ANNA MATHUR

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THE Uncomfortable TRUTH

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CHANGE YOUR LIFE BY TAMING 10 OF YOUR MIND'S GREATEST FEARS

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The Uncomfortable Truth

Anna Mathur is a psychotherapist and bestselling author. She's passionate about taking therapy out of the consulting room: sharing her personal and professional experiences online. She offers supportive insights on Instagram (@annamathur), via online courses and in-person events, and through her incredibly popular podcast, *The Therapy Edit*. Anna's podcast has now released over 250 episodes and received over three million downloads, with guests including Fearne Cotton, Sophie Ellis-Bextor, Anna Whitehouse, Holly Tucker, Giovanna Fletcher and Liz Earle.

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The Uncomfortable Truth

Change Your Life by Taming 10 of Your Mind's Greatest Fears

Anna Mathur



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Penguin Random House UK

First published 2024
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Set in 12/18pt TT Commons Classic
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–70719–7

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

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Dear Reader,

I dedicate this book to you. Because you deserve far more than to spend your whole life living a half-life.

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‘One thing I feel clear about is that it’s important not to let your life live you. Otherwise, you end up at forty feeling like you haven’t really lived. What have I learned? Perhaps to live now, so that at fifty I won’t look back upon my forties with regret’

– Irvin D. Yalom, *When Nietzsche Wept*

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Welcome

Our fear of bad things happening has our mind telling terrifying stories that steal our focus away from the good things happening right in front of us. We worry about being disliked, so much so that we lose chunks of ourselves pleasing others. We go so far trying to avoid the truth of our inevitable death that we prevent ourselves from truly embracing the life that we have.

What if the real answer to living a happier life isn't avoiding the inevitable, uncomfortable truths, as many of us spend our time doing, but instead choosing to stare them square in the face?

From a young age, I have had to face one of those uncomfortable truths of life head-on.

I am going to die.

I was eight when my younger sister was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumour in her tiny four-year-old head. Lives

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that had revolved around school, seeing grandparents and playing in the surrounding woodland were now filled with hospital corridors, sickness and scans. We lived in the painful limbo land that fell between a diagnosis and death. We found joy in the waiting, don't get me wrong, but life was a dance between moments of acknowledgement and denial, acceptance and avoidance.

I remember lying in bed thinking that if my sister died, I'd simply have to die too. I didn't believe that it would be possible to live with a broken heart. Life felt too risky, love felt too vulnerable. It would be better simply not to live or to love. My eight-year-old mind also recognized the heartbreak my parents felt. Would I want them to be sad about my death too? Absolutely not. So instead of seeking death, I did everything in my power to avoid any more loss. Theirs and mine. I spent years fearing my own cancer or the sickness of anyone I loved. Health anxiety stole my sleep and my peace as my mind skipped to the worst-case scenario every time someone complained of a headache. The news of the death of someone I didn't even know would replay through my head like a backing track.

At school I faced another uncomfortable truth: that some people wouldn't accept me regardless of how well

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behaved or well intentioned I was. I had a teacher who bullied me. To this day, I still don't know why. I do know, however, that in each year group she taught, there was one child who'd face the confusing discomfort of her disapproval. I did everything I could to appease her, assuming that if she disliked me, there must be a reason, and the reason lay with me. I'm sure this experience was part of the reason I spent the next almost thirty years of my life in the relentless, exhausting pursuit of acceptance. Acceptance from everyone.

A little later in life, aged twenty-three, I began my postgraduate studies to become a psychotherapist at Regent's University London. We studied different approaches to therapy, including a focus on the 'existential' approach, which acknowledges that many of our anxieties and insecurities come down to how we relate to and accept life's fundamental certainties and uncertainties.

I quickly fell in love with the work of Irvin D. Yalom. Yalom certainly wasn't the first theorist to share this existential way of making sense of life. Philosophers Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre all explored concepts around our personal responsibility in finding meaning. And

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May and Tillich were known for bringing this form of philosophy into the mainstream through their work.

However, I found Yalom's take on existentialism particularly warm and hopeful. In his book *Existential Psychotherapy* he suggested that, as humans, we grapple with these four main themes, which are the inescapable 'givens' of life:

- **Death** Death is an inevitable and inescapable part of life.
- **Freedom** We have the freedom to make choices that impact our lives.
- **Isolation** We have connection with others, yet we exist as single beings in the world.
- **Meaninglessness** We seek meaning but we don't have inherent meaning in this world.

