The Anxiety Gates

Anxiety is not something to be eliminated. It is a built-in alert system, and like any alert system it is only useful if it is listened to and acted on rather than silenced or ignored. The difficulty most people face is not that they feel anxious. It is that they have no structured method for working out what the anxiety is telling them, so they either suppress the feeling or are pulled along by it without ever resolving what caused it.

The gates give you that structure. They are five questions, asked in a fixed order, each one testing a specific possibility before you move on to the next. Worked in order, they mean the anxiety is met directly rather than avoided, and that whatever it is pointing at is genuinely addressed rather than endured.

This guide sets out the sequence and then shows you how to rehearse it. That second part matters as much as the first. A sequence you have to work out for the first time while you are anxious is a sequence you will not use.

The Strategy at a Glance

A summary of the whole method, to orient you before you read the detail and to refer back to once you have learned the sequence.

Purpose	Working out what your anxiety is pointing at, and resolving it at the earliest point where resolution is possible.
What it is	Five questions, asked in a fixed order, each one testing a single possibility before you move on.
The habit underneath	Stop and check. Face the signal rather than turning away from it.
The sequence	Is this important? Am I ready? Is there something I can do? Is there an external resource? If none of those apply, resign from the task, change it, or pass it on.
Every gate has an exit	Stop at the first gate that resolves it. You are not required to reach the end.
The pivot	Gates one to four work within the rules of the situation. The fifth changes the rules, and carries the cost of a second-order intervention.
Governing principle	Test each gate honestly before moving to the next. Never assume an answer you have not checked.
When to use it	While the anxiety is still in your thoughts, or in your body, and you can still think clearly.
When not to	Once clear thinking has gone. Bring your system down with tension and breathing first, then come back to the gates.
When to practise	Daily while calm, on small material, until the sequence runs without prompting.
Time required	Seconds for a run in the moment. Ten to fifteen minutes for a written run on something substantial.

What Produces the Feeling

Anxiety has three characteristics, and all three are present every time.

The first is **importance**. The second is **readiness**. These two work as a pair. If something matters to you but you are fully prepared for it, you will not feel anxious. If something does not register as important at all, you will not feel anxious either, because there is nothing to prepare for. It is the combination of mattering and not yet being ready that produces feeling.

> *"This is an adventure that every human being must go through—to learn to be anxious in order that he may not perish either by never having been in anxiety or by succumbing in anxiety. Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate."*
> ***— Søren Kierkegaard, 1844***

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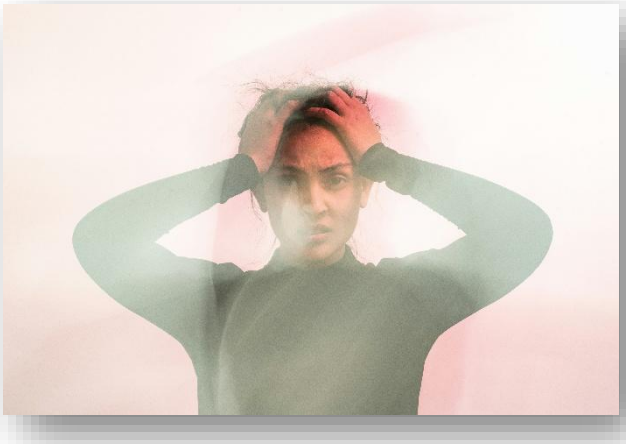
third is **imagination**. Anxiety is always anticipation. always about something that is going to happen rather than something that is happening now, and holds however close the event is. It could be a second away, standing at the side of the stage about to walk out and speak, or it could be weeks away. Either way the event has not happened yet, so the experience is, by definition, imagined. It makes no difference whether your anticipation turns out to be accurate or pure fantasy that never comes to pass. The anxiety is generated by the act of imagining the future, not by the future itself.



Fear is different in kind, not merely in degree. It is a direct biological reaction to something present: a danger actually in front of you, here and now. If a bus is about to hit you, getting out of the way is fear acting on a real and present threat. Anxiety has no equivalent object in the room with you.

