



ANXIETY: F*CK YOU

one
woman's
story

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Prologue

I originally wrote this short book about my experience with anxiety as a three-part blog in 2016 on somehannahsthinkdifferent.com.

If you have any thoughts or comments about anything I've written here I always appreciate any feedback. I'm a writer and a journalist and you can email me at:

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Chapter 1

One day, a long time ago, all the way back in 2006, something happened to me that has really affected my life and everything that I have done ever since. Something that until recently, I have been deeply, deeply ashamed of.

I had a good, solid and safe life situation going on, I was a mum, I had a partner, we had bought our own place and I had a successful and fulfilling career.

It was the summer and I was in London for a girls weekend with two of my best friends. I'd been looking forward to it for ages – the shopping, the drinking, the dancing and the laughing. Things were going well, we'd been vintage shopping all morning and picked up some overpriced, reworked T-shirts (up-cycling was very new back then and still exciting), then to a great place for lunch that served artisan sandwiches on a wooden chopping board... can you imagine? (Remember this was 2006 and also, we were country bumpkins from the North). This was followed by glasses of perfectly chilled Chardonnay (I'm presuming it was Chardonnay, it was definitely white wine and I know we hadn't yet discovered Sauvignon Blanc).

We were heading back to our friend's place on the underground to get ready for a super swanky and cool AF party that we'd managed to get an invite to, based on our friend's job in TV. To pour ourselves into skinny jeans, don oversized men's T-shirts with the sleeves ripped off, add stiletto's and apply tonnes of blue eye-liner. There was a big 80's revival going on back then and we were cool AF too... well we thought we were.

Have you ever been to Angel tube station? If you have you

will know it has the: 'Longest escalators on the underground network and the fourth-longest escalators in Western Europe', my good friend Wikipedia can confirm. This is an important fact in the story because...

As we went further and further underground, down and down, down and down into the unknown, something started to happen to me, and it happened very quickly. I started to feel very uncomfortable, like I was being suffocated, choked almost. I couldn't breathe properly and there was a thick fog behind my eyes. My whole body prickled, with what I can only describe as poison, something that you may only ever feel in your worst nightmares, when you wake up in a sweat of utter panic because the worst thing in the world, that could happen, has happened, but then you wake up and realise that you're ok. Well, I was awake but the feeling was still there.

It started in the pit of my stomach and reached to my outer skin and radiated from within me. I was a dark pulsating ball of black poison and something very bad was about to happen. My brain was caving in, there was no room inside to think clearly. It was filled with red and black, thick poison, I was completely terrified, in a way like never before in my whole life - and I've given birth so I know all about terror.

I looked around, surely the end of the world was coming? It must be affecting other people (I have been known to enjoy a spot of science fiction on the quiet). But no, everyone was just going about their daily business, which made the whole thing seem all the more sinister.

I got off the escalator and got straight on the one to come back up, my friends were staring and shouting at me, looking at each other in bewilderment and asking me what I was doing.

"I need to leave, I need to leave immediately, I have to get out of here, I have to get to the top!"

They followed me confused.

"Please can someone call me an ambulance, I'm not ok, I need an ambulance, please somebody, my brain's going to explode, I'm not well, I need help, please somebody help me."

"Hannah you're OK, you've just panicked a bit."

"No I'm not ok, I need help, I need an ambulance, I'm mentally insane, I need sectioning, please just call me a fucking ambulance."

My caring, kind and confused friends walked me away from the tube station and calmed me down, they said it sounded like it could be a panic attack. I knew that it definitely wasn't a panic attack and that I had real problems and that I was actually going insane. I decided to pretend to agree with them until I got myself home, and then I could check myself into hospital and get the care I needed. But I just couldn't shake this feeling, the black and red poison, running through my veins and prickling up and down my body and it rested on my chest, sitting there comfortably, pulsating gently with my heart. The other symptoms had gone, but the poison remained and that poison stayed with me for days, weeks and months.

Chapter 2

I had had a panic attack of course, but I had no idea of what that meant at the time and thought that it sounded too easy. And I felt like I was going insane remember, that was my panic, and nobody in their right mind would think that, unless they were actually insane of course. A panic attack was about not being able to breathe wasn't it? And possibly feeling like you were having a heart attack?