Yalom, along with other existential thinkers, suggested that how we understand these 'givens' can determine whether we feel heightened anxiety and fear, or alternatively, a sense of compassion and acceptance as we navigate life.

As a therapist who incorporates existentialism into my practice, I aim to work with my clients to help them

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become more accepting of life's certainties: that death comes to us all and there is much outside the realm of our control.

At first, as a student, I found the existentialist module deeply depressing. I didn't want to think about death; I wanted to avoid thinking about bad things happening. Considering my freedom to make both good and damaging life choices forced me to confront the responsibility, power and vulnerability I had in shaping my life. I tussled with the fourth given, that of 'meaninglessness', as personally I drew meaning from my belief in a higher power. Yet I also acknowledged that many of the anxieties I experienced were around the very truths we were encouraging our clients to come to terms with.

I began to understand how existential therapy is all about finding a balance between being aware and accepting of these givens of life, while not being overwhelmed by anxiety at their inevitability.

My work is about encouraging my clients to find their own meaning and purpose, as life won't present it to them. It's about supporting them as they face their vulnerability, or the enormity of the responsibility they

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have in making decisions, while accepting that life's losses and curve balls will inevitably come along and nudge or reroute their path.

I empower my clients to find their potential, while also acknowledging their mortality. I seek to hold space for them as they contend with their anxiety, while encouraging them to move forward with living more intentionally. We all exist with this internal conflict, trying to live with intention, while being aware (consciously or subconsciously) that ultimately we lack control over the outcome.

For years I worked with clients to help them address the anxiety of the unknown, but it would take a long time for me to recognize that the best way to live fully is to seek acceptance of the unknown itself. We can exhaust ourselves trying to avoid the elephant in the room, contorting our lives around it or defending ourselves against it through busyness or numbing behaviours like alcohol, social media or consuming. Or we can look it square in the face and say, 'Hey. You're here for good, so let's find a way to live together.'

The truth is that all the difficult stuff in my life – the anxiety, the need to numb my reality, the people-pleasing,

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the perfectionism – all of these things arose from my desperate attempt to avoid the uncomfortable truths being, well, true. Yet in accepting the uncomfortable truths, my life has actually become far more intentional and fulfilling, and less uncomfortable!

I used to be a 'yes' woman through and through. Ask me to do something and you'd have a 'yes' before you'd paused for breath. Saying 'yes' was my currency. I believed that spending all my time and energy fulfilling the desires and needs of others was what made me acceptable. However, as the years went by, I struggled with hidden burnout and resentment. As I began to realize how much each 'yes' was costing me, I started placing boundaries and saying 'no' more often. Sure, it hasn't been easy, and some difficult conversations have been had, but now my yeses are far more authentic, my relationships more two-sided and my behind-the-scenes less burnt-out.

My life has been changed by choosing to befriend the elephant in the room. And this book is an invitation for you to join me.

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Introduction

In his book *If Only It Were True* Marc Levy challenges us with this scenario. Imagine your bank account was credited with $86,400 each morning. So far, so very good, right? The catch is that at the end of each day the balance is wiped and nothing can be carried over. Your mind is likely buzzing with ways you'd try to withdraw and use every last cent so that it didn't go to waste. He says that, in the same way, every day we are gifted 86,400 seconds that we cannot keep, save or carry over. 'You must live in the present on today's deposits. Invest it so as to get from it the utmost in health, happiness and success! The clock is running. Make the most of it.'

I wonder what feelings you are left with on reading that scenario. Panic, regret, guilt, empowerment? For me it feels like empowerment, but it also feels like pressure. Pressure to make the most of every second. It feels like grief. Grief that I've not squeezed every one of my 86,400 seconds for health, happiness and success. This challenge fuels anxiety, that I'm not living as I should,

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that my mind and attention are scattered, and I often lack the calmness and patience I need in order to be present.

Regardless of how you felt as you considered what you'd do with that eye-watering daily figure of cash, or the sobering figure of seconds, this book is all about finding hope. It's about finding acceptance of the fact that life is limited, while embracing realistic ways to live a full, messy, very human, fulfilling life.

