

sarah wilson

first,  
we  
make the beast  
beautiful

a new story about anxiety



## **praise for *first, we make the beast beautiful***

*Quirky, edgy and brutally frank. first, we make the beast beautiful is an exploration of the chasm between the public persona of a high-functioning media personality and her private struggle with ever-lurking, crippling anxiety. You'll never read a more searingly honest account of mental illness than this.*

**Hugh Mackay, social researcher and bestselling author of 17 books, including *The Good Life* and *Beyond Belief***

*Sarah's book is indeed quite extraordinary, illuminating what is at once a nomadic journey, a cri de cœur and a compendium of hard-won wisdom flowing from a uniquely talented individual who has experienced a wide spectrum of mental ill health, and from her search for meaning and solutions. One gets the feeling her mind has operated like a vacuum cleaner sucking up all these experiences, experiments and extensive and deep reading and reflection.*

*This is not just a self-help book, though there are many 'whiffs of answers' contained within its pages. Many are undiscovered gems. Truth, honesty and complexity shine through every page of what has been a lifelong struggle powered by a formidable energy. Sarah's narrative shows why the conventional diagnostic framework doesn't really work. It's a tour de force.*

**Professor Patrick McGorry AO MD PhD FRCP FRANZCP FAA FASSA, 2010 Australian of the Year**

*I can't stop thinking about this book. It's for all the people who, like me, love the Sarahs of the world. It will help you understand them and love them more. Sarah's raw account of her mental health issues is at times harrowing and at times uplifting. It will change the way you think about anxiety.*

**Helen McCabe, journalist and former editor of *Australian Women's Weekly***

*I had some anxiety about whether I would be giving this gem of a book the endorsement it deserves. As a psychiatrist who spends time with my patients exploring meaningful connections and life balance, this book resonated. As a person with anxiety and a family history of mood disorders, I cannot recommend it highly enough. I found the beast indeed to be beautiful.*

**Dr Mark Cross, consultant psychiatrist, SANE board member and author of *Changing Minds***

*Sarah speaks directly to my heart, articulating her journey in a language that is almost visceral. The words leap from the page and resonate so deeply with me, as they will for anyone who has walked the path of anxiety.*

**Aurelio Costarella, fashion designer and Lifeline Ambassador**

*Sarah's story provides great insight into what I see people experiencing every day, and I admire her courage for sharing it with the world. She recognises that the road to wellness is about embracing and living a life aligned to our values.*

**Dr Jodie Lowinger, clinical psychologist, Sydney Anxiety Clinic For Adults, Children and Adolescents**

*Sarah's life mission is to help us all feel less lonely in our pain. These pages are filled with authenticity and clear direction for how to return to our spiritual truth.*

**Gabrielle Bernstein, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *May Cause Miracles***

*Thank you Sarah Wilson. This book is a beacon of reality in a sea of avoidance.*

**Louise Androlia, artist, writer and emotional mentor**

## about *first, we make the beast beautiful*

*This journey is what I do now. I bump along, in fits and starts, on a perpetual path to finding better ways for me and my mate, Anxiety, to get around. It's everything I do.*

Sarah Wilson, author and entrepreneur, gravitates to 'hard problems' and intrepidly tries to solve them so she can pass on the hard-earned wisdoms to all who want to make life better.

She applied this formula to quitting sugar. Now, ***first, we make the beast beautiful*** sees her apply it to the force in her life that's brought the most pain and become her finest teacher. Anxiety.

Investigating deeply, she pulls at the thread of accepted definitions of anxiety, unravelling the notion that it is a disease that must be medicated into submission. Could anxiety be re-sewn, she asks, into a thing of beauty? A state of grace that will lead her and her fellow sufferers closer to what really matters?

There are many books about coping with anxiety. This one encourages the myriad souls who dance with the condition to *live the better life* with anxiety.

"... at once a nomadic journey, a *cri de Coeur* and a compendium of hard-won wisdom..."

