



▲ Instead of putting off tasks, Rosie Mullender is learning to confront them head on. Photograph: Michael Leckie/Guardian



Project: prevention

# The joy of feeling the fear: how to kick anxious avoidance to the curb

From avoiding a big work project to ignoring bleeding gums, some of us are experts at putting things off. Chronic 'anxious avoider' Rosie Mullender finally learns how to dig her head out of the sand

by Rosie Mullender

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About this content

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When I was a teenager, I was a classic homework avoider. I knew that if I simply made a start on it I'd feel 10 times better, but it still felt easier to ignore it until the last minute.

Now that I'm older and wiser, I've learned the pointlessness of putting things off. I tackle my to-do list methodically, and I'm way better at not sticking my head in the sand. Except ... who am I kidding? The writing project that makes me freeze whenever I think about it; the mortgage application tab that's been open for weeks; the bleeding gums that, logically, aren't going to heal themselves ... I often find myself putting off the tasks that make me anxious in favour of ticking something simple off my to-do list. What's that? We need more loo roll? Ah, shame, that other stuff will just have to wait.

It's a common enough problem. Avoidance coping is our primitive brain's way of protecting itself, says Joshua Fletcher, anxiety counsellor and panic expert. "We avoid things because the threat response in our brain tells us to," he adds. "Sustained stress can trigger a threat response that creates the need to run to safety.

"And it doesn't just apply to major stresses, such as a job interview, it applies to low-level things, too. Your brain will tell you to avoid them to be safe - which is why some people procrastinate and put things off."

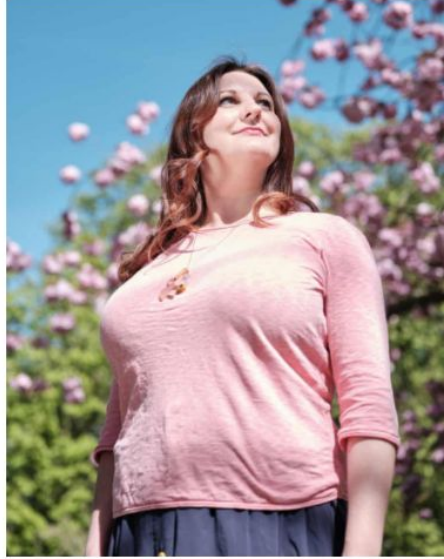
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It's good to know my anxious avoidance is simply nature kicking in and, ergo, not my fault. But if that's the case, what can I do to stop it happening? I'm hoping Fletcher will recommend some lovely meditation, or gentle journaling. But no: apparently my best option is to feel the fear and do it anyway, no matter how uncomfortable that might be.

"All those things on your to-do list aren't dangerous," he says. "So you need to show that to the threat response - by going towards what your anxiety is telling you to avoid. Eventually, your brain will acknowledge that you've stopped avoiding those things, and switch off its threat response. OK, so you're going to be anxious the first few times, but that's not going to hurt you."

With Fletcher's advice ringing in my ears, I start with my mortgage application. I've been putting it off, knowing I'll start worrying about the outcome as soon as it's sent. But I grit my teeth, fill in the form and hit send. As predicted, anxiety hits immediately afterwards - but I remind myself it won't kill me, before adding a big fat tick to my to-do list.

**“  
You need to  
show your  
brain that  
your to-do  
list isn't  
dangerous**



Next, I tackle a thorny work project I've been putting off. But where to start? In cases where it's possible, Fletcher recommends "prepping", which might involve reaching out for help. "For example, if you're worried about seeing the dentist because you don't know what will happen, uncertainty can increase your anxiety," he says. "So you could ring the dentist and ask for some factual reassurance."

Taking this advice to heart, I email my editor for some guidance, and quickly realise I should have done this days ago.

I didn't think of it sooner, because I was trying not to think about it at all. But suddenly, the project feels a lot less intimidating, and I find I'm finally able to knuckle down.

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Lastly, it's time to address my bleeding gums. I've ignored this issue for years, because surely it'll eventually go away? Of course it won't and, in fact, a spot of "prepping" (Googling) informs me that the bleeding could be a sign of gum disease, which, if I continue to ignore, could cause further dental problems down the line.

The good news is, my research also tells me that there's a simple solution: Corsodyl toothpaste, which is clinically proven to help stop and prevent bleeding gums. So I pick it up on my next trip to the shops. And, just like that, brushing my teeth no longer makes my heart pound. Within days, there's no more blood, and that knot of fear is now replaced with a twice-daily reminder that I can overcome even the most anxiety-inducing of tasks.

This past week, I've discovered that tackling the issues that make your stomach squirm is, unsurprisingly, pretty uncomfortable; but the satisfaction you feel when you get to the other side makes it well worth the effort.

My anxious avoider tendencies are far from cured but, task by task, it's getting easier to push on through. And if that means that we're sometimes out of loo roll because I was taking care of the big, important stuff, so be it.

*Healthy gums don't bleed - if yours do, it's time to take action. Brushing with Corsodyl toothpaste twice a day is clinically proven to help stop and prevent bleeding gums - so that's one thing off your to-do list. To find out more, head to [corsodyl.co.uk/products/toothpaste](https://corsodyl.co.uk/products/toothpaste)*

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