

# Anxiety Treatment in Brisbane: What Actually Helps — How ACT Can Help You Reclaim Your Life



by Vanessa Elliott  
Psychologist

Anxiety is one of the most common reasons people contact me for psychological support. However, many don't recognise they have anxiety straight away. More often, they describe feeling constantly overwhelmed, mentally exhausted, on edge, or unable to properly switch off.

It can also show up as overthinking, irritability, poor sleep, difficulty concentrating, or a constant sense of pressure that never really eases. By the time people come to therapy, they're often exhausted from trying to manage it on their own.

You might talk to a friend or loved one about it and they may say to you that you have anxiety. You might then think or even say, *"But I don't feel anxious."*

That's partly because anxiety does not always feel the way people expect it to. You might not experience obvious panic or fear. Instead, you notice yourself lying awake replaying conversations from days ago, bracing for things to go wrong before they've even started, or feeling stuck in a constant state of mental tension.

Over the years, I've worked with professionals, parents, students, and leaders who describe some version of this experience. Despite understanding logically that their thoughts may be exaggerated or unhelpful, they still feel unable to step out of the cycle. One of the most common things I hear is: *"I know it doesn't make sense, but I can't seem to stop it."*

That gap between what we intellectually know and what we emotionally feel is one of the most frustrating aspects of anxiety. It is also one of the most important things to understand if you want lasting relief.

This article is designed to help you better understand what anxiety actually is, why it so often resists our attempts to simply 'think differently' or rationalise it away, and how Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) offers a different approach — not by eliminating anxiety altogether, but by changing your relationship with it.

## When Worry Becomes Something More

There's a version of anxiety that's useful. It sharpens your focus before a presentation. It prompts you to double-check important details. It keeps you alert when something genuinely needs your attention.

But for many people, anxiety stops being helpful and starts to take over their life.

When anxiety becomes disruptive, it tends to look more like this:

- Worry that doesn't switch off, even when there's nothing immediate to fear or actually worry about
- A sense of being permanently "on edge" — tense, watchful, waiting for something to go wrong
- A mind that keeps jumping to worst-case scenarios, no matter how many times you talk yourself down
- Pulling back from situations, people or opportunities — not because you don't care, but because the anticipation feels too much or too difficult to sit with
- Physical symptoms that come along for the ride such as racing heart, tight chest, disrupted sleep, an unsettled stomach, increased need to urinate, shaking hands, sweating, feeling like breathing is more effortful

Anxiety is not simply overthinking or a lack of resilience. In many cases, it reflects a nervous system that has become highly sensitised — constantly scanning for risk, uncertainty, or the possibility that something might go wrong. Understanding that process is an important part of learning how to respond to anxiety differently.

## What's Happening Inside Your Body

Your nervous system has a built-in survival mechanism. When your brain perceives threat — real or imagined — it fires up what we call the fight-flight-freeze response. You may notice a range of physical experiences, such as a racing heart, faster or more effortful breathing, muscle tension, nausea, shakiness, sweating, or a sense of restlessness and physical agitation.

This system was designed to protect you from short-term, physical danger. The challenge is that it doesn't easily distinguish between immediate threats and something like a worried thought about tomorrow's meeting, and it doesn't differentiate much between what is actually happening and what is being anticipated.

When stress becomes chronic and there is little space to recover, this alarm system can start to feel like it is always on. You might notice yourself becoming more easily startled or reactive. You

might lie awake replaying conversations or mentally preparing for worst-case scenarios. You might also experience physical tension that lingers without a clear or immediate trigger.

Many clients start to believe that something is wrong with them as a result. This can lead to the assumption that their nervous system itself is the problem — when in fact it is doing exactly what it is designed to do. The challenge is that the nervous system can continue to respond in the present moment as though there is immediate threat or danger, even when the level of risk



no longer matches the intensity of the response — reacting to everyday situations in ways that are no longer necessary or proportionate.

### **Why "Just Think Positive" Doesn't Work**

If you've struggled with anxiety, you've probably been told — or even told yourself — to "stop worrying" or "just focus on the good things." And if you're reading this, you likely already know that doesn't work.

Trying to suppress or argue with anxious thoughts often makes them louder. It's a bit like being told not to think about a pink elephant — and now you can't think of anything else. The energy we pour into fighting our anxiety can become its own source of exhaustion.

This is one of the reasons I use ACT — because it takes a fundamentally different approach. And central to that approach is something called building psychological flexibility.

### **Building Psychological Flexibility: The Core of ACT**

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy — ACT, pronounced as the word "act" — is an evidence-based psychological approach that has become well-established in Australia and internationally. At its heart is a concept called psychological flexibility: the ability to stay present, open up to your inner experience, and take meaningful action — even when that experience includes anxiety, fear or discomfort.