Professor Patrick McGorry AO MD PhD FRCP FRANZCP FAA FASSA, 2010 Australian of the Year

## five things to know about this book

1. I'm not a medical professional. This is my personal and creative response to my condition and the research around it. But I also had three medical professionals read the book to ensure the information is responsible.
2. I've put an octopus on the cover because they are beasts that have been made more beautiful through our deeper understanding of them. Their intelligence and sentience is hard to fathom. They are driven by 500 million neurons and have a deep desire to connect and communicate with humans.
3. The scientific claims are supported as endnotes that can be found at [sarahwilson.com](http://sarahwilson.com). I acknowledge that the science in this realm is often imprecise and conflicting.
4. The format of the book is nomadic in nature. It meanders through disciplines and between polemic, didactic and memoir. Because this best reflects how I've experienced my own journey through the issue.
5. The title is derived from a Chinese proverb which I came across twenty years ago in psychiatrist Kay Redfield Jamison's memoir *An Unquiet Mind*.

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## THE WORM'S WAKING

*This is how a human being can change.*

*There is a worm  
addicted to eating grape leaves.*

*Suddenly, he wakes up,  
call it grace, whatever, something  
wakes him, and he is no longer a worm.*

*He is the entire vineyard,  
and the orchard too, the fruit, the trunks,  
a growing wisdom and joy  
that does not need to devour.*

— Rumi

متن نمونه بوکزی فا

the  
first

bit

1. The first time I met His Holiness The Dalai Lama, I was invited to ask him one question. He tends to go on and on, his people told me. So one question only.

Of course I fretted. *One* question.

I was interviewing His Holiness for a magazine column I wrote in which I explored ways to have a better life. The column was one of my smarter orchestrations. Anxiety-related illness had planted me in a spot such that I was too sick to hold down a normal job, too broke to get the healing treatments I needed. So I confected a gig where I tested different ways to heal myself. Two birds, one stone.

I deliberated for days. How would I reduce things to *The* question that would provide a salve to all us Westerners seeking a more meaningful path through the fuggy, constipated, heart-sinky angst of life? The choice left my head spinning and chattering. What is it *exactly* that we need to know? Are we here to evolve into higher beings? Why are we so alone? Is there a grand scheme to our allotted eighty-five years?

When we meet a few weeks later, His Holiness kisses my hand and tosses his thongs aside. We sink into adjacent hotel room lounge chairs. I still don't have my one question. So I ask the most authentically pressing thing in that exact moment:

'How do I get my mind to shut up?'

You know, to stop the fretty chatter that makes us so nervous and unsettled and unable to grasp the ‘present moment’ at the end of yoga classes when the instructor talks about it as though it’s something you can buy off the shelf.

His Holiness giggles and blows his nose on a paper serviette, shoving it down the front of his robe like my Year 4 teacher used to. ‘There’s no use,’ he tells me. ‘Silly! Impossible to achieve! If you can do it, great. If not, big waste of time.’

‘But surely *you* can do it,’ I say.

*I mean, is the Pope a Catholic; can the Dalai Lama still his mind?*

‘Noooo. If I sit in a cave for a year on mountain, then *maybe* I do it. But no guarantee.’ He waves his hand. ‘Anyway, I don’t have time.’ He has better things to do, he tells me. Like teaching altruism to massive crowds around the world.

His Holiness then tells me about his recent trip to Japan, how he hits his running machine at 3am every day and all about his anger issues (*yes, the Dalai Lama gets cranky!*). But he says nothing further about the torturous human experience of having a fretful, frenzied mind that trips along ahead of us, just beyond our grip, driving us mad and leaving us thinking we’ve got it all terribly wrong. It was as if the subject bored him.

I leave feeling deflated and anxious. I didn’t exactly have a pearly insight for my column. But a few days later I was defending his seemingly flaccid response to my close mate Ragni and I realised what His Holiness had done.

He’d given me a response that came with a screaming, cap-lettered subtext: **YOU’RE OKAY AS YOU ARE!!!** He’d given me – and everyone else out there whose whirring thoughts keep them awake until 4am, trash-talking their poor souls into agitated despair – a big, fat, red-robed hug. It was perfect.

Now, a strange thing happens when you realise that some gargantuan, all-looming issue you’d been fretting over no longer needs to be fixed. You take a deep, free breath, expand a little, release your grip and get on with better things.

I suspect you might be reading these words here because you’re a fretter with a mind that goes too fast, too high, too unbridled. And, like

me, you might have tried everything to fix this fretting, because fretters try really, really hard at everything. They also tend to think they need fixing.

