

# Nervous Energy

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**HARNESS THE POWER  
OF YOUR ANXIETY**

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**Dr. Chloe  
Carmichael**

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## **Contents**

### **PART I: THE FOUNDATIONS**

1. Introduction	3
2. What Are “High Functioning Clients” and Why Does It Matter?	13
3. Menu of Techniques	30
4. How to Use This Book: Channel Your Nervous Energy for Success	36
Getting Started	37
Three Examples of Typical High Functioning People and Good Starting Points for Each “Type”	40
Set Yourself Up for Success	57
5. Essentials of Nervous Energy: Self-Discipline, Perfectionism, and Mindfulness	61
6. Special Considerations for High Functioning People Seeking Therapy	89

### **PART II: THE TECHNIQUES**

7. The Three-Part Breath	101
8. The Zone of Control	135
9. Mental Shortlist	152
10. To-Do List with Emotions	162
11. Mind Mapping	185
12. Worry Time	210
13. Response Prevention	218
14. Thought Replacement	234
15. Anchoring Statements	247
16. Moving Forward	267
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	271

NOTES	273
BIBLIOGRAPHY	281
INDEX	283

## 1.

### Introduction

Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Amy shifted nervously on my leather sofa. Her manicured fingernails fiddled with the hem of her knee-length skirt as she glanced around the room awkwardly and kept tucking an imaginary piece of hair behind her ear. It was her first visit to my office, and Amy was uncomfortable: she was afraid that coming to see a psychologist meant there was something wrong with her. A lifelong perfectionist who practically *prided* herself on being “a little OCD” (her words, not mine), it was quite difficult for Amy to admit that she might need help managing herself. Self-discipline was her *specialty*, for goodness' sake—How could this have happened? Ironically, the iron fist with which she had successfully ruled herself for so long had now ceased to create order and progress; it was now creating feelings of isolation and stagnation. Amy felt stuck—and the worst part was, she was keenly aware that *she* was actually the person holding herself back. Her “nervous energy,” which had once been a friend that provided an excited drive to be “on point,” was now becoming a “rabbit hole” of excessive self-criticism, anxiety, pessimism, or analysis paralysis.

Rest assured, Amy actually started to experience moderate relief later that very same session, when she learned that many bright, productive people have successfully freed themselves from the very same patterns that were ensnaring her.<sup>1</sup> They do this by learning how to harness their nervous energy rather than let it drain their creativity and overrun their motivation. Oftentimes, adolescents and young adults reach a moderate level of success through deliberately being their own worst critic and obsessively double-checking homework or presentations to ensure every flaw or error is detected and corrected before it is exposed; or they push their feelings aside so they can focus exclusively on “putting one foot in front of the other” to work toward their goals. **This strategy is seductive because it *actually does work, at least up to a certain point.*** When you're a college student or an early-career professional, your work is generally defined and parceled neatly into a syllabus or work plan. At this stage in your education or career, there is usually a “correct” answer, or at least the one you know will please your boss or endear you to your professor. All you have to do in those earlier stages is channel

your nervous energy into constantly reviewing or preparing for the assignment in front of you, and you will progress.

The problems arise once you advance beyond college, graduate school, and early-career stages. The higher you climb, the more complex, voluminous, and sometimes amorphous the projects you're given. For example, the boss just wants "sales to climb" or "the global team to get on track"; oftentimes there's no clear direction beyond that *you're* supposed to make it happen. Suddenly, there's more work to do than any human being could *possibly* double-check, there's no syllabus or clear-cut objectives, and there's a *team* of people whose approval you're seeking rather than just one person, like a single direct manager or class professor. Or you suddenly realize it's time to "find a partner," "get closer to your spouse," or at least "get into a good relationship," but the ambiguity around exactly *how* this is supposed to happen, or figuring out *how* to manage perfectionist tendencies in the process, feels overwhelming. Meanwhile, you may have gotten *so good* at putting your emotions aside in certain situations that it's become hard to smoothly reconnect with them in a balanced way that sparks the high level of meaning and fulfillment you're seeking in work and relationships. This is when the old tools no longer suffice. This is when people like Amy often seek my help.

I've found that the nine tools in this book that can help you harness your nervous energy are extremely helpful to the Amys of the world who want to live more productive *and* more fulfilling lives. I'm very excited to share those tools with you here in this book. In the upcoming sections, you'll find a menu of techniques, some tips on how to approach the learning process, and some personal stories from my own life, illustrating how I've used the Nervous Energy Approach . . . and of course you'll also find step-by-step instructions along with optional homework to help you try the techniques for yourself!

The techniques in this book are intended to help you harness your nervous energy as a productive force that moves you forward, so that you don't feel overwhelmed or stuck. If managed correctly, the nervous energy that some people label as anxiety can actually be your friend. It can be a source of stimulation, productivity, and fulfillment—so let's capitalize on that nervous energy!

### **Question: What Exactly Is Nervous Energy? Does It Mean What I Think It Means?**

It's probably intuitive to you on a certain level, but just to be totally clear, let me spell it out. For the purposes of this book, the term "nervous energy" puts a label on something that many intelligent, cognitively active, goal-oriented, generally responsible people feel and want help managing: it's that "extra" part of yourself that frequently wants to double-check things that feel important (which is fine, till eventually *everything* starts to feel important and double-checking everything is impractical); that wants to rerun (and maybe overanalyze!) conversations in your head sometimes; or that wants to find ways to break complex goals down into manageable and executable steps (unless you get stuck because you're really worried about failure or parts that may be out of your control).

Sometimes people with nervous energy can be vulnerable to going into overdrive during which they overthink things or overwhelm themselves. However, **the beauty of nervous energy is that, with a few relatively simple tweaks, it can be harnessed as a valuable tool that can actually begin to shape itself in a positive way.** The good news is that just like we can quickly “go down a rabbit hole” into a negative thought spiral when we have a lot of mental speed and acuity, we can actually use that very same mental energy to train our minds to work in a more efficient, harmonious way that helps us reach our goals, increase personal fulfilment, and decrease stress. If this sounds desirable to you, then you’ve found the right book!

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