

The Art of Anxiety: An Analysis of Female Anxiety Memoirs

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While the objective well-being of women as measured by career achievement and reproductive rights has increased over the past 35 years, women's anxiety levels continue to rise. Today, women are twice as likely as men to be anxious or depressed (World Health Organization 2020). Antonella Santuccioni Chadha, co-founder and CEO of the Women's Brain Project, suggests that this anxiety may be linked to women's traditional roles as caregivers ("What's Driving the Female Anxiety Epidemic?"), which places a burden on them to constantly perform and achieve success in both private and public spheres.

While women's anxiety has been studied from a health perspective, there is less known about how women cope with anxiety through writing memoir. My essay will analyze three memoirs to understand how memoir writing can help alleviate anxiety and delve into the factors that cause anxiety in the first place; specifically, I examine how personal writings about anxiety can help other women deal with their own anxiety. *On Edge: A Journey Through Anxiety* by Andrea Petersen (2017) is a memoir fueled by journalistic reportage and research in psychology, that provides insight into why women's anxiety is rising. Her memoir provides insight into the pressures placed upon women to be perfect. *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful: A New Journey Through Anxiety* by Sarah Wilson (2017) provides potential solutions to the problems presented by Petersen. Wilson encourages women to reject perfectionism to focus on a personal sense of growth by working with anxiety, not against the illness. Lastly, *Furiously Happy: A Funny Book About Horrible Things* by Jenny Lawson (2015) offers an upbeat and humorous perspective on contemporary notions of success and anxiety. Lawson rejects perfectionism and urges her readers to embrace their imperfections. She accepts who she is, quirks and all. Although different in style, all three memoirs are written by women who, in their own way, has felt burdened by the expectation to achieve more.

I will begin this paper by examining the pressure women feel to adhere to societal standards of perfection in the areas of beauty, and professional success: the drive to “have it all.” Next, I will show how the authors learn to accept anxiety rather than run or hide, empowering women with mental illnesses to live a better life. I contend that the contemporary women’s memoir about anxiety powerfully exposes the expectations placed on women to achieve perfection, and by exploring these memoirs, I argue against society continuing to place such a burden on women.

### Section 1: The Mask of Perfection – How and Why Women Hide Anxiety

More than ever women are under enormous pressure to be successful in every aspect of life. Petersen, Wilson, and Lawson, however, encourage women to shun perfectionistic striving for a more balanced lifestyle which they all argue will reduce anxiety. In her memoir, *On Edge*, Petersen explores the need for women to appear as though they have everything under control, using a personal experience where she felt compelled to hide her own anxiety. After an intense cardio workout, a large chunk of Petersen’s vision disappears, leaving her with a single thought: “*I am having a stroke. And I have to get to the hospital*” (Petersen 130). At the ER, her vision and blood pressure return to normal and she is discharged with no explanation for its cause or resolution. The doctors scold her rash reaction and the experience leaves her feeling “chastised and a bit sheepish but also a little angry” (132). It can be common for women to hide their anxious feelings to avoid judgement and negative implications. For Petersen, she worries that she would lose her job, her New York apartment, and scare away her loved ones. So, she decides “not to hit the pause button” on her life (132) and carries on. After her anxiety is dismissed

without cause or explanation, she pretends to feel fine, not for the benefit of herself, but to appear “normal” to others, such as medical professionals.

Women’s preoccupying concerns for how others regard them can lead to perfectionism. Petersen attests that anxious women may have an overwhelming sense of guilt, loss, or failure (150), which leads to perfectionism as compensation. In her memoir, Petersen defines perfectionism as “the will to achieve high standards combined with excessive self-criticism” (160). In her own experience, a mistake equates failure, and therefore, perfectionists “tend to doubt their actions” (161) as when she doubted the validity of her anxiety when she was disregarded by doctors. Perfectionism is also linked to the “belief that loved ones have high standards for you” (162). Again, women feel the constant need to perform on behalf of and for the benefit of others.