And like me you might have wondered if there's another way.

I'd like to say this up front. I write these very words because I've come to believe that you can be fretty and chattery in the head and awake at 4am and trying really hard at everything. *And* you can get on with having a great life.

Hey, the Dalai Lama told me so.

Actually, I'll go a bit further. I've come to believe that the fretting *itself* can be the very thing that plonks you on the path to a great life.

2. When God was handing out *The Guidebook to Life* I was on the toilet. Or hanging out nappies for Mum. I was, I believe, the only person on the planet who missed out

The first time this realisation came crashing down on me I was fifteen, crouching in an Asian-style squat behind a curtain in a Canberra shopping mall waiting to see if I'd won the inaugural Face of Miss Gee Bees modelling competition.

A few months earlier a matronly fitting room attendant had stopped me as I flicked through her bra rack and asked if she could take a photo with

Miss Gee Bees was the teen section of the now defunct Grace Bros. department store behemoth, should you be too young to know.

her point-and-click. 'Yeah. Okay,' I said and half-smiled, half-frowned for the camera. I got a letter two weeks later inviting me to attend the finals being held at the mall's centre stage. Up for grabs was a modelling contract, a *Dolly* magazine shoot and a bra and knickers package.

The other finalists chat and laugh as we wait for the judges' announcement. They're glossy and cheerleader-y and all seem to be wearing the same Best & Less stilettos and black lycra micro-dresses that they keep adjusting over their bottoms, but without bending over. Because to do so would muck up their hair-sprayed quiff-fringes, a few strands combed forward over their eyes.

I hadn't got the Robert Palmer memo.

I'm wearing an ankle-length white poly-cotton peasant dress with beige slouch socks and worn tan Sportsgirl brogues with splits in the soles. It's a bit Linda Kozlowski in *Crocodile Dundee*. A little bit *Out of Africa*. I'd borrowed the dress from a girl at school and I'd carefully hand-stitched the princess-line seams in a few centimetres to fit. Dad Araldited the splits in my shoes and dried them on the hot water tank overnight.

I'm feeling nervous. And, oh boy, so terribly alone.

Also, this had just happened. On my second run on the catwalk for the Saturday morning shopping crowd I'd spun in front of the judges. All eyeballs were on me.

*And. Then.* Time seemed to stop and the world went silent like it does just before a bushfire.

*And. Then.* A tightly packed wad of toilet paper dropped from under my dress and landed with a light *pfft*, right in front of the judges.

As an awkwardly undeveloped teen, I'd do this thing where I'd stuff tissue or toilet paper into the sides of my underpants to give me hips where I had none. I wore jeans mostly, and would stick the toilet paper in the pockets, wash them and then bake them in the sun, creating papier-mâché insta-curves. I'd also wear two – sometimes three – T-shirts at a time, rolling the sleeves up over each other, and football socks with ankle boots to bulk out my undersized frame. I was an optical illusion of womanly shape that had to be carefully, anxiously, constructed each morning.

From the back of the crowd Dad whooped, 'You little *beuuuuuty!*' like he did at sports carnivals when my brothers and sister and I ran into the home straight, no matter our placing in the pack.

I scampered off behind the curtain.

Was I mortified? Ashamed? No. This wasn't the issue. The ordeal had instead triggered a panic, an overwhelming and lonely panic of the most fundamental kind.

I was breathless and alert in the car on the way home with my second-place bra and knickers package. Entirely unanchored, dangerously adrift. In this moment I fully believed that I didn't get it. I didn't 'get' life. And everyone else on the planet did. They'd got *The Guidebook*. They got the missive that showed them how to interject in a jokey conversation.

They got the instructions for choosing the right career path. They seemed to somehow know why we existed. Shit! Shit! How was I going to get through this thing called life?

But! One of the dear, dear things about getting older, is that it does eventually dawn on you that there is no guidebook. One day it suddenly emerges: *No one bloody gets it! None of us knows what we're doing.*

Thing is, we all put a lot of effort into looking like we did get the guide, that of course we know how to do this caper called life. We put on a smile rather than tell friends we are desperately lonely. And we make loud, verbose claims at dinner parties to make everyone certain of our certainty. We're funny like that.

