CRUISING THROUGH CALAMITY
Handling ANXIETY in ANXIOUS TIMES

“Bev Aisbett is a gift. Her simple, easy-to-follow advice about anxiety is revelatory.”
Cameron Daddo

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Bev Aisbett is the author and illustrator of 16 highly regarded self-help texts for sufferers of anxiety and depression, most notably Living with IT and Taming the Black Dog. These books are distributed to health professionals nationwide and have been translated into four languages.

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Bev is also a recognised artist, and her soulful paintings have been regularly exhibited in Victoria and Tasmania.

Workshop and lecture information, and other anxiety resources:
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INTRODUCTION

CRISIS. It can happen to ANYONE.

And then it happened to EVERYONE!

I first started working on the idea of a book to help people with anxiety deal with BIG, SUDDEN upheavals in their lives when I was going through my own BIG, SUDDEN and very SCARY upheaval several years ago.

Little did I know then that, in time, a book on handling crisis would become as TIMELY and ESSENTIAL as this was to be.

When COVID-19 appeared on the horizon, our lives would change in ways never before imagined and on a scale we never could have predicted.

For many, and especially for people already struggling with ANXIETY, this has been an experience that strikes at the heart of some of their DEEPEST FEARS.

It is a ‘CALAMITY’.

And yet, not EVERYONE shares this view or is experiencing the PANDEMIC in the SAME way. For some people, there are actually POSITIVE aspects of the changes that have come with COVID-19. In fact, some people are actually SAILING through the crisis!
How are they doing this? And what might we LEARN from COVID-19 that can help even an ANXIOUS person move more CALMLY through whatever crisis might come their way?

That is what this book is created to explore – finding ways to NAVIGATE through the most TROUBLING times.
CHAPTER 1

It’s HERE!
At the time of writing, we are only a few months into one of the most SIGNIFICANT and LIFE-CHANGING events of our generation’s history.

In the manner typical of life’s big, nasty shocks, out of the blue, CORONAVIRUS marched into our lives and turned them upside-down in ONE FELL SWOOP.

For some people, this represented the arrival of their DARKEST NIGHTMARE – that TERRIBLE THING that had always lurked in the background, ready to pounce.

But for others, it really hasn’t been that BIG a deal. A few months of DISCOMFORT, some ADJUSTMENTS – that’s all. Some have even found that SLOWING DOWN their hectic routines can be RELAXING!

How could there be two such CONTRASTING responses to something so SIGNIFICANT?

From the very start, we saw people react to this crisis in markedly DIFFERENT ways.

Some went into FULL PANIC MODE ...
... while others were more MODERATE in their response.

For those people with a history of ANXIETY, this has been a very TESTING time; and even people who have not had pre-existing anxiety have been feeling some degree of anxiety for the FIRST TIME.

As far as CRISES go, COVID-19 is the FULL PACKAGE. Because of the virus, we have been challenged not only on FAMILIAR anxiety-provoking issues such as ILLNESS and MORTALITY, RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN and FINANCIAL STRESS but also, very SIGNIFICANTLY, we have been thrown upon OURSELVES more intensely than ever before through ISOLATION and SOCIAL DISTANCING.

However, as SWEEPING and EPIC as the COVID-19 crisis appears, it is still, by definition, a CRISIS and, like ANY crisis, it needs to be FACED and WORKED through.
And one could do this in a state of:

**PANIC** or **CALM**

Regardless of your PARTICULAR crisis, whether it be:

**ACCIDENT/INJURY** or **ILLNESS**
DEATH

RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN

MONEY ISSUES

JOB LOSS

AGEING

NATURAL DISASTER
or even a GLOBAL PANDEMIC ...

... how DEEPLY this impacts on you and how QUICKLY and EASILY you RESOLVE your crisis depends less on EXTERNAL factors and more on how you navigate your EMOTIONAL journey through this time.

Let’s take a look at the CORONAVIRUS journey as an example, to compare how different ways of seeing events – in ANXIOUS or NON-ANXIOUS ways – demonstrates this.
When the crisis FIRST unfolded, this was NEW and UNKNOWN territory. For ANXIOUS people, the UNKNOWN is the greatest threat, because the space that the unknown presents can all too easily be filled with NIGHTMARE SCENARIOS – even BEFORE they happen!

**ANXIOUS**

- This is a DISASTER!
- It’s going to be HORRIBLE!

**NON-ANXIOUS**

- It LOOKS serious but let’s WAIT and SEE what happens

![Diagram](image)

- What if EVERYONE gets SICK or DIES?
- By acting NOW, we can PREVENT a lot of deaths
In the early stages of a crisis, there is a tendency to become OBSESSED with the issue. In looking to others for REASSURANCE, we keep the problem at the FOREFRONT. It is ALL we TALK about, THINK about and SEE and, in doing so, we keep the FEAR cranked to the MAX!

**ANXIOUS**

Did I MISS something? Has something even WORSE happened?

**NON-ANXIOUS**

This is starting to TAKE OVER. It’s time to set a LIMIT.