This matters for the gates, because it tells you what you are actually assessing. Both importance and readiness are judgements you make through your own belief system, about a future you are imagining, not perceptions of something you can immediately verify. That is precisely why they can be tested, and why testing them can change the feeling.

The Habit Underneath Everything: Stop and Check

Before any of the five gates, there is one habit the whole method rests on: stop and check. Face the signal rather than turning away from it.

Avoidance is the exact opposite of that habit, and it is what allows anxiety that could have been resolved at the first gate to escalate instead. Not looking because you do not like what you might see is what keeps your internal alarm blaring at you. Deep down you already know. Not looking is a short-term tool that will very likely make the situation considerably worse.

Avoidance and filtering are not the same activity, and the difference is worth holding on to. Filtering is a necessary part of daily life. You cannot attend to every stimulus, process every demand, or act on every signal that arrives. Prioritising what to attend to and what to set aside is not avoidance. It is efficiency, and it is healthy.

The line is crossed when avoidance becomes automatic rather than chosen: when you do not deal with something simply because it is difficult, and without actively acknowledging to yourself that you are avoiding it. Conscious, acknowledged avoidance, where you know you are setting something aside and

intend to return to it, works perfectly well as a short-term strategy. Unconscious, habitual avoidance is ignoring the alarm to get through the day, and it builds pressure. It does not resolve anxiety. It escalates it.

Before You Begin: Health and Safety

The first two gates ask you to assess your own judgement and your own readiness. If you run a harsh internal commentary, those questions can turn into an occasion for self-attack rather than assessment: not "am I ready?" but "why am I never ready?". The questions are diagnostic, not moral, and they are asking about one task rather than about you. If you find the sequence reliably ending in a verdict on your character instead of an outcome for the task in front of you, stop working it alone and raise it in session.

The fifth gate can carry real consequences: leaving a course, stepping back from a role, handing something to somebody else. Reaching it honestly on paper is one thing, and acting on it is another. A decision of that size deserves a conversation before it is carried out rather than after. The gate tells you the direction. It does not oblige you to move today.

The gates work on something that has not yet happened. Where what troubles you has already happened, this is the wrong tool, and it will produce answers that do not fit. That material belongs elsewhere.

When Not to Use the Technique

- Not while anxiety has moved past the point where you can think clearly. The gates need a working mind to answer them, so bring your system down first and come back.
- Not on something that has already happened. Anxiety is anticipatory, and every gate tests a future you are imagining.
- Not as a way of talking yourself into things. If every run ends at "push on regardless", the sequence is being used to override the alarm rather than read it.
- Not in an actual emergency. What is in front of you then is fear rather than anxiety, and it calls for action rather than assessment.
- Not alone, where an honest answer at the fifth gate would significantly change your circumstances.

The Five Gates

Work them in strict sequence. Test each one before moving to the next.

The First Gate: Is This Important?

The first gate asks one direct question: is this actually important?

You begin here because anxiety sometimes arises from a misreading of the situation. Stopping and genuinely asking whether the importance you have assigned is accurate can be enough on its own to settle it. If, on reflection, the matter is not as important as it first appeared, the anxiety has nothing left to stand on.

If the answer is no, stop. There is nothing further to do.

If the answer is yes, move to the second gate.

The Second Gate: Am I Ready?

The second gate asks: am I ready for this?

Approach it honestly, because sometimes the answer is genuinely yes. If you have been preparing for an exam for weeks, have covered the material and know that you know it, you may still notice anxiety rising as you walk towards the exam room, even though you are in fact ready. In that situation you can challenge the anxiety directly. Your system is telling you this is important and you are not ready. The honest answer is that readiness has already been achieved. This is anxiety doing its job, which is to prompt you to level up your attention.

Challenging the anxiety on that basis, with a true and considered answer, allows it to reduce, because the underlying concern has been addressed rather than dismissed. The alternative, letting the nerves run in the background because the check-in is too uncomfortable to make, buys you hours of stress that was in no way needed.

If the honest answer is yes, stop. The anxiety has done its job by prompting a check, and the check has confirmed that all is in order.