3. Stephen Fry wrote in *The Fry Chronicles* that behind 'the mask of security, ease, confidence and assurance I wear (so easily that its features often lift in to a smirk that looks like complacency and smugness) [is] the real condition of anxiety, self-doubt, self-disgust and fear in which much of my life then and now is lived.'

Two things about this.

Thing 1. It's the most incredible relief to know that we're all wearing masks ... and to see them slip on others. Oh, sweet Jesus, we're not alone! We're in this together! It's not a mean-spirited *schadenfreude*; it's the ultimate connection. Really it is. My beaut and brutally frank mate Rick rang and asked me one morning, 'Darl, why exactly are you writing this book?'

'Because I can't help it and because I'm sick of being lonely,' I replied. Then I quoted something I'd read that morning from philosopher Alain de Botton's *The Book of Life*: 'We must suffer alone. But we can at least hold out our arms to our similarly tortured, fractured, and above all else, anxious neighbours, as if to say, in the kindest way possible: "I know ..."'

'Good,' Rick said and hung up.

Thing 2. When you realise there's no guidebook, an opportunity suddenly presents itself. If no one knows what they're doing, if there's no 'right' way to do life, then we can surely choose our own way. Yes?

4. My beautiful brother Ben recently asked me over the phone, ‘Remember that time you got stuck on the bus because of that woman’s perfume?’

Nope. But if Ben, the family elephant, said it happened, it did. Ben’s sixteen months younger than me and I realise just now that he’s been my ballast over the years with his gruff, ‘Sarah, just don’t worry about it’ sturdiness. The Mindy to my Mork.

Apparently I was so distressed by the stench from the lady sitting next to me I’d covered my face and missed several bus stops. Perfume has always made me anxious. I was six.

I’ve been anxious for a long, long time. I don’t know when or how it kicked in, but I don’t remember a time without it.

5. I was diagnosed with childhood anxiety and insomnia at twelve, then bulimia in my late teens, then obsessive-compulsive disorder shortly thereafter, then depression and hypomania and then, in my early twenties, manic depression, or bipolar disorder as it’s now called.

I’ve seen about three dozen psychiatrists and psychotherapists and spiritual healers, generally twice a week for years at a time. I was medicated from seventeen until I was twenty-eight with anti-epileptic, anti-anxiety and anti-psychotic drugs. I’ve waded through CBT, NLP, hypnotherapy, Freudian analysis, spiritual coaching and sand play. For long, lonely slabs I’ve had to step out of the slipstream of life, missing school, dropping out of university twice, quitting jobs and unable to leave the house for up to a year at a time. Also twice.

I can now tell you it was all anxiety. All of it. Just different flavours.

But at twenty-seven I decided to go my own way. I was living in Melbourne, writing restaurant reviews and celebrity features for the Sunday paper. I also wrote a weekly opinion column. I’d write it Thursday night and had the most marvellous time, under the pump, with an outlet for my thoughts on homeless people, feminism and the reasons why men always power-walk in pairs. I’d recently split from my first boyfriend and was living with a fun artist in a South Yarra terrace that was to be demolished in coming months. We wrote on the walls, ivy grew through the kitchen, we cooked stew. And I was on a conscious mission to explore sex. I came to sex late and had only had one sexual

partner. I was ready to play; it was a fun experiment and one not based on pain or compromise. Things felt aligned and touched by some rippin' flow.

And so I broke up with the psychiatrist who was my last for a very long time. I presented her with a dot-pointed rationale of why I had to go my own way. 'I am ready,' I told her. 'This is the real thing, now. Life ain't no run-up, a dress rehearsal,' I said. 'I'm ready for the work. It's just hard work, right? I can do hard work. It's a matter of firing the f\*ck up.' She shook my hand as I left her dimly lit office overlooking Melbourne's Albert Park. I appreciate, now, that I was probably riding a slightly manic upswing.

Six months later I had used up the last of my medications. They'd run out, one by one. And I'd simply chosen not to repeat the prescriptions.

Despite appearances, this was not a monumental fork-in-the-road-never-turn-back moment. That's the thing with my important life moments, they always seem to emerge slowly, like a Polaroid picture. I suspect few people have instant-capture aha moments. Especially those of us ensconced in the nebulous realm of anxiety where discernible lines between normal and neurotic cease, at some point, to exist.