I'm a seeker of knowledge, so the first thing that I did when I got home was to read a book about anxiety and what it told me was that, yes, everyone is different when it comes to panic, panic is a personal thing and can be, but not exclusively, any of the following;

- **Thinking you're going to die**
- **Thinking you're having a heart attack**
- **Thinking you're going to go insane**
- **Thinking you're going to wet yourself**
- **Thinking you're going to suffocate**
- **Thinking that loved ones are going to die**
- **And the list really is endless..**

Things were very tough when I got home, I didn't go to the hospital, I was ashamed, racked with guilt, I thought it was all my fault and that I'd done something terribly wrong. What if people I knew found out? What would they think of me? What if work found out?

The poison remained within me and it was one of the most horrible feelings in the world, that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. It reminded me every second, of every day that I was a failure, that I wasn't normal and that I had mental health problems (a very dirty word in the English language). I daren't go out at first, I wouldn't even leave the house, but this couldn't be sustained so I had to ask for help from people, off relatives and very close friends.

I started going out but only when accompanied, I was terrified of the outside world, I was terrified of people, and I had this poison in me, weighing me down, all the time, taking over my whole body, I couldn't relax, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat.

But, most of all, I was absolutely terrified of it happening to me again, and the fear completely took over my life.

Chapter 3

Days and weeks passed and not much changed. Every morning I'd wake up hoping that the poison would have gone, evaporating into the night to set me free again, but it didn't, it hung over me like a heavy black cloud. I couldn't enjoy anything, a nice meal, a good book, I just couldn't feel ok. I couldn't even go to the shop on my own.

Eventually people started to notice my absence, once the social butterfly, always up for a gathering, now I was nowhere to be seen. Friends invited me for coffee, drinks, dinner – I couldn't go. Then I had to start saying no to birthdays, the pressure was mounting.

After weeks in the house and being terrified of my own shadow, my mum insisted that I go to the garden centre with her. I didn't want to go, the thought scared me and I could feel the poison starting to rise up again, just thinking about it. But I knew that I had to, I couldn't continue with the life that I was living, it was a massive pressure, not only for me, but for my family too, my daughter and my (by now) long suffering partner.

So off we went, and it was, as I expected, absolutely awful. As soon as we got in there I realised how low the ceilings were and the more I went in, the more confined I felt. I was moving further and further away from the door, the entrance, and my escape route if needed. What on earth I would need to escape from I have no idea? Some tomato seeds possibly? Was some organic fertiliser going to kill me? Who knows, it was completely irrational, but that's how it works. That was the overwhelming feeling that I had, that I was trapped and that I needed to escape, my heart in my mouth, sweat on my brow, and the poison gently pulsating in my chest.

Of course at this stage, I was near home, I was in a garden centre with my mum for god's sake, the rational Hannah must have been working somewhere as I knew deep down that I was safe, and I didn't have an attack that time. I just hung about by the entrance, next to the fresh flower section, with a bright red face, feeling like a massive dickhead.

However, this was the start of me getting better although I didn't know it at the time.

The thing that was crippling and disabling more than anything else was the fear of it happening again, not it actually happening. It controlled everything, where I went, what I did, would I be ok in this situation, would I be ok in that situation? Situations that had always previously been absolutely fine were now tainted somehow, nowhere and nothing was safe.

With a chaperone, I started to go out more regularly, to small and uncomplicated things, just with close friends. The more I went out and saw people, the better I felt, the poison started diluting. I also started talking to my close friends and family about it. Nearly every single one of them said it sounded like something that had happened to them or like had happened to their sister/brother/partner. I was astounded, do you know how re-assuring this was? I cannot even begin to explain. If other people had experienced this kind of thing then surely it must mean that I'm not as weird or as mad as I think? An interesting idea.

Chapter 4

The term 'mental health' and anything associated with it, such as anxiety and depression has a very powerful stigma attached. The word 'mental' only really means anything that is associated with the mind, but the word has been socialised to mean dangerous, unhinged, crazy or weak. So it's no surprise that we are extremely cautious about wanting ourselves to be defined in that way.