If the honest answer is no, move to the third gate.

The Third Gate: Is There Something I Can Do?

The third gate asks: is there an action I can take, now or with the resources available to me, that would move me from not ready to ready?

That might mean learning a skill. It might mean taking a direct, practical action. It might mean a short-term adjustment that compensates for the gap rather than closing it: taking notes into a presentation rather than relying on memory, arranging extra lessons with a tutor before an exam, or completing a short course before starting a new role. The test is whether something within your own ability and resources would genuinely close the distance between where you are and where you need to be.

If the answer is yes, identify the action and take it. The anxiety tends to reduce, because the problem has been solved rather than avoided. Stop here.

If the answer is no, and there is no internal action available, move to the fourth gate.

The Fourth Gate: Is There an External Resource That Could Help?

The fourth gate asks: is there something or someone outside my own immediate ability that could help me become ready?

That might mean asking somebody for help. It might mean acquiring something you need. It might mean drawing on a person, a service, or a piece of equipment that sits outside your current capability but is within reach if you go and get it. Where the third gate looks inward at what you can do yourself, this one looks outward.

If you can identify and use such a resource, the anxiety settles again, because the gap has been closed even though closing it required outside help. Stop here.

If no external resource is available, or none would be enough to create genuine readiness, move to the fifth gate.

The Fifth Gate: Resignation

You reach the fifth gate only when none of the previous four has resolved the situation. The matter is genuinely important. You are genuinely not ready. No internal action and no external resource can close that gap. The only remaining option is to resign from the task: to withdraw from it, change it into something more manageable, or pass it on to somebody else.

This is not a failure of the process. It is the honest conclusion the process leads to when none of the earlier gates can be satisfied. Pushing forward into something for which there is no genuine path to readiness, and no way of creating one, does not resolve anxiety. It simply forces you into a situation you are not equipped to manage. Recognising that resignation is sometimes the correct and necessary outcome is what makes this model honest, rather than a method for talking yourself into things regardless of the cost.

> *"I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one."*
> ***— Henry D. Thoreau, 1854***

Reaching this gate means you are making a second-order intervention, and it is worth naming that plainly before you attempt it. The third and fourth gates work within the rules of the situation as it stands: you accept the shape of the problem and apply skill or resources to it. The fifth gate changes the rules themselves. You are altering the structure of the problem rather than your performance inside it, and everything already established about the cost of change applies here in full.

Expect it to be inefficient in the short term. Coping is cheap and immediate. Changing the structure of a problem takes more energy, more organising, and very often considerably more time before any benefit shows, which is precisely why it is the option people avoid even when it is the only one that will work.