That said, I think my adult journey, the one I'm sharing in this book you're holding, began as I left my psychiatrist's office on that late autumn morning. I remember the soft light. I remember doing a fist-pump as I walked to the tram stop. I was making up my own rules for managing what everyone insisted on calling an illness and I knew I was ready to live them out. I get asked how I did this. I can only say that I chose. I made the decision and then I committed, motivated predominantly by the fact that, frankly, nothing else had worked. I've spoken to a lot of functioning neurotics over the years and they tell me the same. You choose. You might not even know why, but you do. You commit. Then you do the work.

Oh, yeah. Then you falter. And fuck up. And go back to the beginning.

In my mid-thirties my mania flared again. And my obsessive-compulsive disorder. I've wrestled with OCD since I was eleven or twelve. I have to tap things and check things, and wash my hands, to a count of three. It's a night-time ritual only. I tap light switches and doors and bathroom taps after everyone has gone to bed and I check – to a



count of three, in multiples of three – for things under my bed. As a kid I counted pretty much everything in threes – cracks, drips, turnings of my pillow to the cool side when I couldn't sleep. I know when I'm getting worse. My counting goes from sets of threes to sets of fours and fives.

At thirty-five I was also suicidal for the second time in my life. I was unable to leave the house or to work for nine months. Everything unravelled again.

I've since gone back to therapists. I've gone back to medication. And then gone off it again. I have anxiety attacks in batches throughout the year. I keep Valium in my bathroom. Just in case.

The first time was when I was twenty-two, but I'll cover this off a bit later on.

But this journey is what I do now. I bump along, in fits and starts, on a perpetual path to finding better ways for me and my mate, Anxiety, to get around.

It's everything I do.

As someone wrote to me on my blog a few years ago, 'Sarah, you're all striving, no arriving.' Yes, and I think this is the point. I've written more than 1500 posts on my personal blog, and hundreds (thousands?) of agonised-over columns for eleven different magazines and newspapers over a twenty-two-year writing career in which I try out different ideas and life hacks all geared in one way or another at ... what? ... understanding my anxiety. It's been a rather self-serving career trajectory.

Where do I land? Modern medicine has certainly preferred dealing with my various conditions as individual diagnoses – the bipolar, the anxiety attacks, the obsessive-compulsive disorder, the insomnia, as well as the host of autoimmune diseases I've developed along the way (and never shall thy psychiatrist and endocrinologist meet!). But me? I think all the diagnoses boil down to anxiety. That is, an itchy sense that things are not right, a buzzing dis-ease. Whatever doctors want to call it, the feeling is the same: it's that gut-twisting, grip-from-behind, heart-sinky feeling that winds me in tighter spirals and makes everything go faster and with so much urgency and soon enough I'm running down a steep hill faster than my poor spinning legs can carry me.

I'm aware many doctors may disagree with this notion, and I could indeed be wrong. But I reckon it's time we explored the idea. It's time we had the conversation because I think many of us are feeling the itchiness of something missing from the issue.

My qualifications for writing this book, then, if this matters to you, is that I'm a committed striver. I'm strapped in. Doing the work and keen to start the conversation.

I should also point out that I don't have an answer to ... any of it. You should probably know this eleven pages in. This book doesn't take a linear path to salvation. Nope, it meanders through a series of explorations. I take off my mask and share my not-knowing.

But, dear reader, I ask you, do you feel, in your heart of hearts, that fixing your anxiety is the answer? I ask this of anyone with the kind of low-to-medium anxious buzz we're all feeling, as well as those of you with a diagnosed anxious condition. Because the question is equally relevant. Do you think it might be lovelier if we bundle up our uncertainty, fear, late-night over-thinking and kooky coping habits, tuck them gently under our arm, and see where they take us?

This might not sound like the most 'grab a highlighter and mark out the wisdoms' premise for a book. But let's see how it goes.

6. *The Journey* by Mary Oliver goes straight to it. I don't generally like long quotes and poems in books. They clutter the flow. But please, do yourself a favour and read it in full (it's just over the page), and absorb it, so we can all start on the right note.

## THE JOURNEY

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice –  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.  
But you didn’t stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations –  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice,  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do –  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.  
—Mary Oliver

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because

no one

knows ...