This really doesn't help the situation, because as I've learned, one of the most powerful tools that you can have against anxiety is knowledge. Often anxiety, well my anxiety anyway, was caught up in the unknown. I began to realise that what happened to me that day on the escalator was all the more terrifying because I didn't have a clue of what was going on. Once I began to gain knowledge about the subject from books, from the internet and from speaking to people, I began to feel better.

We're not likely to get the knowledge if we can't even talk openly about it. So we shouldn't be cautious, and whilst I'm not advising to shout it from the rooftops (well, I mean you can if you want), we should chat to our nearest and dearest about it, because more than likely they will understand and not only that, they will want to help.

Remember, there is absolutely no shame in mental health problems. Is there any shame in cancer, diabetes, pneumonia? No, there isn't. These are all health problems too. Nobody asks for poor health, we don't ask for it and we don't want it either – it is just the roll of the die.

Alongside arming myself with knowledge about anxiety and going back out into the big bad world and facing my fears, I started to look at other things that I'd never considered before in my aim to feel well again.

Acupuncture was one of them. A friend had had it and couldn't recommend it highly enough, and whilst unsure and also wary, I had nothing to lose. I remember attending my first appointment and after my assessment saying to the acupuncturist.

"Basically I'm fucked, I have severe mental health problems and I'm going to need a lot of help".

To which she replied.

"No, you have some mild problems which I can certainly help with and you'll only need four sessions."

I couldn't believe it, not only did she understand everything I was talking about, she knew she could help me and also she knew that I wasn't fucked. Needless to say we became friends for life.

So eventually, and thankfully I started to feel better, the black cloud was lifting and I started trying to get back on with my life.

Chapter 5

What I can now tell you is that I NEVER had a panic attack again. Of course back then I didn't know that I would never have one and so I was still living in the constant fear of it happening, which as I've mentioned before is equally disabling. I carried on with acupuncture, and also started regularly exercising. This, along with eating well, getting enough sleep, and just generally being kind to myself set me on my road to recovery.

There was one other factor though, that I believe was the biggest and most powerful thing that helped me to truly deal with my anxiety and really get better. It's actually one of the simplest pieces of knowledge ever. I wish I'd had the insight to think about it at the time, I couldn't because I was too caught up in it. It took someone to point it out to me.

It involves going into the next stage of thinking, the next level. So we're no longer thinking about avoiding the panic at any cost and putting all these things into place to help keep us 'safe'. We need to progress onto thinking about the actual attack itself.

What's the worst thing that can happen if you do have a panic attack? What happened last time? Did you die? Did anyone you know die? Are you going to die? If the answer is no then everything is ok, and it really is. It really, really is.

Has anyone ever died from a panic attack? Has anyone actually lost their mind from a panic attack? And whilst I can't be 100% sure about this, I honestly don't think they have. Of course these are quite complicated questions. Some could say, and even I could say, that I did suffer severe harm from my attack, as it did affect my life in such a powerful way. But somehow I know, and don't ask me why, but I know that I will never feel like

this ever again, because of the knowledge that I now have. The knowledge that I'm not going to die or lose my mind.

Years later, after my first attack I was presented with a similar situation. I was in London, again, about to get on the underground. Not with an escalator this time but with spiralling steps that went deep underground, this time we had the pleasure of Covent Garden Station. It was the peak of summer, incredibly hot and sticky, the air was close and to make matters worse it was rush hour and rammed with people. I immediately realised the gravity of the situation and stopped in my tracks, sweating and panicking. But something else happened...

"Do it". I thought: "Go on do it".

So I did. Down and down and down I went, spiralling with all of these people into the earth below. The poison started forming in my mind and in my body. I was sweating, my heart was thumping, my brain was pounding, my throat was being strangled, I couldn't think straight, sweat trickled down my back. What could I do? I turned around but there was no way I could go back the way I came against the sea of people. I had to continue, on and on, and down and down and down I went, **faster and faster, down and down.**

I reached the bottom.