To understand the societal factors that cause women’s self-imposed drive for perfection, Petersen draws on psychological literature. Specifically, she writes about a small 2012 study that examined the intelligence of people with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). In the study, researchers found that patients with the most severe symptoms of anxiety generally had the highest IQs. The researchers argue how this may make evolutionary sense: anxious, high-strung people are needed because they are “constantly scanning the horizon for danger” to warn and protect others (168). But such hypervigilance is most prevalent in women, starting from a young age.

Petersen asks the profound question: Are women born more anxious, or are we raised that way? She analyzes several studies and concludes that women are more anxious than men because young girls are socialized to conform to stereotypes (i.e. that women are weaker and require protection) and fearful and avoidant behaviours are not discouraged. According to

Petersen, scientists believe that parents are often more protective of girls, whereas boys are taught to “suck it up.” As a result, boys grow in confidence as they learn to tackle difficult situations, but girls avoid experiences that makes them nervous (79). By school age, girls have learned to become vigilant to threat (82). The greatest problem, however, is when boys engage in risky behaviour, parents, especially mothers, adapt a “boys will be boys” mentality; if a girl gets injured, however, parents are more likely to *blame* the child. It is expected that girls should know to be more careful to avoid getting hurt or it is *their* fault. This makes girls more anxious about succeeding and worried about the prospect of failing. Petersen’s research reveals how parenting can burden girls to over-protect themselves, and others, from potential threats. This need to live a life without mistakes that begins in girlhood drives women to strive for constant success. Although Petersen’s experience and expertise in research presents the problem, she lacks potential solutions. Wilson, however, attempts to take away some of the blame placed on women by alleviating the demand to be constantly successful.

In her memoir, *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful*, Sarah Wilson writes about how striving for perfectionism led to a breaking point, and a decision to live an alternative, healthier lifestyle. Wilson can be categorized as a woman who “has it all.” She created a phenomenally successful career for herself in writing and television, becoming cohost on *MasterChef Australia* in 2009. She was the epitome of success, but she describes how her “anxiety didn’t so much scream in [her] ear as explode” (Wilson 173). Wilson recalls the moment when her success and relentless drive to conform to standards dictated by others caused her to erupt, ironically, at the show’s grand finale. She was in the shipping-container dressing room that she shared with her three male cohosts when the producers came in to “announce yet another compromising set of

instructions that would see [her] reduced to a vacuous talking head” (174). Her response was to mouth-off at the producers for pushing her too far and punching the wall of the metal shipping container, breaking two knuckles. After, she tells her meditation teacher, Tim, that she feels “deeply ashamed” and she has “never behaved like this in [her] life.” Her teacher laughs in response, saying that she was “the volcano that released the pressure valve” (174). Like Petersen, Wilson’s instinct was to blame herself, even though there were numerous external factors that caused her to break. In her memoir, she argues that an intense reaction should be an indication that something is wrong with the situation, not that there is something wrong with the individual. She furthermore suggests that we need to stop blaming women, and instead see the greater problem – women cannot be expected to constantly perform and pretend like nothing is wrong.

Women often strive outwards for a form of success that is defined by others. Part of women’s drive occurs when “a social role... is highly central to an individual's definition of self” which can become “particularly threatening to his or her self-concept and may consequently undermine psychological well-being” (Martire 148). Roles in society, be it a mother, wife, or a career, are important to a woman’s self-worth, and therefore women do not want their status compromised. Petersen showcases the problem of perfectionism; however, Wilson further provides ways for women to look inwards instead of seeking outwards for feelings of success and societal contribution. She quits the show and decides to start her own business, one that can allow her some breathing room. Unlike Petersen, Wilson changes course and chooses not to conform.