7. So here's the thing. A lot of us are anxious. Many of us haven't been diagnosed as such, or even worked out if our particular flavour of anxiety constitutes a problem. But we know we're anxious. More anxious than we should be. When I mention I'm writing a book about anxiety, everyone (and I mean every single person) suddenly goes a little wide-eyed. Drops their tone a little. Leans in. And tells me ... 'Everyone these days seems to have it, hey.'

We're told that globally one in thirteen people suffer an anxiety-related illness. Some studies tell us that one in six of us in the West will be afflicted with an anxiety disorder at some stage in our lives, making it the most common officially classified mental illness. For men, anxiety is even more common than depression – one in five men will experience anxiety at some point. But of course these are only the stats for those whose anxiety crosses the line to become a diagnosed disorder. There's no accurate gauge for the number of people who are feeling the frenetic toll of modern life but somehow manage to keep on keeping on without presenting to a doctor, though Google search rates can sometimes give a real-time picture of such things. And, sure enough, searches for anxiety are up 150 per cent in the past eight years. Searches for 'anxiety at night' have risen nine-fold.

A growing number of conditions come under the umbrella term of anxiety, in the medical sense of the word. The latest (fifth) edition of the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the diagnostic handbook used by mental health professionals in most Western countries, lists thirty-seven different disorders under anxiety, including social phobia, specific phobias, panic disorder, generalised anxiety disorder (pervasive and chronic worry about a variety of everyday issues), separation anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and post-traumatic stress disorder. (I should note that since 2013 the American Psychiatry Association assigned OCD its own separate category.)

Anxiety was first classified as a mental disorder in 1980 in the third edition of the DSM.

Yep, you read right: 1980.

And before then? Were none of us anxious?

For nearly three centuries – pretty much since Descartes separated our heads from our flesh and bones – the idea that our emotions could impact our physical health remained scientific taboo. In 1950 only two books had been written on the topic. Two. In the whole entire world. (Freud wrote about it eighty years ago in *The Problem of Anxiety*, and Søren Kierkegaard ninety years before him in *The Concept of Anxiety*.)

We officially became ‘stressed’ from 1950, when the term was invented by an Austrian–Canadian physician who worked tirelessly to popularise the term with a one-person campaign to get the word into dictionaries around the world. An aetiology I just love.

Several dozen more books and academic papers then appeared on the subject. In the main, though, the mind–body split persisted and anxiety was regarded as an everyday condition (we all get anxious, right?) that some of us are just too weak to handle. Women who got anxious were slapped with the hysteria diagnosis. Men self-medicated with drugs or alcohol or went into man caves. And we all got on with things.

Today there are countless theories as to the genesis of anxiety. All of them are worth understanding. Childhood trauma is one. In Sue Gerhardt’s seminal book *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby’s Brain*, it’s argued that when you grow up in conditions of emotional vulnerability (anything from extreme abuse to having a parent who was busy with other children – hello, the Anxiety of Being An Eldest Child!) this can shape how you cope emotionally for the rest of

your life. British TV clinical psychologist Oliver James (author of the brilliantly titled parenting book *They F\*\*\* You Up*) argues that childhood trauma sees you grow up in a state of permanent 'red alert' which deregulates your brain chemistry. It's firmly nurture, not nature, in his book.

Low levels of certain chemicals in the brain (namely serotonin and norepinephrine) have also been implicated. Our brains process information about what's happening inside and outside the body via the nervous system – a network of 100 billion neurons that relay information via electro-chemical signals. Serotonin relays messages related to mood, sexual desire and function, appetite, sleep, memory, learning and social behaviour. The crude theory is that when we don't have enough serotonin, the information doesn't get through.

More recently, it's been found that another neurotransmitter, anandamide (a name that comes from the Sanskrit word *ananda* for joy or bliss), helps our brain communicate happiness, ease and comfort. Those of us with low levels of this message emitter tend to get nervous. Or so goes the theory.

Even during the writing of this book, I've been exposed to fresher explainers.

Recent research has shown that anxiety is more common in people with autoimmune (AI) diseases, illnesses that occur when the immune system gets deranged and attacks different parts of the body. I have Hashimoto's, an autoimmune disease of the thyroid, a gland in the neck that controls everything that makes you a conscious, sentient being: metabolism, breathing, heart rate, the nervous system, menstrual cycles, body temperature, cholesterol, blood sugar, mood, sleep ...