I stood on the platform. The cool, dark and peaceful platform. A powerful cold gust of wind from a passing train swept along the platform and through my hair. I took some long deep breaths and realised that I was fine? I was ok. I hadn't lost my mind. I was alive. More than that – I was great. The poison had gone completely and in its place was a feeling of lightness. **I'd beaten it.**

I'd faced my fears, I'd allowed myself to carry on with the panic,

telling myself over and over again: 'What's the worst that can happen? What's the worst that can happen?' Reinforcing the truth of the situation, which is this: it's all in my mind. It really was about saying to myself **"FUCK YOU ANXIETY"**, you are not having this hold over me anymore.

Am I Free?

I say I'd beaten it, but it's not quite as simple as that. I can live my life in a fairly normal way now, although if I don't look after myself then it can rear its ugly head. Not in the way that I have talked about here, nothing extreme as that, but in similar feelings which are annoying and uncomfortable. Not quite as powerful as the poison, but it can make me feel afraid and out of control. I see it as a warning sign from my body to my mind to tell me that I need to slow down, or rest and take more care of myself.

My general triggers for feeling like this can be:

- **Drinking excessive alcohol**
- **Lack of sleep**
- **Working too much**
- **Being overtired**
- **Stress – and this can be work stress or personal stress**

Chapter 6

Knowing the difference between nerves and anxiety

Do you have an exciting date that you've been looking forward to and you can't stop thinking about it? Do you have a job interview for a position that's very prestigious and it would mean everything for you to get?

A couple of years ago I got offered an amazing job. Like the job of a lifetime for me. I got the opportunity to go out to the Caribbean to spend the weekend with Yoga Girl AKA Rachel Brathen to do an interview. New to journalism and also to yoga, I was absolutely petrified. I actually phoned my mum to ask her whether I should go or not – what about my 'anxiety'? I was already feeling anxious at the thought of the ten hour flight, hanging out with all these Scandinavian journalists (what if they didn't speak English?), the heat, the interview blah blah blah.

"Hannah you're going."

"Yes, of course I am"

Anyone new to journalism and new to yoga and presented with an opportunity that they'd wished their whole life for WOULD BE NERVOUS, that is absolutely given. But with my historical psychological baggage it made me stop and think and question myself - It was another case of fuck you anxiety!

These are common real-life situations and they do bring about what I now refer to as healthy anxiety, but are more commonly known as nerves. **Nerves are a good thing.** They can feel like a very mild version of anxiety in that you can feel breathless, stressed, under pressure and sometimes even induce a sweat. They are our body's natural way of telling us to 'up our game', do our best and **fight for what we want.** This is not what

people are talking about when they are talking about anxiety.

Anxiety as a label

I'm no longer ashamed of my anxiety, I'm (quite clearly as you can see here in this book) happy to talk about it and happy for people to know that I have it. But I won't let it define me or control me, not because I'm ashamed of it, but because it no longer affects my life in the way that it used to. I don't define myself as being anxious or having mental health problems or having anxiety, I'm just a person, who like lots of folks, gets a bit anxious at times.

This is my choice, some people do define themselves as having anxiety and that is because it is still a major factor in their lives.

I am incredibly lucky that I have a very loving and supportive family and network of friends, that I'm part of a wider supportive, open, forward minded community. Also that I have the resources to be able to get myself better using acupuncture and a whole host of other things.

I started the blog because I'd felt ashamed of what had happened to me and I felt that I had a guilty secret that I was carrying around, it was an incredible burden, I knew that if I was feeling like this then others must be also. As times have changed and we are living in this brave new world, people are becoming more and more open about their experiences, I felt that I finally had a safe place and platform to share my experience. Mainly because I wanted to help other people who may be experiencing such difficulties, as we know that **knowledge is power here.**

I think the thing that surprised me the most was the amount of people that contacted me after I'd written the posts, to say that they'd had very similar experiences -it affects so many people.

If you don't suffer from anxiety but you know somebody who does I hope this blog has given you a small insight into how that person may be feeling, just how terrifying and disabling it can be, and how a little love and care can mean everything.

I want to thank everyone and anyone who's read this for taking the time out to find out a bit more about something which affects a great many people.

I'm not a mental health practitioner, I am just talking about my own experience here, other people's experiences of anxiety may be quite different, I can only comment on my own.

Note* The photos in this book were taken on one of the best days of my life to date, in Aruba in the Caribbean. Something that I would have said no to if I'd have allowed my anxiety to control me.

The End



or maybe just the beginning...