Sarah Wilson created her own business called “I Quit Sugar;” a company that promotes healthy and sustainable eating. As part of her 8-Week Program to cut sugar out of your diet, Wilson works in the option for sugar fixes, creating room for lapses. In becoming her own boss,

she alleviated the need for her to be successful 100 % of the time and encourages others to do the same. Her theory is that humans are bad at *not* doing something: put up a sign that says do not touch the wet paint, and we naturally want to touch it. The same concept can be applied to anxiety: tell someone not to worry, and they are still going to worry. Tell someone to feel more positive, and they will not naturally feel less anxious (Wilson 51). Anxiety cannot simply be replaced with positivity; instead, take some of the pressure off and allow yourself to “fail.” By doing this, Wilson shows how success can be achieved but without added pressures of perfection, changing the way we view success, especially for women.

According to Wilson’s research, unhappiness among women correlates with having more options. In her view, basically, the idea of “having it all” (i.e. career, kids, and using the rowing machine at the gym) also comes with the pressure that we *should* “do it all” (232). Not only that, but to balance it all perfectly. Instead of greater happiness, high levels of attainment in fact increase stress levels. Kelly and Houston describe what happens to driven women: they “experience greater neuroendocrine arousal because they have more taxing work and domestic experiences and less frequent and relaxing leisure activities” (1074). When women put all lot of effort into every aspect of their lives, home, work, and leisure, they can never relax. Wilson has a possible solution to the problem, however, and that is to achieve imbalance. Knowing that perfect balance is impossible to achieve, instead “tilt” towards activities and commitments you like and find meaningful (Wilson 232). Wilson’s concept of “tilting” can alleviate a lot of the pressures that society, and women, place on themselves to achieve success in every aspect of life.

Lawson’s memoir *Furiously Happy*, like Wilson’s, further exemplifies Petersen’s research about how pressures to succeed begin at a young age. Lawson shares memories about



her daughter, Hailey, that contrast the expectation to achieve early in life. Her belief is that “parents have very little input in creating the positive aspects of their children’s personalities” (Lawson 298), immediately removing some responsibility from mother’s shoulders in raising “perfect” daughters. She writes how some “think this is a cop-out that people like me use in order to justify the fact that I don’t have my child enrolled in 287 different extracurricular activities and lessons, and those people are right” (298). She writes that even if you enroll your child in something, they will still be missing out on learning to “twirl batons while reciting Mandarin poetry” (298). The rat race has already begun, and Lawson does not wish to be a part of it. Barnett and Baruch argue that individuals do not have enough energy to fulfill all their obligations, and it results in role overload, when demanding satisfactory performance in all areas becomes improbable (136). Since the overload is affecting women’s mental health, Lawson suggest women be more forgiving of themselves and accept their limitations. She claims to not fit inside a culture that demands constant success because she makes “inappropriate comments.” For example, when her daughter falls head over heels into a large rubber trash bin during dance class, her response to the other aghast parents was “wow. I love that kid, but she can-*not* hold her alcohol, am I right?” (Lawson 299). Her sense of humor shows that she will not let societal norms dictate her own ideas of self-worth. It is not to say, however, that Lawson does not feel the same pressures that all women do.

Despite her many accomplishments, Lawson admits that there are only a few days a month where she feels "good at life" (283). In her memoir, she shares her original blog post, in which she asked readers if they feel the same level of insignificance as she does. The response, she notes, was astounding. It appears that no one feels good enough, at least not all of the time, if not most of the time. But how could *everyone* be unsuccessful? Hewitt explains that a facet of

perfectionism is not necessarily a matter of being perfect (self-imposed) but *appearing* perfect, displaying a public self that does not disclose mistakes (1303). Such individuals are “actively trying to keep up appearances and live up to the unrealistic expectations imposed on the self by other people or by society as a whole” (1304). The fact remains that expectations for perfection are unrealistic; to present one’s self as perfect fuels a society that demands higher expectations of individuals. That is what is so admirable about Lawson revealing her mistakes. By showing she is not perfect, it removes the veil that makes other women strive for unobtainable ideals.