Building psychological flexibility doesn't mean becoming someone who never feels anxious. It means becoming someone who can feel anxious and still choose what matters.

ACT doesn't try to get rid of anxiety. Instead, it asks a different question entirely:

*What if the goal isn't to feel less anxious — but to be less controlled by anxiety?*

While it seems small, that shift matters more than it might seem at first. Because when we stop measuring success by how anxious we feel — or no longer feel — and start measuring it by whether we're living in line with what we value — something changes.

### **Emotional Resilience Tools from ACT**

ACT works through several interconnected ideas. I want to walk you through them the way I'd explain them in a session — not with textbook definitions, but with the kind of language that actually makes a difference.

These are emotional resilience tools in the truest sense: not techniques to perform, but ways of relating to your inner world that genuinely shift things over time.

## Growing resilience despite Anxiety

### Noticing curiously

Huh, this is anxiety!  
I'm having a thought  
I won't cope.



### Self compassion

It's okay to feel this way.  
I can be kind to myself  
right now.



### Mindful presence

I'm here, right now.  
I notice what's around  
me and inside me.



### Willingness

I can feel this.  
I can let it be and  
still keep moving forward.



### Values connection

This matters to me.  
Let's see what step I can  
take next.



### Committed action

I can take this step.  
Even with anxiety,  
I move toward what matters.



## 1. Noticing thoughts instead of being fused with them

When anxiety is high, thoughts feel like facts. "Something bad will happen." "I won't be able to cope." ACT introduces what we call defusion — the ability to step back slightly and see a thought as a thought, not as truth. A shift as subtle as "I'm having the thought that I won't cope" rather than "I won't cope" can create just enough breathing room to choose differently. It doesn't make the thought disappear. But it loosens its grip.

## 2. Developing self-compassion in the face of anxiety

One of the quieter but more powerful parts of this work is developing self-compassion — learning to relate to your anxiety, and yourself, with more kindness. Most people I work with have spent years criticising themselves for feeling anxious. "I should be over this by now." "Why can't I just get it together?" That layer of self-judgement adds suffering on top of suffering.

Developing self-compassion doesn't mean excusing everything or letting yourself off the hook. It means treating yourself with the same care you'd offer a friend who was struggling. That shift alone can change the texture of the work considerably.

## 3. Mindful presence — coming back to now

Anxiety lives in the future — or in the past. "What if this happens?" Or "Why did I say that?" Mindful presence — bringing your attention back to this moment, this breath, this room — doesn't fix those concerns, but it gives your nervous system a break from the endless loop. And it creates space to respond rather than react.

This isn't about formal meditation unless that suits you. It can be as simple as noticing the feeling of your feet on the floor, or pausing to look around the room before you open a difficult email.

#### 4. Making room for uncomfortable feelings

One of the most counterintuitive things I ask clients to consider is this: what if trying to get rid of anxiety is part of what's keeping it going? ACT explores how to make room for difficult feelings — not because we like them, but because the constant battle against them is exhausting. When we stop fighting anxiety and allow it to be present without adding layers of self-judgement on top, something often softens.

#### 5. Clarifying values and taking steps that matter

Values are one of my favourite parts of the work — because they give us direction when anxiety is making everything feel foggy. Values aren't goals you achieve and tick off. They're ongoing directions – almost like a compass to guide us: the kind of partner, parent, colleague or person you want to be. When people reconnect with their values, something changes in how people relate to their anxiety or other experiences.

#### 6. Committed Action

Committed action is about learning how to move toward the life you want, even when anxiety is present. Many people find themselves waiting to feel more confident, certain, or emotionally ready before they take action. But often, confidence comes through doing the thing over time and not before it. This part of ACT focuses on taking small, meaningful steps guided by your values, while making room for the discomfort that may come alongside them. Sometimes those steps are outwardly significant, like having a difficult conversation or returning to something you've been avoiding. Other times they're much quieter and more personal. Over time, committed action helps people build trust in themselves — not because anxiety disappears, but because it no longer gets to make every decision.

**That's ACT in practice. It focuses on helping people notice and respond to anxiety in ways that support meaningful, lasting change.**

### What This Looks Like in Real Life

Let me give you a sense of how this plays out in the room.

I worked with someone not long ago who had been avoiding a difficult conversation at work for months. Every time they thought about it, anxiety would spike and they'd find a reason to delay. What we discovered together wasn't that they were weak or avoidant by nature — it was that they deeply cared about doing it right, about not damaging the relationship, about being fair. Their avoidance made complete sense. But it was also costing them — in self-respect, in the relationship itself, and in a growing sense of being trapped.