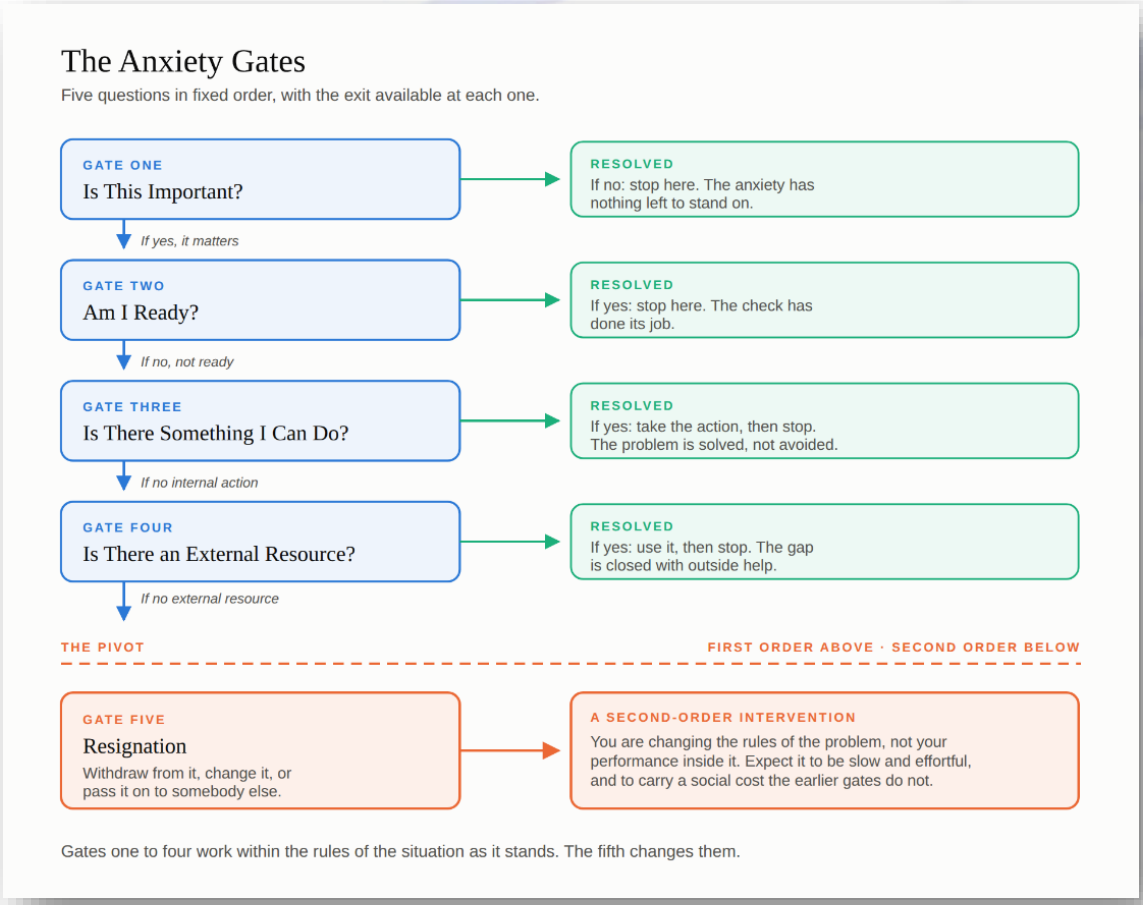
Expect a social cost as well. Withdrawing from something, renegotiating it, or handing it on usually means doing things differently from how they are expected to be done, and being read as awkward, disruptive or unreliable. That prospect activates one of your most fundamental protections, the fear of being excluded from the group, and because exclusion once represented a genuine threat to survival, the weight it carries is out of all proportion to the practical risk involved. It will make the correct answer feel considerably more dangerous than it is.

Knowing this in advance is what allows you to reach the fifth gate honestly, rather than flinching back to the fourth and pretending a resource exists.

The Sequence at a Glance

- Is this important? If no, stop here.
- Am I ready? If yes, stop here.
- Is there something I can do to become ready? If yes, do it, and stop here.
- Is there an external resource that could help me become ready? If yes, use it, and stop here.
- If none of the above apply, resign from the task, change it, or pass it on.

What makes the model work is the discipline of stopping and checking at each stage rather than skipping ahead, dodging the question, or assuming an answer without testing it.



Why No Gate Asks Whether the Worry Is True

Read back through the five questions and you will notice one that is missing. At no point are you asked whether what you are afraid of is actually going to happen. That omission is deliberate.

Anxiety compromises insight. The capacity you would need in order to look at your own fear and judge whether it is accurate is the same capacity the anxiety has already degraded. Asking yourself outright whether the worry is true makes a single-step demand on a faculty that is not currently available to you, which is why it so seldom works and so often leaves you worse off than before you asked. If you could settle it in one step, you would have settled it already, and the anxiety would not be there.

So the model does not ask. It puts you instead through five rational check-ins, none of which is about the truth of the fear, and each of which quietly obliges you to make contact with the situation as it actually stands. Gate one has you weigh real importance against assumed importance. Gate two has you take an inventory of what you have already done. Gate three has you name a concrete action, which cannot be done without describing your circumstances accurately. Gate four has you look at who and what genuinely exists around you. Gate five has you state the real limit.

