



/ The Anxiety Machine

/ b y CARRIE A. DYER

/ The Anxiety Machine

The Anxiety Machine is a systems-based psychoeducational and intervention tool designed to help clients understand how anxiety is generated and maintained through interconnected cognitive, emotional, physiological, and behavioral processes. This model draws from cognitive behavioral theory (Beck, 1976), which highlights the role of thought patterns in emotional experience, as well as contemporary understandings of anxiety as a feedback loop involving threat detection, arousal, and avoidance (Barlow, 2002).

The model is also informed by neuroscience and trauma research, which emphasize the role of the nervous system in amplifying and sustaining anxiety responses (Porges, 2011; van der Kolk, 2014). When individuals perceive threat—real or anticipated—the body activates protective responses that can reinforce anxious thinking and avoidance behaviors over time.

By conceptualizing anxiety as a “machine,” this tool externalizes the process and allows clients to identify specific entry points for intervention. Clients are supported in recognizing how components such as catastrophic thinking, physiological activation, and avoidance behaviors interact to maintain distress. This framework promotes agency by shifting the focus from “what’s wrong with me?” to “how is this system operating—and where can I intervene?”

References

Beck, A. T. (1976). Cognitive therapy and the emotional disorders.

Barlow, D. H. (2002). Anxiety and its disorders.

Porges, S. W. (2011). The polyvagal theory.

van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). The body keeps the score.

Anxiety Machine Worksheet

01. Map the Machine

Q: What are the parts of your anxiety loop?

___ Trigger: [_____]

___ Thoughts: [_____]

___ Body sensations: [_____]

___ Behaviors (avoidance, checking, etc.):
[_____]

02. Identify the Loop

Q: Where does it reinforce itself?

[_____]

03. Find Intervention Points

Q: Where could you gently interrupt the cycle?

[__]. Thought shift

[__]. Body regulation

[__]. Behavior change

[_____]

Draw your machine

04. Draw your machine:

. *gears*

. *loops*

. *arrows*

. *pressure points*

05. Connected Parts

. *Alarm System → threat detection*

. *Overthinker → catastrophic thinking*

. *Avoider → behavioral loop*