When it comes to PRACTICAL MATTERS, these are interpreted as either evidence of even GREATER danger or sensible precautions to PREVENT danger.
And then came the BIGGEST challenge – LOCKDOWN! For SOME, this was another form of THREAT or even PUNISHMENT!
ANXIOUS

I can’t STAND being STUCK here! What will I DO?

This is TERRIBLE! It’s like being in PRISON!

I’m so BORED! I’ll go CRAZY if I have to do this any longer!

NON-ANXIOUS

There is PLENTY I can do that I’ve never had TIME for before.

I’m thankful that all I have to do to stay SAFE is stay home!

I’m amazed at how INVENTIVE people are!
And with ‘SOCIAL DISTANCING’, we have been cut off from human contact in a number of ways, which can be a HUGE challenge for many people.

**ANXIOUS**

How will I SURVIVE without seeing my loved ones?

**NON-ANXIOUS**

Isn’t it great we have the means to still keep in TOUCH?

I’m STUCK at home with my KIDS! It’s too much!

I LOVE having the chance to spend time with my kids!
Then at last, restrictions begin to EASE. And yet ...

ANXIOUS

I can’t believe we STILL have RESTRICTIONS!

NON-ANXIOUS

We’ve done WELL to have RESTRICTIONS eased in a fairly SHORT time!

And finally, it was time to contemplate the FUTURE.

ANXIOUS

Our way of life is CHANGED FOREVER! We’ll never get it BACK!

NON-ANXIOUS

Perhaps this will lead to POSITIVE CHANGES!
Can you see how your REACTION to a crisis is the thing that determines whether the experience is DEVASTATING or MANAGEABLE?

But surely it depends on the CIRCUMSTANCES!

It’s true that some situations are EXTREMELY challenging, but even so …

ANXIOUS

I’ll NEVER get over this!

NON-ANXIOUS

I can’t change what’s HAPPENED but I can control what I do NEXT!
We can learn a great deal about managing ANY crisis from the CORONAVIRUS experience, and we will be exploring some more of those lessons later.

In the meantime, the AIM of this book is to help you learn to RESPOND, rather than REACT, to whatever has come your way.

Let’s start at the BEGINNING, when your crisis first HITS.
CHAPTER 2

First IMPACT
Whether or not you are PREDISPOSED to anxiety, there are some moments in life that can rock even the most LAID-BACK person to the CORE.

And if you ALREADY have anxiety, you’re going to REALLY feel it!

It might be that you have LOST YOUR JOB, or are facing DIVORCE, or there may be an ILLNESS or even the DEATH of someone close to you that has thrown your life into CHAOS.

When your particular crisis FIRST lands in your lap, you’re going to wonder what HIT YOU. You’re going to experience some very STRONG EMOTIONS, such as:

- WORRY
- ANGER
- FRUSTRATION
- SORROW
- OVERWHELM
- RESENTMENT
And, of course, then ...

Far from being a BAD thing, experiencing some degree of anxiety at this point is a NORMAL reaction.

Anxiety arises when we experience what may be construed as a THREAT to our SURVIVAL. In response to the THREAT, your BODY and MIND enter a physiological process that is designed to PROTECT you.

The discomfort you feel is actually your body and mind PREPARING you to respond to danger in the best way to ensure your survival, which may be to either TACKLE the threat HEAD ON or HEAD for the HILLS! This is known as the ‘FIGHT or FLIGHT’ response.

Let’s take a look at what your body and mind are doing at this point:

- **RAPID HEARTBEAT AND BREATHING**

  Heartbeat and respiration rates increase to ensure that the body has the ENERGY and OXYGEN it needs to either run away or fight in response to the danger.
• **PALE OR FLUSHED SKIN**

As blood flow increases to the **MUSCLES, BRAIN, LEGS and ARMS**, the face may alternate between appearing pale (as blood moves away towards the limbs) or flushed (as blood rushes back to the head and brain).

• **DILATED PUPILS**

Dilation of the pupils lets more light into the eyes and results in **BETTER VISION** of the surroundings. This allows in more **VISUAL INFORMATION** to process the best action for self-preservation.

• **TREMBLING**

**MUSCLES** become tense so as to be primed for action. This tension can result in **TREMBLING** or **SHAKING**.
The above physiological changes are all perfectly NATURAL responses to DANGER.

They are HARD-WIRED into us, and they date back to earliest mammalian evolution. In ancient times we had to be ALERT to any potential DANGERS, such as:

**PREDATORS**

**ENEMIES**

**SHORTAGE OF SURVIVAL NEEDS**

**PHYSICAL DANGERS**
And the same INSTINCTIVE response still occurs when our sense of SECURITY is threatened.

Once the danger has passed, your system can reset – or SHOULD – unless there remains a THOUGHT that there is still DANGER, which is where the MIND comes in.

With ANXIETY, there can be a sense of ONGOING threat, that one is not SAFE or SECURE in GENERAL – and this leads to a state of HYPERVIGILANCE.

In other words, you STAY on the lookout for TROUBLE, and that trouble might be ACTUAL, POTENTIAL or even just IMAGINED!