Lawson describes how it feels to constantly strive for an unobtainable ideal: "I'm always treading water and I'm always another half day behind in life" (284). Behind in what? Why do women always feel this way? Any success seems overshadowed by any self-prescribed failure, most likely caused by comparing ourselves to others. Lawson shares that she may seem happy and successful on the outside, but she worries that upon closer look everyone will see the cracks and dirt and the shame of a million projects that never get done (284). Lawson describes wearing a mask, a façade for others, similarly to Petersen, who also pretends to feel fine when she is anxious. But what would happen if we *all* removed our masks, to bravely show others our true selves?

Part of Lawson’s feelings of inadequacy, she admits, is that she compares herself to the shiny personas people present on social media as their true and authentic selves (284). Perhaps we have been so bombarded with what everyone else is doing and accomplishing, making us feel like we should be achieving “more.” But take it from Lawson – these internet personas are not real - no one else has it more together than you. We all have the same doubts and insecurities, she contends; an escape from relentless perfectionism, she argues, comes down to how brave one is to be willing to show their true selves, beautiful flaws and all. Lawson is bravely paving the

way down this less chartered terrain. She counters the notion of constant success by tearing off the mask. So, as Lawson argues, women must stop judging themselves against shiny online personas, or, get to know the people behind them well enough to realize that they too have flaws. Take her advice: “you'll have to just trust me when I say that you are worthy, important, and necessary. And smart" (291). Lawson has created a whole new way of viewing yourself and judging if you are successful – by accepting that you are *already* enough.

## Section 2: Do *Not* Turn That Frown Upside Down: Honesty for Ending Stigmatization

Stigmas against mental illnesses keep individuals isolated and ashamed, but through Petersen, Wilson, and Lawson sharing their struggles, the memoirs encourage women to accept their own anxiety. Petersen finds that the “most frustrating – actually heartbreaking” thing about having anxiety is that it separates her from those she loves, creating what she calls an “isolation chamber” (Petersen 188). What keeps those with mental illnesses feeling separated from those they love? According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated 25 percent of the worldwide population is affected by a mental or behavioral disorder at some time during their lives (Ahmedani 2001). Mental health issues are believed to contribute to 12 percent of the worldwide burden of disease, which is projected to increase to 15 percent by 2020. Despite this prevalence, individuals in need of care do not often seek support or follow through with treatment (4). Why is this the case? WHO (2001) cites stigma as the key barrier to receiving successful treatment. Stigmas are defined in the article as stereotypes or negative views that attribute persons or a group of people as inferior to societal norms (5). Therefore, women who do not comply to the standards feel inadequate. That is why the authors’ attempt to alleviate stigmas

may help others facing the same difficulties seek treatment. Especially for women who feel they must be strong to support others.

Petersen describes the experience of stigma when she feels wracked by fears and hides away, avoiding friends because wearing a mask is exhausting and revealing herself is too frightening (Petersen 188-89). What Petersen describes as “wearing a mask” is a way of hiding in plain sight. Instead of disappearing completely, leaving everyone to wonder what happened, Petersen can be around friends, but only by playing the role of a woman who “feels fine.” It can be easier to be alone rather than pretend to be fine for the benefit of other people. Kivity and Huppert state that people “tend to use safety behaviours to try to hide their social anxiety” (269), acting as though they feel fine. This is what cause individuals, such as Petersen, with high levels of social anxiety, to avoid people so that their anxiety is not evident in public. Treatments, however, encourage individuals not to hide their feelings, least of all from themselves, so that they can improve their everyday function. To alleviate greater stress on those with anxiety, we must alleviate the stigmas that prevent them from getting help.

However, Petersen has found a silver lining to her illness in how anxiety has given her “incredible moments of intimacy and love” (Petersen 189). She feels that anxiety has given her a greater point of connection with other people who are also suffering, and it has made her more empathetic. It is especially true now that she is more open about her feelings, making her the go-to girl for friends and family concerning anxiety (189). Ironically, her feelings of empathy, which often make women feel anxious, have provided her with the skills to be a great resource and comfort to others facing the same struggles. For Petersen, her burden, that is difficult to bear, is alleviated by the support network of others.

