to do the compulsion, or can I delay again?”

You are practising choice, not perfection.

3. The No-Solving Window (cont.)

What was the urge?

How strong was the urge at the start? (0-10)

Use the 0-10 rating lightly. It is only a rough marker, not something to get exact.

What happened during the delay?

How strong was the urge at the end? (0-10)

What did I learn about the urge, the feeling, or my ability to pause?

4. Practising “Maybe, Maybe Not”

Purpose

Anxiety often wants certainty.

It may demand that you prove you are:

- good
- safe
- right
- harmless
- innocent
- rational
- trustworthy

This exercise helps you practise allowing uncertainty instead of trying to solve it.

Important Note

This is not meant to be a reassuring mantra.

The aim is not to make yourself feel certain.

The aim is to practise letting uncertainty be present.

Choose a phrase that feels challenging but not overwhelming.

Examples

| Anxiety thought | Uncertainty response |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| “What if I said the wrong thing?” | “Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t.” |
| “What if I’m a bad person?” | “Maybe I am not as good as I want to be. I can still choose my next action.” |
| “What if I hurt someone?” | “Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. I do not have to solve this right now.” |
| “What if I never know?” | “Maybe I will never know with complete certainty.” |

4. Practising “Maybe, Maybe Not” (cont.)

Anxiety thought:

“Maybe, maybe not” response

What feelings come up when I do not try to solve it?

Can I let those feelings be present for one minute?

If one minute is too much, try ten seconds.

Afterwards, gently return to something ordinary.

5. Values Instead of Certainty

Purpose

Scrupulosity and moral anxiety often ask:

“How can I prove I am good?”

A more helpful question may be:

“How do I want to live, even while I feel uncertain?”

Values are not about being perfect. They are about the direction you want to move in.

Values are directions, not tests.

Examples of Values

- honesty
- kindness
- courage
- fairness
- humility
- repair
- respect
- curiosity
- boundaries
- responsibility
- compassion
- freedom
- connection
- justice
- gentleness

Instructions

Think of a recent anxiety trigger and answer the questions below.

1. What is the anxiety demanding?

Examples:

- “Prove you are not bad.”
- “Confess so you can feel better.”
- “Work out whether you were wrong.”
- “Analyse this until you feel certain.”

5. Values Instead of Certainty (cont.)

2. What value do I care about here?

3. What would a proportionate values-based action be?

Examples:

- offer a brief, proportionate apology if I clearly hurt someone
- listen more carefully next time
- act kindly without needing reassurance
- leave the uncertainty alone
- return to the present moment
- respect someone's boundaries
- respect my own boundaries

4. What would be a compulsive action?

Examples:

- apologising repeatedly;
- asking whether they still like me;
- replaying the conversation for an hour;
- Googling whether this makes me a bad person
- confessing mainly to reduce my own anxiety

What will I practise doing instead, even if I still feel uncertain?

6. The Proportionate Repair Ladder

Purpose

Anxiety can make every possible mistake feel like an emergency.

This exercise helps you separate genuine repair from compulsive guilt.

The Repair Ladder

| Level | Situation | Possible response |
|-------|---|---|
| 0 | Intrusive thought only | No action needed |
| 1 | Mild awkwardness or possible misunderstanding | Let it pass, or act normally next time |
| 2 | Small actual mistake | Brief apology if needed, then stop |
| 3 | Clear hurt caused | Apologise once, listen, and make reasonable repair |
| 4 | Serious harm or safeguarding concern | Take concrete, appropriate action and seek relevant support |

If you are genuinely unsure, choose the smallest reasonable response and avoid repeated checking.

Instructions

Choose one situation that has been bothering you.

1. What happened?

2. What level does this seem to fit? (circle) 0 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 4

3. What would be a proportionate response?

6. The Proportionate Repair ladder (cont.)

4. What would be an anxiety-driven or compulsive response?

5. Is my planned action for the other person's wellbeing, or mainly to reduce my anxiety?

6. What would "enough" look like here?

7. Label and Leave Rumination

Purpose

Rumination means going over something again and again in your mind.

It can feel like problem-solving, but often it keeps anxiety alive.

This exercise helps you notice rumination and step out of it.