If you feel anxiety bubbling as you turn your focus to these big themes, rest assured. This book eases anxiety, but not with tools and tips for breathing exercises and reframing thoughts (although you'll find some of these woven throughout which you may benefit from). This book will teach you to calm your anxiety not by sidestepping the symptoms but by taking a long, hard look at your deepest fears.

If we distilled anxiety down over a Bunsen burner, the racing heart, pacing mind, sweaty palms, broken sleep and churning stomach would all evaporate. We'd look down into the beaker to view the molten remnants and we'd find these ten uncomfortable truths.

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We spend millions of pounds and hours numbing our fears. The alcohol industry is roaring. In much-needed moments of nothingness, we reach for our phones to scroll lest our emotions and anxieties dominate rare stillness. We pipe sounds into our ears so that we don't have to think. We spend our lives finding new ways to skirt around the truths of life, and the more we avoid them, the more we affirm that they are something to be avoided at all cost.

But avoidance of life's truths carries the highest price of all. We see burnout, perfectionism, addiction, anxiety, people-pleasing, grief and so, so much shame.

Through the course of this book you'll come to realize that many of the challenges you experience in life can be attributed to avoidance of one or more of these ten truths. And as you move into a place of radical acceptance, you'll find yourself living more freely and intentionally, with more presence and confidence than ever before.

I've spent a lot of my life trying to ensure that good things happen, that everyone likes me and that I do not fail. I've devoted copious headspace to ruminating over the times I've done bad things, accidentally or on purpose. I've exhausted myself in the relentless pursuit of doing

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everything well, and beaten myself up for not being fully present in my life. I have lost sleep as my mind has played out painful images of those I love getting sick.

I was fed up with my constant attempts to control the outcomes of the uncontrollable. I'd become a master at speculating. I'd lived on the hamster wheel of pursuing perfection, failing and trying again. Was this life, I wondered? The constant dodging and avoidance of failure and death? The constant undertone of worry and anxiety? The constant ache of not-good-enoughness?

One same-old day I decided I'd do things differently.

'Some people don't like me. I am going to fail. I am going to die,' I muttered under my breath. These three truths underpinned my nightmares and my deepest fears. All my life, I'd spent so much of myself trying to secure likeability and success, and fearing death.

What if I faced the truth head-on, instead of spending my time running from it?

As I muttered these three foreboding sentences under my breath, something incredible began to happen. Instead of

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feeling more fear, I felt freer. Instead of exhaustion, I felt a fresh lightness.

I took out my phone and started to list other truths that I'd spent too much time trying to avoid. 'I'll never find balance,' I typed. 'I am not good enough. Bad things will happen. I can't always be fully present.' As I wrote these fundamental truths, I didn't feel defeated, but empowered.

I realized that we try so hard to control the things that we cannot control in pursuit of a contented life, but we aren't content at all, really. Are we? We're all a little sad, scared and tired.

In facing the uncomfortable truths of life head-on, we can receive the invitation to live more authentically, more fully.

In recognizing the truth that not everyone will like us, we can stop feeling so deeply pained when we displease someone. In admitting that we simply cannot be consistently present and focused on the moment in front of us, we can relieve ourselves of pressure and guilt, and focus on slowing down where we can. Instead of lying

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awake fearful of death, we can make decisions with confident intentionality, because life is short and we deserve to live it fully.

There is always a cost to avoiding the truth, because these fundamental truths don't change. It becomes more and more exhausting to dance around them. I have spoken to so many people in their sixties and seventies who profess that caring less about being liked by everyone has been a wonderful gift that has come with age. 'I wish I could tell my younger self not to care,' they say. Well, my hope is that we begin learning to accept these truths long before the perspective of age or burnout forces us to.

So, as you move through ten of the uncomfortable truths of life, you will find that in accepting them they actually make life more beautiful. You'll discover that in running from life's truths, in an attempt to live an authentic and fulfilled life, you've actually been denying yourself the very same thing.

We are going to learn to embrace all that we've spent years trying to escape. We are going to try a different way.

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How to read this book

I encourage you to read this book slowly. Let the truth of each chapter settle before you move to the next. Not every truth will feel like one you need to accept, either because you already have an acceptance of that uncomfortable truth, or because you feel too anxious and defensive against it.