The end goal, she now realizes, is acceptance rather than transformation. According to Petersen, psychology previously focused on relieving symptoms, rather than trying to uncover the root cause of a patient's anxiety (99). The danger in a "cure over cause" mentality is it allows the problems to continuously reoccur. By ignoring what causes the anxiety, such as immense pressures to perform perfectly, we are refusing to take preventative measures, allowing anxiety to be common and normalized.

Alternatively, Petersen discusses how exposure therapy is far more effective. A form of this therapy is known as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which focuses on cognitive reappraisal: challenging negative beliefs (94). How does *not* changing negative emotions lead to a positive psychological outcome? It improves self-awareness, self-compassion, and behavioural flexibility, deflating one's negative evaluations of themselves (Troy 60). The authors' self-compassion, rather than transformation, for their anxiety may be the best course of action. However, Troy's laboratory studies "yielded inconsistent findings...acceptance does not exert a reliable effect on negative emotions" (60). For women, this means acceptance is not a matter of willing anxiety away but learning to live alongside it. The therapy is hugely empowering because it encourages women to face their struggles rather than pretend nothing is wrong.

Unfortunately, however, Petersen claims that "people with panic disorder" wait an average of ten years before discussing their symptoms with a medical professional, and those who seek help may not receive appropriate treatment (Petersen 100). That is why Petersen's honesty about her experiences seeking therapy may encourage other women to do the same, before anxiety interferes with their lives. Petersen can attest that trying to get rid of pain only amplifies it (106). That is why she suggests an alternative therapy: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The difference from CBT is that you not only accept your feelings, but you are

taught to distance yourself from anxious thoughts to view them more objectively (106). It seems that we may often be searching outwards for causes that make anxiety not women's fault. But therapies can help you to understand that there is no one to blame, not even you. Instead, you can gain the skills to work through it.

Petersen also claims that she relies on her girlfriends more than she relies on therapists or doctors (190), which shows the power of collectivity – and even, of sisterhood. Feelings of anxiety and inadequacy seem to be a common factor among women but coming together can perhaps alleviate some of the stresses that we place on ourselves. Research proves that people with a lower quality of friendships have higher rates of anxiety (Petersen 191). What about those who do not have the support of a close-knit family, or those whose anxiety has driven them from the opportunity to form lasting friendships? While Petersen turns to friendships, Wilson shows how a woman can help herself.

Wilson can relate to Petersen: she always had an overwhelming need to feel connected to others, but she feared anxiety would interfere. She asks an acquaintance, Australian actor Jessica Marais, if given the chance, would she press a button that could get rid of her anxiety. The answer was a resounding “no.” Marais claims that having anxiety does mean that you will be compelled to connect with other beings on a profound level, but her mental illness is also what brought her closer to herself. Similar to how Petersen felt closer to others, Wilson agrees that the journey *through* your mental illness is what matters, and once you begin to notice it, instead of operating on autopilot with it, it becomes a friend (Wilson 114). Wilson then takes accepting her anxiety one step further than Petersen and tries to befriend it. In getting closer to herself, she realizes that she does not have to depend on anyone else. Perfectionists can change their negative

beliefs to better cope by alleviating the need for reassurance from others and seeking further self-validation (Wu and Wei 276). Wilson suggests alleviating some stress by focusing inwards instead of on others' expectations.

Wilson's argues that women cannot rely on others for help when they feel battered by anxiety. In her memoir, Wilson describes how at the age of four, she watched a children's television show with a puppet named Mr. Squiggle, a man from the moon, who visited Miss Jane. Mr. Squiggle was often overly excited and nervous, and Miss Jane would have to hold his hand to keep him from floating back up to space. "What would I do without you, Miss Jane?" the puppet asks. In reflecting on the show, it occurs to Wilson how much she would love a Miss Jane: a rock-solid female friend, or partner, to keep her grounded when she felt herself floating away. However, Wilson asserts that when you have a mood disorder, there are few people strong enough to be your anchor or patient enough to hold you through the many ups and downs. It is expecting too much of any one individual (Wilson 116). What Wilson concludes is that to live a grounded life, you must become your own Miss Jane.