Reflecting vs Ruminating

| Reflecting | Ruminating |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| Has a clear purpose | Repeats the same loop |
| Leads to action or acceptance | Demands certainty |
| Is time-limited | Goes on and on |
| Feels grounded | Feels urgent or sticky |
| Helps you learn | Keeps you trapped |

Instructions

When you notice yourself mentally looping, practise these steps.

Step 1: Label it

Say:

"This is rumination."

Step 2: Name the theme

Examples:

- "This is the 'am I bad?' theme."
- "This is the 'what if I hurt someone?' theme."
- "This is the 'I need certainty' theme."
- "This is the 'what if I made a mistake?' theme."

Step 3: Step out of the debate

Say:

"I am not answering that question right now."

Or:

"This is not a useful problem to solve at this moment."

Remember:

You are not trying to win the argument with the thought. You are practising not entering the argument.

7. Label and Leave Rumination (cont.)

Step 4: Redirect to one chosen action

Examples:

- stand up
- drink water
- return to the task in front of you
- message someone about something ordinary
- look out of the window
- continue what you were doing before the loop began.

Reflection

What was I ruminating about?

What theme did I notice?

What did I redirect to?

What did I notice about the urge to keep analysing?

8. Orienting Without Checking

Purpose

Hypervigilance can make your body feel as if danger is everywhere.

This exercise helps you gently widen your attention.

The aim is not to prove that you are safe.

The aim is to notice that anxiety can be present while you also notice the world around you.

Instructions

Look around the room and name the following.

Three colours I can see

Three shapes I can see

Three sounds I can hear or three things I can touch

Three points of contact with the chair, floor, or surface beneath me

Now say to yourself:

"Anxiety is here, and I am also here."

Checking asks:

"Am I definitely safe?"

Orienting notices:

"I am here.
Anxiety is here.
The room is also here."

8. Orienting Without Checking (cont.)

What did I notice before the exercise?

What did I notice afterwards?

Did I try to use this to force anxiety away?

Can I allow anxiety to be present for a brief period without treating it as an emergency?

9. Making Room for Body Sensations

Purpose

When anxiety appears in the body, it can feel threatening.

This exercise helps you practise making room for sensations without immediately trying to fix them.

Instructions

Choose a sensation in your body that feels manageable. Do not start with the most frightening sensation. You do not need to stare at the sensation. You can notice it gently, while also staying aware of the room around you.

Examples:

- tight chest
- stomach drop
- tension
- heat
- buzzing
- nausea
- shakiness
- numbness

1. Where do I notice the sensation?

2. If it had a shape, what shape would it be?

3. If it had a temperature, what temperature would it be?

4. If it had a texture or pressure, what would it be like?

5. Can I give this sensation 5% more room?

9. Making Room for Body Sensations (cont.)

6. Can I carry this sensation while doing one ordinary thing?

Example: (walk for one minute, tidy away an item, drink some water, etc.)

Reflection

What happened when I practised fighting the sensation a little less?

Did the sensation change, stay the same, or move?

What did I learn about having sensations without immediately fixing them?

10. The No-Confession Experiment

Purpose

Sometimes confession can be honest and healthy.

But sometimes it becomes a compulsion: a way to reduce anxiety, guilt, or uncertainty.

This exercise helps you practise not confessing low-stakes thoughts, feelings, or doubts simply to get relief.

Important Note

Only use this for low-stakes situations where there is no genuine safety issue and no clear need for repair. Do not use this exercise for situations involving actual harm, safeguarding, consent, abuse, serious risk, or a clear need to repair.

If you are unsure, bring the situation to therapy or to a trusted professional/support person who will not simply reassure you.

Instructions

Choose one small thing you would normally confess, explain, or over-clarify.

Examples:

- "I had a weird thought."
- "I felt irritated."
- "I'm worried I sounded selfish."
- "I need to explain my exact motive."
- "I need to tell them this so they know I'm not bad."

1. What do I want to confess or explain?

2. What am I hoping confession will do?

10. The No-Confession Experiment (cont.)

3. How long will I delay confessing?

4. What will I do during the delay?

After the Delay

What did I predict would happen?

What actually happened?

Did the urge rise and fall?

What did I notice about the difference between actual harm and discomfort?

11. Imperfect Morality Writing Practice

Purpose

Moral anxiety often demands impossible purity, certainty, or harmlessness.

