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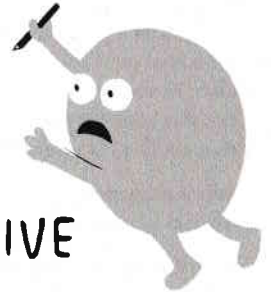
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# TIME ANXIETY

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THE ILLUSION OF  
URGENCY AND A  
BETTER WAY TO LIVE

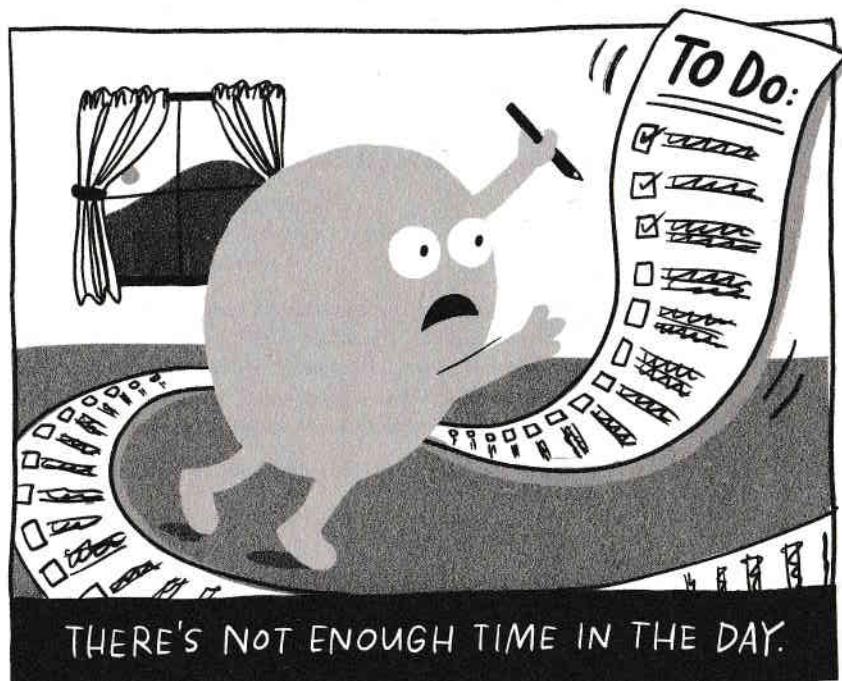
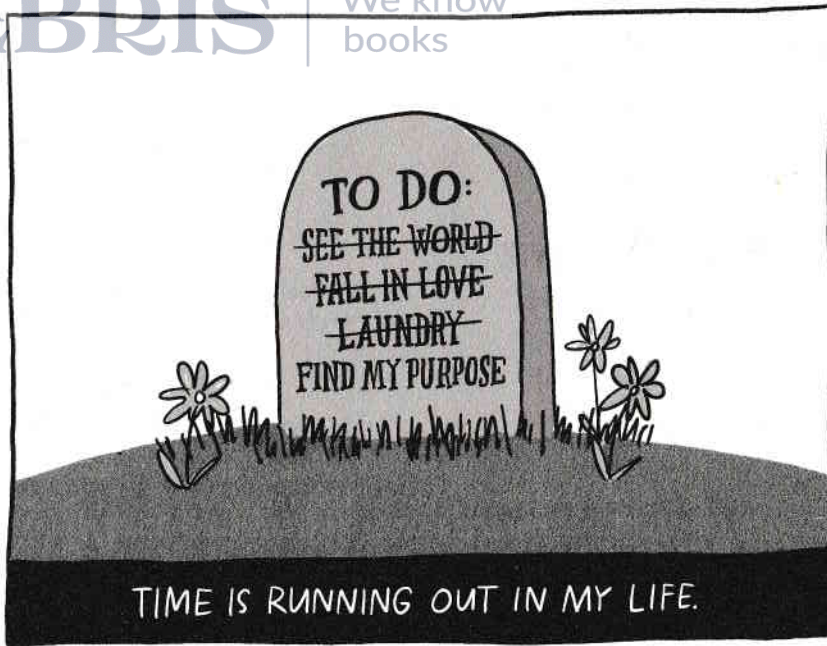


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## TIME ANXIETY

### The Fear of Running Out of Time

Time is passing me by.

