

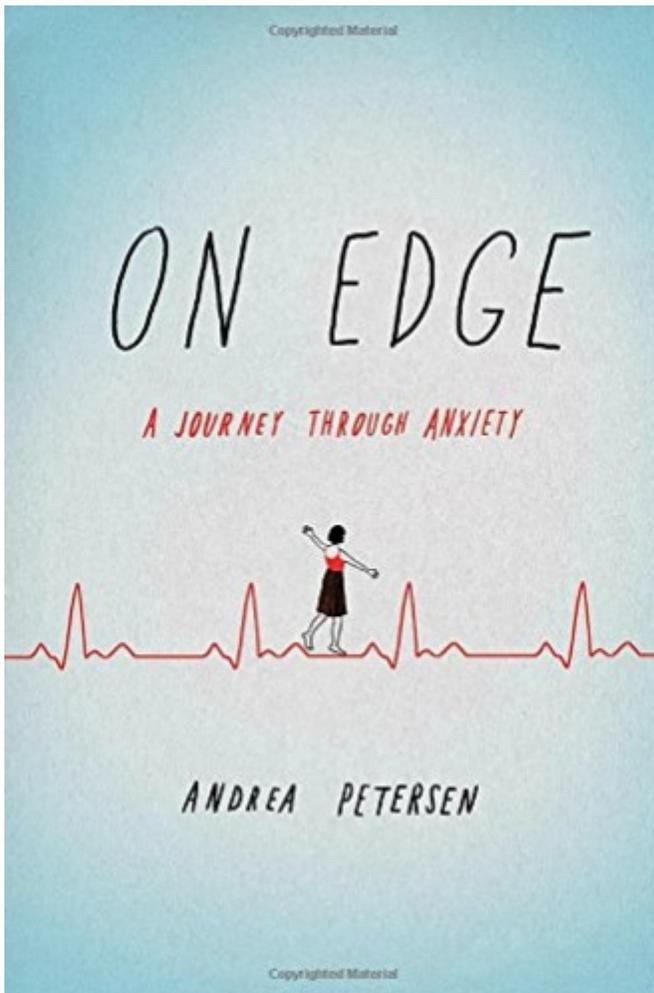
Rising anxiety

We live in an anxious age. But it's worse for some than others.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

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In Review



On Edge

A Journey Through Anxiety

by Andrea Petersen

Crown

I'm glad to know that I'm not alone in my recent spate of anxious feelings. Apparently, anxiety is all the rage these days. Two different friends in the last few days told me they'd seen a recent news show segment claiming that anxiety now surpasses depression in terms of the number of people in America afflicted. This rise in anxiety, one friend explained, is thought to be related to the ubiquity of information at our fingertips, our excessive consumption of it 24/7, and the difficulty assessing whether it is true or false.

Andrea Petersen, a journalist whose new book traces her own experiences of anxiety through its history, cultural resonances, and common treatments, wouldn't necessarily disagree with this explanation. But the full picture she paints is far more nuanced and complex. Situational anxiety (e.g., I wonder why that one lymph node has been swollen for several months, or I worry that the current president is going to destroy our democracy) is different from generalized anxiety, social anxiety, phobias, or any other number of disorders that now afflict so many people. It's mostly the latter forms of anxiety that Peterson covers in this book, the kind of anxiety that at its worst paralyzes people and at its mildest still sabotages them from living fully and joyfully.

Anxiety, Peterson suggests, is part nature and part nurture. There are genetic tendencies (and the story of her grandmother's attempt to burn down the house with her children in it makes Petersen's own stories of panic attacks seem downright mild). But studies have also shown that the way we raise our children—and specifically, how we conform to social and gender expectations ranging from subtle to blatant—can contribute to the development or prevention of anxiety in teenagers and young adults who are genetically or temperamentally prone to it. Childhood trauma can play a role in the development of anxiety, and anxiety may also be transmitted from a pregnant mother to her baby in utero.

Petersen clearly explains the brain mechanisms that can cause an anxious person to experience physical symptoms or be immobilized by panic. When the amygdala is overactive and the prefrontal cortex is less active, people have trouble turning off their fears and tend to stay in fight-or-flight mode. Petersen walks her readers

through the laboratories of scientists whose research focuses on anxiety and its extinction, explaining what they've learned from their studies and how they've created and evaluated various treatments—from cognitive behavioral therapy to medication to socialization exposure to yoga.

The book ends on a hopeful note, but it's not a lighthearted or happy read. Just reading it made me feel anxious on some deep level. But it also made me feel relieved that my own anxiety is mild compared to the kinds of anxiety that animate the book. I should have already known that. I used to be a campus pastor on a college campus whose unofficial motto is "[where fun comes to die](#)" and where undergraduates wear t-shirts that boast "If I'd wanted an 'A' I would have gone to Harvard." In that context, significant anxiety disorders were rampant.

Petersen notes that 17% of all college students were diagnosed with or treated for anxiety last year. After interviewing three such students at a café near her alma mater, Petersen notes that "these young people are energetic, passionate, and fearless." *Fearless* may seem like a strange word to describe someone who is driven by anxiety, but I know just what Petersen means. I observed among my campus ministry students that those who could honestly name their anxiety in conversation with people they trusted were the ones who were best able to work against it with concerted, fierce effort.

If pastors, caregivers, teachers, and friends of those who are anxious read Petersen's book and begin to understand the complexity of anxiety, communities may emerge in which fear and fearlessness can work together to alleviate the worst of anxiety's damage. If Petersen's statistics are accurate—that one in three Americans (and 40% of women) have an anxiety disorder at some point in their lifetime—there is much damage for those communities to alleviate.