This exercise helps you practise making room for being a limited, imperfect human being without trying to immediately reassure, confess, analyse, or repair.

The aim is not to prove that you are bad.

The aim is to practise living without perfect moral certainty.

Instructions

Read the paragraph below slowly. Then copy it out by hand below. If a word feels too intense, choose a slightly less activating version and build up gradually.

I cannot be perfectly pure, certain, harmless, or morally complete. I may make mistakes. I may disappoint people. I may never fully know the impact of everything I have done. I can still choose to live by my values today.

My Copied Version

Response Prevention

After writing it, try not to:

- reassure yourself that you are definitely a good person;
- edit the statement into something more comforting;
- ask someone else whether it is true;
- analyse how it made you feel;
- argue with it in your head.

Instead, practise saying: "I can let this feel unfinished."

11. Imperfect Morality Writing Practice (cont.)

What feelings came up?

What did I want to do afterwards?

Was I able to leave it unfinished, even briefly?

Remember: leaving it unfinished *is* the practice

12. Building a Gentle Exposure Ladder

Purpose

Avoidance can make anxiety smaller in the short term but bigger in the long term.

Exposure means gradually approaching things that trigger anxiety while resisting compulsions.

This should be done gently and carefully. Do not start with your hardest fear. The aim is practice, not flooding.

Instructions

List some triggers from easiest to hardest.

Rate each one from 0–10 for distress.

Try to include the compulsion you would usually want to do afterwards.

You do not need to include 9s or 10s at first.

Example Exposure Ladder

| Trigger or exposure | Distress (0-10) | Compulsion to resist |
|--|------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Reading the phrase "I might not know for certain" | 3 | Reassuring myself |
| Leaving a message slightly imperfect | 4 | Sending a follow-up clarification |
| Watching a scene involving moral conflict | 5 | Researching or analysing afterwards |
| Not apologising for a tiny awkward moment | 6 | Asking if they are annoyed |
| Reading something connected to old religious fears | 7 | Mentally arguing with it |

12. Building a Gentle Exposure Ladder (cont.)

My Exposure Ladder

Try to choose exposures that are specific, small, and repeatable.

For example:

- less helpful: “deal with guilt”
- more helpful: “leave one message without rereading it more than once”

| Trigger or exposure | Distress (0-10) | Compulsion to resist |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

12. Building a Gentle Exposure Ladder (cont.)

Choosing One Practice

Choose one exposure that feels challenging but manageable.

It is usually best to start with something around 3–5 out of 10.

Exposure I will practise

Compulsion I will resist

How long, or how many times, will I practise this before reviewing it?

Examples:

- once a day for three days
- for five minutes
- three times this week
- until I have tried it twice

What did I learn afterwards?

Helpful Phrases to Practise

You may want to choose one or two of these phrases to return to during the week.

- "I do not have to solve this right now."
- "This is anxiety asking for certainty."
- "Maybe, maybe not."
- "I can feel uncertain and still continue."
- "I can act according to my values without proving I am perfect."
- "Guilt is a feeling, not a verdict."
- "I can let this feel unfinished."
- "I am allowed to pause before checking, confessing, or apologising."
- "The aim is not certainty. The aim is freedom."

Choose one or two.

They are there as gentle reminders, not to be repeated over and over to feel certain as another compulsion.

Closing Reminder

You do not need perfect certainty before you are allowed to live your life.

You can feel anxious and still act according to your values.

You can feel guilty and still pause before confessing, checking, or apologising.

You can feel uncertain and still move forward.

The aim is not to become a perfect person with perfect confidence.

The aim is to become freer from the cycle of fear, checking, relief, and more fear.

Return to this phrase when you need it:

"I do not have to solve this right now."

About Me

My name is Phil and i'm a psychotherapist based in Aberdeen, Scotland.

For over 15yrs now I've been helping those navigating away from high-control religions in various contexts.

If you found this workbook helpful I'd love to hear how, do feel free to reach out.

If you are seeking to work with a therapist I can offer therapy nationwide in the UK and therapeutic coaching worldwide. I am passionate about making therapy accessible to those who are less privileged financially and as such I have a sliding scale pricing policy.



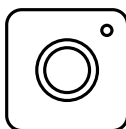
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