I don't feel in control of my circumstances.

There's something I should be doing,  
but I don't know what it is.

This is a book for people who worry about time running out. It's for those who feel like there's never enough time for the things that matter, who fear they're too late for something important in their life, and who sense there's something they should be doing right now—but aren't sure what it is.

They can't always put their finger on this feeling. They might call it by a name, or they might not call it anything at all. Either way, it never really goes away.

I call this experience *time anxiety*. I didn't come to study it out of academic interest. As I'll share with you, my interest in it started from my own struggle of several years. Before long, I learned that many other people were dealing with time anxiety in their own way—and that most of what they did in an attempt to remedy it was making it worse.

When I wrote a blog post sharing my experience, the comments and emails poured in:

- “My friends and I talk about this all the time.”
- “I thought it was just me.”

- “I’ve always felt this way, but never knew there was a name for it.”
- “It affects me every single day.”
- “Ever since the pandemic, these feelings have intensified.”
- “I honestly believe this is the defining problem of my life.”

It was clear that this was a serious, understudied problem. As I began paying more attention, I noticed that most people focused on one of two ways of describing it. Their source of feeling unsettled had to do with either their big-picture view of life or the day-to-day challenge of managing it all. And for some lucky people, including me, it was both.

### EXISTENTIAL:

TIME IS RUNNING OUT IN MY LIFE.

### DAILY ROUTINE:

THERE’S NOT ENOUGH TIME IN THE DAY.

This list of symptoms breaks down the difference between these two forms a bit more:

#### EXISTENTIAL

- Ruminating on past decisions that “wasted” precious time
- Feeling a heightened sense of pressure to make every moment count, leading to chronic stress

- Worrying that you’ll never find your true calling or purpose and that you’ll look back on your life with regret
- Experiencing a sense of dread or panic when contemplating the finite nature of life

#### DAILY ROUTINE

- Putting intense pressure on yourself to complete tasks within a certain time frame
- Feeling like you’re always “on” and can’t truly disconnect from work, even during your downtime
- Struggling to focus on one task at a time, constantly switching between tasks, or getting distracted by new demands
- Rarely experiencing a sense of completion or satisfaction after finishing a task or meeting a deadline

Those who focused more on the existential, big-picture view would say things like, “I don’t know what to do with my life, and it feels like time is running out.”

Meanwhile, those who focused on the challenge of a daily routine would say things like, “There’s not enough time in the day to do what I need, and I keep falling behind.”

Either way, their sense of angst was similar: *Time is passing me by. I don’t feel in control of my circumstances. There’s something I should be doing, but I don’t know what it is.*

People experiencing time anxiety tend to be plagued with indecisiveness. They often voice feelings of frustration around “What should I do next,” an open-ended question that can refer to almost anything. The question could be asked about a project, a relationship, or literally anything else in life.

Whether you're facing a big life change or simply trying to decide which task to tackle next, analysis paralysis has a way of taking over your mind. You end up spiraling and consuming energy. Ultimately, you become even more frustrated at your inability to make simple choices.

There was one more thing that came up frequently in these initial comments: *a sense of being too late*. Whether it's an overdue career change, a relationship that should have ended years earlier, or a dream deferred, the internalized belief of missing your chance can be especially painful.

One woman in her late thirties put it this way:

As I get older, the feeling of time passing me by and the feeling of missing my chance at doing certain things has become more prominent. If you factor in the fact that I had little choice of what I did with my time the first 18 years, I should actually have MORE time to do the things I want to do in this second half of my life. But for some reason, it doesn't feel that way.

Later, when I conducted more research, I'd notice something interesting: this worry came up among people of all ages, from fourteen to seventy-four. It's a cross-generational fear! While it's true that some things in life do have a concrete timeline, it seems that the fear of being "too late" isn't always correlated to it.

*Even so, when you start to believe you've missed a chance at something important, it doesn't feel good.*

## Time Anxiety Is More than FOMO and Different From ADHD

The experiences I'm describing are sometimes labeled as FOMO (the fear of missing out), but time anxiety is different. FOMO is focused on the present ("something is happening without me"), whereas time anxiety connects to all three dimensions: the past, present, and future. You feel regretful about the past, uncertain or hesitant about the present, and apprehensive of the future.