This is a profoundly powerful statement for women. Instead of depending on anyone else, the author proclaims to trust in the person who cares about you and knows you more than anyone else – yourself. Too often, women are expected to hold the weight of everyone else, without considering the importance of holding herself first. In other words, instead of depending on anyone else, like a significant other, and waiting to be saved, women can be their own heroines. In accepting this, Wilson shows other women how to accept themselves, without thinking someone else can help you or that you should change for others.

Wilson does, however, agree with Petersen about self-acceptance of one's anxiety. For a wellness column she was writing, Wilson had the opportunity to interview His Holiness the

Dalai Lama. Since he is so busy, she could only ask him one question, which was “How do I get my mind to shut up?” His Holiness giggled and told Wilson that “there’s no use...Silly! Impossible to achieve!” (2). If there was ever a reason to stop being hard on yourself, it is that even the Dalai Lama cannot calm his mind. For Wilson, His response “came with a screaming, cap-lettered subtext: YOU’RE OKAY AS YOU ARE!!!” (3). What this means for Wilson “and everyone else out there whose whirring thoughts keep them awake until 4 am” is “you can take a deep, free breath...release your grip a little and get on with better things” (3). In other words, you do not need fixing. Wilson’s willingness to accept anxiety as part of her works in tandem with Petersen’s therapy theory ACT – it is better to accept your anxiety rather than work against it. Wilson takes the theory one step further and believes that “fretting *itself* can be the very thing that plunks you on the path to a great life” (3). And that, is making the beast beautiful.

Lawson’s memoir relates to Petersen’s theory of acceptance and, like Wilson, she strives to improve life with anxiety. Her mentality is a notion she gained from her mother: “It’s all in the way you look at it” (Lawson 265). By changing her perspective, Lawson shows how anxiety can be something positive. For her, “the sadness and tragedy in [her] life made the euphoria and delicious ecstasy that much more sweet” and it gave her “more room to grow and enjoy the beauty of life that others might not ever appreciate” (265). What some might see as a curse, Lawson has turned into a blessing. A chance to let go of the mundane and constant productivity to appreciate all the little joys that make up a life. For Lawson, she admits that she has “had a very odd and strange life, filled with more ups and downs than the average woman could shake a stick at” (265), but that is what makes her the person she is today. And if she did not share her experiences with anxiety then there would be far fewer individuals helped today.



Lawson reaches people on an intimate level through her writing. She loves “the hundreds of strange and wonderful misfits” she has met at book launch events, what she calls, “a special tribe of people” (239). Through writing memoir, Lawson has created a sense of community where people feel less isolated in knowing there are others who feel the same. And with so many people affected by anxiety, are they really misfits? Lawson also credits the internet for its support network. She describes Twitter as “having a large, invisible gang of equally messed-up people who will hide with you in bathrooms and make you laugh under the pillow fort you built” (244). It makes her feel less lonely when everyone can be alone together, helping likeminded individuals to find each other. It is this network that allows Lawson to turn her horrific experiences into something humorous.

Unlike Wilson, Lawson believes that treating anxiety and depression should not be left to the individual. But like Wilson, her inspiration also comes from a childhood cartoon. She recalls how “Smokey the Bear was all, ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT FOREST FIRES, and I was like, “Shit. *Only me?* Because that really seems like it should be more of a team effort” (Lawson 318). Lawson raises a vital point about how anxiety should also be a team effort. Anxiety is not your fault. To quote Lawson, it would be like “feeling guilty for having brown hair” (318). You cannot feel guilty for something out of your control. So, Lawson says, “stop blaming the victims, bears.” How can one person alone decide what is best for them? It only adds to the pressures to be a better, more productive person, and it is destined for failure.