If the uncomfortable truth doesn't feel like one that you'd benefit from addressing, then you can of course move past it. However, I'd encourage you to read it anyway as you never know what conversations might arise, or how pondering a truth that you already have deep acceptance of might serve you in an unexpected way. There will be some chapters that feel too big to turn to, but I promise you we will take it gently.

As a psychotherapist, I have spent hundreds of hours sitting with people who have experienced trauma in the light of these truths. You will benefit from many client anecdotes and stories throughout this book. Please be assured that names and details have been amended beyond all recognition, and where likeness is evident, full permission has been obtained.

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So while I have sat with many clients as they've grappled with these themes, I am also someone who has spent most of my own life doing everything within my power to avoid these truths (yet also lying awake for hours in anxious contemplation of them). I know that, for some, skimming the contents list alone will raise the heart rate. But by the end of the book you'll feel very differently.

In each chapter, we will gently approach one of the ten uncomfortable truths. We will reflect on what it costs us to avoid facing the uncomfortable truth. We will reflect on why we feel driven to deny that truth. Finally, we'll consider what we can gain from embracing it instead, and I'll share five tangible ways to live with the truth.

You will find a mantra in every chapter, a simple line to ruminate over as you focus on each truth, along with three journal points to guide you in delving deeper into self-reflection should you find them helpful.

Make this book yours. Underline parts of it, turn down corners of chapters and pages you need to revisit, and scribble your thoughts into the margins. The more you take ownership of the words within this book, the more power and freedom you will claim.

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1.

Some People Don't Like Me

Diving headfirst into the uncomfortable truth

People don't like you. There, I said it. People don't like me either. Not 'people as a whole', just some people. You will be walking around, standing in queues, doing your best, and someone will have decided they don't like you. Some people won't like you for reasons they can explain – maybe it's something you've done or not done. Perhaps they can't even put their finger on quite why they don't like you, but they don't all the same.

People who don't even know you have decided they don't like you. Someone sitting in the car behind you has sworn at you, while someone at your workplace has gone

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home and complained about you. You have had many feelings come your way, whether you've been aware of it or not: dislike, judgement, assumption, even hatred. There are subsections of society who will have already chosen to dislike you because of how you look or where you were born, neither of which you can do anything about.

There are some people who don't like you, and it has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with you at all. Nothing you could do would change that, no act of kindness, no pleading, pleasing or torrent of self-explanation.

How does it feel to read those words in black and white? Breathe them in and absorb them. Notice how they sit in your body and what thoughts come to mind. Perhaps many of those words already swirl through your mind on a tide of anxiety and rumination. Maybe you feel a swell of discomfort arise as you read everything you try to avoid thinking about.

'I parked my car at the supermarket and went in to do my shopping,' my client Tamsin shared with me one session. 'I came back to find that I couldn't open my boot because

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someone had parked their car right up against it, end to end. When the owner returned to his car I expected him to be apologetic, but instead he was aggressive and ranted at me for having such a sizeable car. "I'm sick of people like you and your big cars thinking you own the place," he shouted. My heart was racing. I wanted to cry. I tried to justify myself. "I have three teenagers and a dog!" I said. However, it was clear he didn't care. It was also clear that him parking against my car wasn't an accident.'

My client found herself in a situation in which someone disliked her based on his own preconceived ideas and judgements. She described feeling enraged at his behaviour and at the same time 'feeling like a kid being told off for something I hadn't done wrong'. We considered how this man's dislike of her had little to do with who she was as an individual, and affirmed how she wasn't doing anything 'wrong' in parking her car in a supermarket car park.

The truth that someone will dislike you is often woven through with anxious thoughts. In this chapter, I am going to help remove that heart-pace-increasing, sleep-stealing element of anxiety and, in place, guide you to welcome fresh acceptance.

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My story

A few years ago, I was sitting at traffic lights, picking some peanut butter off my jeans. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw some movement in my rear-view mirror and glanced up to see what the person behind me was flapping about. They looked furious. It didn't take me long to realize that they were miming a mobile phone and gesticulating 'no' at me. I wasn't on my phone. I was picking peanut butter off my jeans.