**PAST:** I wish I'd done things differently.

**PRESENT:** I don't know what to do right now.

**FUTURE:** I'm worried about what will happen in the days and years to come.

Time anxiety can overlap with neurodivergent conditions like ADHD or autism spectrum disorder, but it also stands on its own. You can be neurotypical (someone with normal brain development) and still struggle with the fear of running out of time, as well as the angst over how to spend it. Alternatively, you can have ADHD, autism, or another condition and find that time anxiety acts as an amplifier of your other behaviors.

Regardless of any specific diagnosis, the struggle with time anxiety deeply affects your ability to plan and complete simple tasks. It leads you to get stuck for hours or days at a time, to under- or overestimate how much time something will take, and to chronically avoid unpleasant situations—even when taking just a few minutes to focus on them would provide immediate relief.

I was diagnosed with ADHD as a child, and I started taking medication for it as an adult. The treatment helped, and so did

learning more about the condition. Still, my inability to focus on tasks wasn't the only problem. I also lived in a state of distress, constantly worrying about whether I was doing the right things.

Time anxiety produces a recurring sense of discontent. It's an undercurrent that tells you something isn't right. Sometimes it recedes into the background, but it always comes back.

### Productivity "Hacks" Mask the Problem

As I reviewed the research, I started rethinking my approach to how I spent my time. I'd been a lifelong fan of productivity methods, but I gradually grew disillusioned. The more work I finished or the more goals I accomplished, the more that remained. There was never any end to it. Simply adopting new habits or routines, or signing up for more apps and services provided a misleading sense of progress.

Worst of all was a sneaking suspicion that I was getting better and better at doing the wrong things. I was addicted to the dopamine hit of working through lists. Just like any other drug, it felt good at first—but the lasting effects were limited and sometimes even harmful.

At the end of any given day, I finally realized, it didn't matter how many emails I'd responded to or tasks I'd checked off my lists. Magically, more emails appeared! Another set of tasks was always waiting to replace the set I'd finished.

• • •

It's hard to overstate how deeply rooted the gospel of efficiency is in Western culture. Hundreds of books, workshops, seminars, and TED talks reinforce the same false belief structure. Many of

them claim to provide definitive answers—even though people with an interest in productivity are generally the first ones to float from method to method.

I used to follow a productivity expert who kept changing the systems he recommended. Every few months he'd get really excited and host a new seminar about his latest method.

In some sense, I knew he was changing his systems because he had something to sell, but it didn't seem like a total act. He was genuinely enthusiastic about whatever the new method was, at least until a new one came along.

Finally, after more than two years of gushing tech recommendations, he sent out a message announcing his newest discovery. This method was totally analog. In a video that accompanied his announcement, he pointed to a paper journal and said, "I've learned that the best way to manage your life has nothing to do with technology; it's all right here in this simple journaling process."

"Wow," I thought, "we've come full circle." Following an array of apps and technical solutions, we're now back to the way people have been writing things down for hundreds of years. After that, I never heard from him again. No doubt he's off being productive somewhere else.

The world of productivity advice, and time management in particular, makes an appealing, impossible promise. It claims to offer order in a world of chaos but fails to equip us with tools that address the root problem. Along the way, it creates other issues of its own, leading us to cycle between feeling ashamed of being able to conquer the beast and gearing up to try one more time.



So what can be done? It turns out that we aren't entirely powerless. As I learned, you first need to approach the problem differently. You need to understand why everything you've tried so far has failed you. You need to rewrite some deeply ingrained patterns.

To be fair, this can be harder than it sounds, at least at first. But I promise it's worth the effort.

In search of answers, I began a series of surveys that more than a thousand people dutifully completed. I mined the results for insights and common themes. I conducted interviews, reviewed academic studies, and tried everything I could on my own, from morning pages to ketamine.

What I found was sometimes frustrating, especially all the unhelpful advice that magnifies the problem. My interpretation of "tips and hacks" shifted from favorable to skeptical to downright hostile. Much of this advice, I saw, did more harm than good. It encouraged the false belief that somehow you can conquer an unconquerable challenge, if only you work extra hard and get up early enough in the morning.