Lawson writes that she is often asked if she regrets coming out having a mental illness – if the stigma is too much to handle. On the contrary, she says that what she got “back in return for being honest about [her] struggle was an enormous wave of voices saying, “you’re not alone,” and “we expected you were crazy anyway. We’re still here” (319). She continues to write

about her struggles because, like when Petersen became open about her anxiety, it connects people. Accepting others' flaws gives you a chance to accept your own. And Lawson's movement has gone far beyond herself. She keeps what she calls "The Folder of 24": twenty-four people sent Lawson letters about how they were actively planning their suicide, but changed their minds "not because of what [she] wrote on [her] blog, but because of the amazing response from the community of people who read it and said, "Me too" (319). Lawson shares her struggles, so others can share theirs. In sharing experiences with anxiety, lives were saved "because people were brave enough or compassionate to convince others of their worth" (320), and this is the power of many gathered voices.

Kivity and Huppert's findings show that people with social anxiety may not use reappraisal techniques (challenging negative beliefs), even if they are equipped with the tools. In other words, many individuals do not believe that their anxiety is malleable or can ever be changed (270). This prevailing belief, which brings many women suffering is why these anxiety memoirs in which women share how their circumstances *did* improve, despite their anxiety, are so imperative: these memoirs show other women that everyday living with anxiety can be improved. Things can get better. To accept anxiety does not mean to succumb to the disorder. Ending stigmas has saved lives and this shows the importance of continuing the conversation. So, the writers agree, communities must keep talking!

How does this relate to Wilson's theory to be one's own hero? Lawson makes a brave confession: "I want to run away and scream and have someone else rescue me, but the only one who can rescue me is me" (Wilson 243). Yes, go Miss Jane! But even if you should be your own Miss Jane, should we not all have people to back us up? With authors like Lawson, and access to the internet, you do not need the people who support you to be in your closest circle. If you

understand that this is a journey you must ultimately walk alone, then you are heading down the right path, and there will be others to cheer you on along the way.

### Conclusion: Don't Back Down Now

The three memoirs, *On Edge* by Andrea Petersen, *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful* by Sarah Wilson, and *Furiously Happy* by Jenny Lawson, although different in approach, argue that the pressures placed upon women to achieve constant success in every facet of life must be alleviated to reduce anxiety levels. The memoirs share the view that anxiety disorders have become all too common, while blame is placed on women individually. Instead, the authors concur, the influx of anxiety should be a warning sign of a larger, collective problem, an indication that something is wrong socially. We are stamped with disorders as a “cure” instead of examining the cause. It is through revealing the personal struggles of living with an anxiety disorder in memoir that we gain insight into where our anxiety comes from and that the stigmatism must end.

Their stories show that there is nothing wrong with who you are, and you do not require changing. However, there are ways to live a better life with anxiety if we can stop being hard on ourselves. It should not be acceptable for women to place such high expectations on themselves to “have it all.” These brave writers, Andrea Petersen, Sarah Wilson, and Jenny Lawson pave a new path for women. One that allows room for error and individuality, instead of conforming to a set of preconceived standards demanding an unobtainable perfection. These memoirs show readers how to face anxiety head-on and encourage women to do the same by rejecting perfectionism and embracing their mental illness as a part of themselves. The authors empower

women to alleviate some of the pressure placed upon them, but also to embrace the beauty of their anxiety instead of hiding in shame. As Petersen argues, we need strong people! But as Wilson and Lawson step back when societal demands compromise their mental health, knowing when to back down is also vital.

This essay is only the tip of the iceberg of what needs to be a much deeper conversation. While this essay has examined the burdens placed upon women in a privileged context, there are many different causes of women's anxiety that can be explored. Research suggests that anxiety levels can be especially high for women who are marginalized because of sexual orientation, ethnicity, and religion. There should be further research conducted about the preventative measures that may help alleviate anxiety in the next generations. It is never too late, however, to face anxiety. As these memoirs argue, women must collectively continue to have open conversations to better support one another.

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