> *"The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool. So you have to be very careful about that."*
> ***— Richard P. Feynman, 19740***

Each of those is an accidental reality check. None is direct, and none is complete. That is exactly what makes them work. A frontal challenge meets the belief head-on and loses, because the belief is being defended by a system currently convinced it is protecting you. Indirect, partial checks go around it instead. You are not arguing with the original fear. You are working on something adjacent to it, and by the time you have made five of these contacts, the ground the fear was standing on has moved without your ever having confronted it directly.

This is also why the sequence is worth completing even when the answer seems obvious at the first gate. The value is not only in the outcome you arrive at. It is in the five partial contacts with reality you make on the way there.

The Same Gates, Two Different Scales

The gates serve both an immediate problem and an enduring one, and it helps to know which you are using them for.

Used narrowly, they manage a symptom in the moment: working through the five questions in the minutes before a public talk. Used broadly, the same five questions apply to something far larger and longer-running, such as how to complete an entire degree when the scale of the task is itself a constant source of anxiety. The tool does not change. The scale of what you point it at does.

A sustained way of living in which you remain sensitised to anxiety year after year is a different subject again, and it needs a considerably broader approach than any single tool can offer. The gates still have a place within that, but they are not the whole of it.

When the Gates Will Not Work

There is a point at which this method stops being available, and knowing where that point is will save you from concluding that you have failed at it.

The gates depend on your being able to think clearly enough to ask the questions they pose: is this important, am I ready, what would help. Where anxiety has moved past your thoughts, past the voluntary muscles, and into your involuntary functions, so that you are dizzy or nauseous and your body is no longer doing what it ordinarily does, you are frequently too overwhelmed and too physically dysregulated to carry that out. Attempting it from there does not work, and the attempt itself becomes another source of distress.

The step at that point is not to try harder at the gates. It is to bring your activated system back down first to a manageable level first, making the gates usable again. The tension and breathing strategy in the Anxiety Breathing Clinical Guide is built for exactly this, as is medication if needed: to calm the nervous system enough to make the thinking possible. Neither resolves anything by itself. Once you can think again, the gates still need to be worked.

The Anxiety Gate process reverses your ordinary problem-solving strategy. In everyday functioning, you solve the problem, and the symptom of anxiety resolves as a consequence. That works most of the time, which is exactly why you reach for it without thinking. In a crisis that order flips: resolve the symptom (anxiety) first, then the problem is second. The reason for this “unnatural” switch is that the faculties you need to solve the problem have been compromised by the body and brain’s reaction to the intense anxiety.

Building the Practice

The gates are simple to read and considerably harder to use, because you will need them at exactly the moment your capacity to think through anything new is at its lowest. Anxiety reduces your ability to hold information, work something out for the first time, or follow an unfamiliar structure. So the sequence has to be established before you need it, in the same way and for the same reason that the tension and breathing strategy needs a preparation phase.

Rehearse in the following order. Do not move to the next stage until the current one is comfortable.

Stage One: Learn the Sequence Cold

Recite the five questions from memory, in order, once a day. Thirty seconds is enough. Do it while the kettle boils.

The target is that you can produce all five in order without prompting, and without pausing to reconstruct them. Until you can do that, everything after this stage is being built on ground that will not hold under pressure.

> *"In days of peace the soldier performs manœuvres, throws up earthworks with no enemy in sight, and wearies himself by gratuitous toil, in order that he may be equal to unavoidable toil. If you would not have a man flinch when the crisis comes, train him before it comes."*
> ***— Seneca***

Stage Two: Work It on Something Small

Once a day, apply the full sequence to something genuinely minor: an email you have not answered, an errand you keep postponing, a small conversation you would rather not have.

Small material is the point. You are not trying to solve anything of consequence at this stage. You are learning what an honest answer feels like in your body when very little is riding on it, so that you can recognise a dishonest one later when a great deal is. Most people discover here that they have been answering the second gate by reflex rather than by assessment.

Stage Three: Work It Written, on Something Real

Once a week, take one genuine anxiety and work the five gates on paper.

Write the question, then write your answer, then write what the answer commits you to. Writing slows you down enough to show you where you are skipping: an unexamined yes at gate one, a gate three answered with something you have no intention of doing, a jump straight to gate five because it feels like relief.