• • •

Other times the investigation surprised me, leading me to question my own long-held assumptions and beliefs. It wasn't just all the other experts who were wrong. I, too, was mistaken. I had committed classic attribution errors, assigning successes to my own brilliance and severely blaming myself for failures.

It turned out I wasn't brilliant or stupid; I'd simply fallen into the trap of believing I could do everything. I'd also based my

self-esteem and perceived status on what other people thought of me, another classic error that can only lead to misery.

In turn, this informed my daily operating system, intensifying the sense that I just had to work harder to feel less anxious—even when I was working hard on the wrong things.

It's not just my friend the productivity expert who's been so misled. His experience was an exaggerated version of what I've done, and maybe you have as well.

If you're like me, you tend to get excited about a new habit or method and try it out for a while, but it doesn't really stick. So then you try something else, and the same thing happens. More apps, more journals, more promises to fix everything once and for all—a promise that sets itself up for inevitable failure.

So instead of overpromising, I'll tell you the opposite: this book will not fix everything for you once and for all. It can, however, give you both a new perspective and a toolkit to make life much easier.

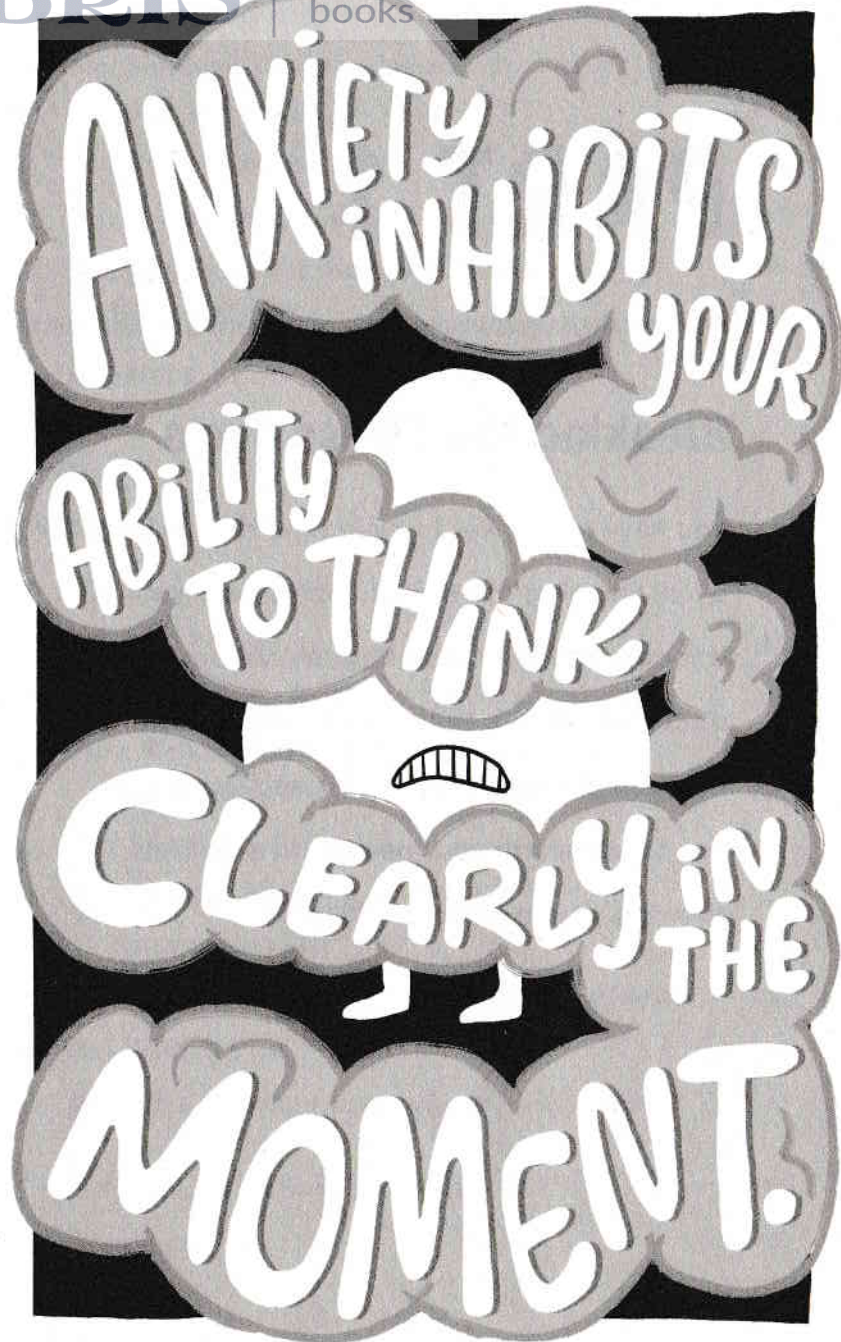
My objective is to help you overcome the fear of running out of time, as well as the chronic indecisiveness over how to spend it. I want you to be able to look to the future with hopefulness, not trepidation. I want you to know that it's possible to face busy days with a sense of purpose.