No one can explain the connection between AI and anxiety, in part because the genesis of many autoimmune diseases is not known. Some suggest that the uncertainty of living with an autoimmune disease is a possible factor – simply not knowing what the hell is going on with your body would drive anyone to agitated despair.

A more promising, and compelling (to me), explanation is that AI, like other inflammatory diseases, leads to high levels of circulating cytokines which have been shown to affect how our neurotransmitters communicate. Indeed, increasing evidence links anxiety to a bunch of

inflammatory diseases such as atherosclerosis, metabolic syndrome and coronary heart disease. Clinical trials have shown that adding anti-inflammatory medicines to mood medications not only improves symptoms, but also increases response rate. The fact that ‘normal’, healthy people can become temporarily anxious after an inflammatory vaccine – like typhoid – lends further credence to the hypothesis.

Possibly the most exciting work is being conducted on the link between gut health, inflammation and anxiety. As you’ve no doubt heard, we have a whole community of bacteria in our digestive tract – our microbiome – which not only plays an important role in our metabolic and immune systems, but also our nervous system. Recent research suggests that these microbes may influence emotional behaviour, pain perception and how we respond to stress.

When the balance of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ bacteria is out of whack (dysbiosis, caused by such things as poor diet, medications, antibiotics, allergens, parasites, fungal overgrowth), it can trigger a cascade of inflammatory molecular reactions that feed back to the central nervous system, causing inflammation in the brain. And it’s this inflammation that messes with our neurotransmitters, leading to anxiety. Put simply, if you have fire in the gut, you have fire in the brain.

Researchers have found that folk who eat more fermented foods (which contain gut healing probiotics) have fewer symptoms of social anxiety. Another study found that eating a mere yoghurt (I say ‘mere’ because the commercial stuff contains only small amounts of the beneficial bacteria touted on the front of the tub) twice a day for a few weeks changed the makeup of the subjects’ gut microbes, and this led to the production of compounds that modified brain chemistry.

In the final weeks of writing the first draft of this book, I found out that I have a number of genetic issues that likely played a part in my anxious history. I have a defective MTHFR gene, which can affect serotonin availability and uptake. It’s a new area in the debate, so I’m still learning about its implications. My hormone clinician, Leah, suspects that I was also born with an inability to produce enough glutathione, a key antioxidant that helps eliminate heavy metals from the body. As a result, I have mercury levels that are literally off the scale (as in, beyond the graph that the labs provided). High levels of mercury, of



course, are directly linked to anxiety. 'Mad hatters' went nutty from the mercury used in felting work. Leah reckons these genetic variables may have been 'switched on' by epigenetic factors such as stress, illness and environmental pollutants.

Nascent research published in *Nature Neuroscience* also hypothesises that phobias (an anxious manifestation, as per the DSM) may be genetic 'memories' passed down from our ancestors and mediated by epigenetics, which may help to explain why people suffer from seemingly irrational phobias that probably made sense at some point in our evolution (like fear of germs).

But none of the above factors consigns a person to an anxious diagnosis. You can have all of the above and never have an anxious day in your life.

8. You know what else happened in 1980, just prior to anxiety being formally recognised and diagnosed? The first anti-anxiety drugs were manufactured. Which begs, was anxiety 'invented' in 1980 to fit the drug? Just a question, just a question, people ...

Oh, and there's this.

In 1994, as Scott Stossel notes in *My Age of Anxiety*, the term 'social anxiety disorder' had only appeared fifty times in the media. By 2000 it was part of our lexicon and studies were indicating that 10–20 million Americans were afflicted.

What might have triggered such a dramatic switch? Were we all suddenly being forced to go to more crowded parties in the late '90s? Or to attend more group workshops involving those awkward trust exercises?

Or could it have been the widespread awareness campaign launched by the Social Anxiety Disorder Coalition (SADC) in 1999, just one year earlier? This particular campaign featured glum-looking folk accompanied by the truly awful tagline, 'Imagine you were allergic to people' and got blanket coverage across America, on the backs of buses and on freeway overpasses.

But sit tight! There's more.