And when you are on the lookout for TROUBLE, your BODY stays on the LOOKOUT too; so you FEEL all those same symptoms as described above.

As UNCOMFORTABLE as those symptoms are, they are fed by ONE THING and ONE THING only – the THOUGHT that there is something to FEAR!

The SYMPTOMS themselves are just a REACTION – it’s the STORY you attach to them that causes you to continue to see them as an indicator that there’s something WRONG.
You may FEEL it, you may even THINK it, but that doesn’t make it a FACT!

Let’s go back to the ANXIOUS/NON-ANXIOUS responses and see how they apply to a CRISIS when it first strikes.

The person who is NOT prone to anxiety is more likely to see the ANXIETY they feel as being REASONABLE under the circumstances. As a result, their experience of anxiety is more likely to be TEMPORARY and PASSING.

ANXIOUS

OMG! This is the WORST THING that could happen! Everything’s RUINED!

NON-ANXIOUS

WOW, that’s really SHAKEN ME UP! This is SERIOUS and needs my ATTENTION!
Right from the VERY START, the way you REPORT your crisis to yourself is going to influence how deep an IMPACT it has on you, and there are several factors influencing your reaction that we will now explore.

There are certain things anxious people do that KEEP them in an anxious state. These are:

They think in EXTREMES.

They have fierce INNER CRITICS.
They are fearful of **MAKING MISTAKES.**

They worry about how they are **PERCEIVED by OTHERS.**

They are easily **OVERWHELMED.**
They don’t TRUST themselves.

They have an UNHELPFUL THINKING STYLE.

Their worries are mostly FUTURE-BASED.
They lean towards PERFECTIONISM.

And they are often HIGH ACHIEVERS.

Not a very RELAXED way to live, is it?

Can you see how these factors may be FEEDING your anxiety?

Most significant is the fact that anxious people tend to respond to already STRESSFUL situations in an ANXIOUS way. By doing so, difficult situations feel more COMPLEX, unsettling experiences become more DISTURBING, and hope seems OUT OF REACH.
Something that is a CHALLENGE for most people too often becomes a CALAMITY for someone with anxiety.

**ANXIOUS**

I’ll NEVER get this report done on time! They’ll probably FIRE me!

**NON-ANXIOUS**

I doubt it I’ll get this done on time. I’ll see if I can get an EXTENSION

What we can glean from this is that it’s not so much what is HAPPENING to you that is causing your anxiety, but what you’re TELLING YOURSELF about what is happening, along with a generally STRESSFUL approach to life.

I can see what you’re saying but I’m still in SHOCK and feel VERY anxious!

Let’s start by looking at a few TECHNIQUES to help you CALM DOWN!
Whenever anxiety TAKES OVER, it’s important that you give yourself a chance to STEP BACK from the symptoms before you even TRY to get anything else sorted.

If you’re in the THICK of it, you won’t be able to THINK straight, let alone arrive at any solutions or helpful decisions.

The first step in managing any CRISIS you may be presented with is to CALM THE ANXIETY.

Here are a few techniques which will help bring down the intensity of the feelings.

1. BELLY BREATHING

Correct BREATHING is the first casualty when you’re in a MELTDOWN, and bringing your breathing back into line is the QUICKEST and EASIEST way to calm down.

Okay, take a big breath in and EXPAND your belly with the inhalation, so that you are getting MAXIMUM oxygen.
HOLD IN the breath for a moment and imagine that you are gathering up any FEAR and TENSION into a big BALL in your belly.

Now RELEASE that ball of stress with an AUDIBLE exhalation – a BIG SIGH.

Make it LOUD!

Most IMPORTANTLY – try to make the EXHALATION last LONGER than the INHALATION.

Don’t WASTE this chance to offload some of the PRESSURE. Make each breath COUNT! Repeat 3 times.

Make a point of slowing down your BREATHING and doing BELLY BREATHING during the following exercises as well.
BY BEV AISBETT

Living IT Up
Letting IT Go
Get Real
Taming the Black Dog
The Little Book of IT
Fixing IT
Recovery: A Journey to Healing
The Book of IT
Get Over IT
I Love Me
All of IT: A Memoir
Living with IT
30 Days 30 Ways to Overcome Anxiety
30 Days 30 Ways to Overcome Depression
Worry-Proofing Your Anxious Child
A book for anyone and everyone who finds themselves going through big change, hard times, bad luck or tough sh*t. A book for right now, as it turns out.

From Bev Aisbett, Australia’s bestselling author with decades of experience helping people through anxiety, depression and panic attacks, *Cruising Through Calamity* is a much-needed new book all about helping people manage their emotions through big changes, hard times and big challenges.

So whether you’re struggling during the pandemic or navigating a personal crisis, if you’re feeling anxious or overwhelmed and your emotions are getting the better of you, then this is the book you need right now to help you cruise through calamities, big and small.

Written in Bev’s clear, simple and straightforward style, using straight talk and humour to defuse, entertain, explain and inform, this is a most timely and topical book to help anyone feeling overwhelmed by uncertainty, difficult feelings and tough circumstances.

*Cruising Through Calamity* by Bev Aisbett
Available in your local bookstore