In short, I want to help you *feel better and worry less*.

## What You Won't Learn

Another obvious theme from the surveys I conducted: people are fed up with hearing the same kinds of advice about how "doing it all" shouldn't be so difficult.

In the words of one respondent:



# 1

## Start by Giving Yourself More Time

BEFORE YOU CAN MAKE BIG DECISIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE, YOU NEED TO REDUCE THE IMMEDIATE PRESSURE YOU FEEL.

**W**hen I started writing this book, I first outlined lots of ideas about mortality, leaving a legacy, and how to complete big projects.

We'll come back to some of that later. But as my editor and I poured over the survey results, we realized that time anxiety prevents people from moving forward in some very basic operations of life.

Over and over, readers said things like:

*"I get absolutely frozen and can't make simple decisions."*

...

*"I've had the same important task at the top of my to-do list for ten days in a row, but I just can't bring myself to face it."*

...

*"It feels like everyone else understands something very simple that I don't get at all."*

They also tended to use absolute terms such as "always," "never," and "constantly" to describe their struggles with time. They've *always* felt this way, they would *never* be better, and they *constantly* felt the pull of wondering if they were spending their time well.

Anxiety inhibits your ability to think clearly in the moment. When you feel anxious, you don't always make rational decisions. Sometimes you know what you should do, but you feel incapable of doing it. Other times, you don't have any idea what you should do—you just know *what you're doing now isn't good*.

Either way, you feel trapped. And when you're trapped, the first step is to locate an escape route.

You would not tell a person experiencing a panic attack that they need to get to work on filing their taxes, break up with their boyfriend, and mail off an overdue rent check. Perhaps they need to do all of those things eventually, but they first need to deal with what feels like an emergency. (And simply telling them to "calm down" probably won't help much.)

They need to learn to address their breathing, lower their heart rate, and understand that even though what they are feeling seems overwhelming, *it will get better*. Only once they're able to do these things will they be able to deal with more systemic problems.

Those actions I mentioned—lowering your heart rate, noticing your breath patterns—are part of regulating your nervous system, the essential part of your body that allows you to do any sort of cognitively intensive work. When this delicate ecosystem is in balance, you're at your best. You're able to make decisions,

plan ahead, and manage your emotions with relative ease. Throw in stress or anxiety, however, and suddenly the ecosystem is under threat.

When you're struggling with time anxiety, you need to deal with the immediate symptoms first. One of the reasons why you experience distress is because you perceive a *time shortage* in your life. Therefore, let's help you achieve a *time surplus*, where more time is available to you, even in the midst of a busy life.

I'll show you some strategies for this in the chapters that follow, including:

1. When to do things poorly (Not everything needs to be done with excellence or even done well.)
2. Why not finishing things is perfectly acceptable (Many things can be left undone, often permanently.)
3. How to decide "What is enough?" for any type of project or creative work, so that you always have an end point in mind

But for now, try taking some quick actions that can help you right away. These actions will give you space to make bigger decisions and figure out how you really want to spend your time.

## 1. Practice "Time Decluttering"

Home-organizing guides often focus on decluttering, the act of removing items from your home or work space that don't have a useful or joyful purpose. It can be a useful habit at times.

But while physical decluttering and improving your environment can help somewhat, time anxiety usually stems from worries in our mind or commitments that occupy our schedule. It's