We didn't work on eliminating their anxiety about the conversation. We worked on helping them notice the anxious thoughts without being run by them, connect with why this conversation mattered (their values around honesty and respect), and take a step toward it — even with anxiety present.

That's ACT in practice. It is not dramatic and does not aim to "fix" anyone. The result is often gradual, meaningful, and sustained change.

## Anxiety, Life Transitions and the Brisbane Context

Anxiety often intensifies during periods of change — and navigating life transitions is something many of us see across our lives. A new role. A relationship ending. A move. A health diagnosis. Becoming a parent. Stepping into a leadership position for the first time.

Navigating life transitions with anxiety present can be challenging. Change brings uncertainty, which naturally activates the nervous system's threat response. In Brisbane, many people experience this alongside everyday pressures such as rising housing costs, increasing living expenses, work demands, and parenting or caring responsibilities. These pressures often leave little space to pause and process what's happening.

When these demands accumulate, and the nervous system is already on high alert, it can begin to respond to ordinary situations as if they were urgent or threatening. In this context, anxiety is understandable — even if it sometimes feels disproportionate to the present moment.

## From Survival Mode to a Growth-Focused Mindset

One of the things I find most meaningful about this work is watching people shift from a survival-focused way of moving through the world to something more expansive — what I think of as a growth-focused mindset.

A growth-focused mindset doesn't mean relentless positivity or pretending things aren't hard. It means approaching yourself and your challenges with curiosity rather than judgement. It means being willing to learn from discomfort rather than only trying to escape it. It means recognising that the same values that make you anxious — because you care, because it matters — are also what make your life rich.

Building psychological flexibility, practising mindful presence, developing self-compassion, navigating life transitions with greater steadiness — these aren't separate skills. They work together to bring more range and flexibility back into how people experience their lives.

## When It's Time to Seek Support

You don't need to wait until things feel unmanageable to seek support. Often, reaching out while anxiety is already affecting daily life — even in small ways — can help you regain a sense of balance and control, and may prevent anxiety from becoming more persistent over time.

It may be appropriate to seek support if:

- Anxiety is affecting your work, your relationships or your ability to do the things that matter to you
- You're avoiding more and more in order to manage how you feel
- Sleep, concentration or appetite have been disrupted for more than a few weeks
- You've tried managing it alone and feel like you're going in circles
- People around you have gently expressed concern

Your GP is a good starting point. They can assess what's going on, discuss options and, if appropriate, prepare a Mental Health Care Plan (MHCP) — which allows you to access Medicare rebates for psychology sessions.

If anxiety is affecting you, you can also reach out to iFlexis directly to discuss your situation and discuss how I can support you, particularly with anxiety and related challenges.

**If you're ever experiencing thoughts of harming yourself or others, please don't wait for a scheduled appointment. Call 000, go to your nearest emergency department, or contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.**

## Working Together at iFlexis — Hamilton and Brisbane

When you come to see me at iFlexis — whether at Next Practice Newstead in Fortitude Valley, Hamilton Health Hub, or via telehealth — the first session usually lasts around 90 minutes. This time gives us the space to explore not just your symptoms, but your life: your work, relationships, values, and the challenges you've been facing. You'll be in a comfortable, welcoming environment where you can feel at ease as we work together.

From there, we work together to find an approach that fits your experience. It's not a rigid program — we draw on ACT and other evidence-based methods, shaping them around your challenges, strengths, values, and goals. We check in regularly to see what is helping, what isn't, and what adjustments might support your progress.

The focus is on understanding your experience more clearly, noticing how anxiety shows up in your life, and gradually developing ways to respond that give you more flexibility and choice. The aim is not to eliminate anxiety entirely, but to help you live in line with what matters to you, even when anxiety is present.

As a psychologist based in Hamilton and Brisbane, I bring over 25 years of experience across clinical, corporate, and mental health settings. That experience gives me both a depth of knowledge and a practical understanding of the pressures — professional, personal, and cultural — that shape people's lives here. It also informs how I tailor therapy to each person, helping you navigate anxiety in a way that fits your life and what matters to you.

## You Don't Have to Keep Managing This Alone

Anxiety can make the world feel smaller than it needs to be. It can hold you back from conversations worth having, risks worth taking, and moments worth fully experiencing.

But it doesn't have to run your life.

If this resonates, you might notice a part of you wanting to reach out—and another part holding back. That hesitation is often anxiety. Yet moving toward what matters, even a little, is already meaningful. From there, we can explore ways to move forward that reflect your values, in a space where you feel heard and comfortable.

To book an appointment or ask a question, contact iFlexis by phone, email, or through the website. Sessions are available at our Hamilton and Fortitude Valley locations, and via telehealth.