Regardless of what I was or wasn't doing, my heart rate rocketed. I related to Tamsin in feeling somehow threatened. Suddenly I was eight years old, being told off by an angry teacher. The lights changed to green and I was forced to drive off before I had a chance to respond with my own charade of explanation. I felt her anger move through my body like shock waves. Her furrowed face lurched into my consciousness, followed by a deep uneasiness. I later told a friend, who laughed and said she'd have responded in a very different way. 'I'd have told her with my eyes where to go,' she shared. This intrigued me, shining a light on how much my concern with what other people thought about me, even a stranger in traffic, had so much power over how I felt.

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The woman in the car behind me didn't like me. Whether it was momentary or whether it was fuelled by a recent experience she'd had of dangerous driving due to mobile phone usage, I'll never know. But it is just a small tale in the library of examples I have of being impacted by people not liking me, whether true or perceived, whether justified or through misunderstanding. I have other stories in which I've contorted my personality, lied, steamrollered my own boundaries, and confused myself and others in my attempts to ensure people like me. Because for me, for much of my life, not being liked has been my fear, my pain and my driver to do better.

But that changed. I realized that the way to more meaningful relationships and healthier self-esteem isn't to ensure that as many people like me as much as possible, but instead to grow in acceptance that some people simply don't, won't and can't. American philosopher Elbert Hubbard wrote in his book *Little Journeys to the Homes of American Statesmen* that, 'If you would escape moral and physical assassination, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing.' Now, we cannot live our lives doing, saying and being nothing. And would we want to live so small that we slipped under everyone's radar, never shocked anyone, never moved anyone, never challenged anything, never shared enough of

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ourselves to make a wave in someone's life or the world itself? If we want to live more fully, we must come to terms with the truth that our lives will be disturbing somehow. Like a teaspoon stirring a cup of tea. If you want good tea, you have to move the spoon. If we want a good life, we have to be willing to create waves and ripples around us.

So, now, gesticulate at me in traffic and perhaps my heart will skip a beat because old habits die hard. Then I'll either nod with acknowledgement if I think it's well placed, or find my breath in the acceptance that I will be misunderstood and disliked sometimes, and that's part of existing as a human amidst others. We will explore the uncomfortable truth of being misunderstood more in Chapter 7.

Why deny?

Why do we feel the need to work so hard to try to get others to like us? Why is the truth that some people won't so hard to stomach? Why does it prompt such anxiety and shame for so many of us?

Above all, we humans are innately pack animals. We need to be accepted in order to be protected. The feeling that

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may rise up within us when we don't feel accepted is a reaction to this. In my session with Tamsin, we gave voice to that part of her which felt threatened as the fellow shopper shouted at her in the car park. We acknowledged how we have a deep human need to be accepted and understood. Being liked by others means we're more likely to thrive and be supported in our community. If you think about the people in your life who you really like, the chances are that you'll also feel an element of care and protectiveness towards them. You want them to be okay, they matter to you. If they're having a tough time, you might seek ways to help them.

Throw your mind back to school years. That yearning to be a part of a group or a clique isn't just culturally encouraged, it speaks of a deep human desire to belong. The problem is that the need to belong in order to feel safe can progress into a need to be accepted by everyone we come across, even those we don't actually know.

If this truth is one you struggle with, then it will be helpful to understand why. I find that understanding why we find it hard to accept the truth enables us to move from a place of self-criticism to self-compassion. Prior to understanding why, for most of my life, I needed people to like me, I'd feel

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frustrated at myself. Why can't I say 'no'? Why do I lack confidence around certain people? Why do I end up doing things half-heartedly because I am full of resentment for agreeing to do it in the first place?

Wanting to be liked by others and *needing* to be liked are two quite different things. Wanting to be liked drives us to be considerate and respectful. It ensures we think about others and consider how our words and actions might impact them. Caring about being liked means we'll seek to respond to others with compassion and empathy, and our relationships are often all the richer for it.

Needing to be liked, on the other hand, is very different. It has undertones of fear and sometimes even desperation. We need to be liked because we need more than just the inner smile that comes when someone is appreciative of us; we need it because our self-esteem and sense of worthiness depend on it. Perhaps we need it because we've lacked the anchoring sense of being accepted, warts and all, by the few people in our lives who truly had the power to tell us and teach us how deserving of love we were.

The more clarity I gained as to why I feared being disliked by or displeasing others, the more compassion I had

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