The target at this stage is a completed sequence with a named outcome. Not a resolved feeling. An outcome: this does not matter, or I am ready, or here is the action, or here is who I am asking, or I am withdrawing from this.

Stage Four: Work It in the Moment

Now use it live, while the anxiety is actually happening, and while you are still able to think.

Start with the episodes you would describe as ordinary: thoughts and feelings, or tension arriving in your shoulders, your foot, your hands. Run the sequence silently, in seconds rather than minutes. It will be rougher than the written version. That is expected. What you are building is the reflex to reach for the sequence at all, ahead of the reflex to look away.

If you notice you have gone past the point where thinking is available, stop and use the tension and breathing strategy first. Coming back to the gates afterwards is the method working, not the method failing.

Stage Five: Keep It Warm

A sequence practised for a fortnight and then abandoned will not be there when you need it. Return to Stage One for thirty seconds a week, and to Stage Three whenever something substantial arrives.

What Skipping a Gate Looks Like

Four patterns account for most of it, and all four are worth catching early:

- **Answering gate one with yes because the feeling is strong.** The strength of the alarm is not evidence of importance. That is the assessment you are supposed to be making, not the answer you start from.
- **Answering gate two with no because saying yes feels like tempting fate.** Superstition, not assessment. If you have done the work, say so.
- **Skipping gate three to reach gate four.** Asking for help is easier than closing the gap yourself. Test what you can do alone first, honestly, before you look outward.
- **Jumping to gate five for the relief.** Resignation reached in order at the end of the sequence is a legitimate outcome. Resignation reached in the first ten seconds is avoidance wearing the model's clothes.

Troubleshooting Common Difficulties

Most difficulties with the gates are ordinary features of learning them rather than signs that they are wrong for you.

Difficulty	What to do
Every run answers yes at the first gate	You are reading the volume of the alarm rather than assessing the topic at hand. Ask what actually changes if this goes badly, and ask it about this week rather than about your life.
You cannot answer the second gate honestly	You are assessing certainty instead of ability. The question is whether you are ready enough to begin, not whether you are guaranteed to succeed. Almost nothing will clear that second bar.
The third gate produces a list rather than an action	You are planning instead of testing. The gate wants one action that closes the gap, small enough to start today. Take the first item and stop there.
You reach the fifth gate every time	You are almost certainly working at the wrong scale. Break the task into shorter time blocks and assess your next actions, not the entire problem or project.
The anxiety does not drop after a clean answer	The answer may be true without yet being believed. Write it down and read it back. Belief follows the evidence more slowly than the assessment does.
You keep arriving at answers without asking the questions	Speed is the problem, and the discipline is the tool. Go back to the written version until the habit of testing rather than assuming returns.
You cannot recall the sequence under pressure	That is what the practice stages and the summary are for. Use the summary while you rebuild the habit, rather than trying to remember it from nothing.
The same unresolvable answer keeps coming back	The sequence has done its job by finding a real obstacle. Repeating it will not move that obstacle. Take it into session instead of grinding it.

What Progress Looks Like

People often judge the gates by whether the anxiety disappeared; that is the wrong measure. The sequence is built to resolve what the anxiety is pointing at, which is slower and more specific than making the feeling stop. These are the markers that tell you it is working.

- You notice the alarm earlier, while it is still in your thoughts rather than in your shoulders.
- You reach for the sequence ahead of reaching for the distraction.
- You can name which gate you are at, rather than meeting the whole episode as one undifferentiated feeling.
- Your answers at the second gate arrive faster, and you trust them more.

- You catch yourself avoiding, and you say so, which is the whole of the first habit.
- The actions you name at the third gate get smaller and more specific.
- When resignation comes, it is chosen at the end of the sequence rather than collapsed into at the start.
- Fewer episodes escalate, because more of them are met at the point where they could still be met.

These markers appear over weeks and months. Judge your progress across that span rather than run by run.

Why the Technique Works

The reasoning sits here rather than alongside the questions, so you can learn the sequence first and read the explanation whenever you want it. You do not need to understand why the gates work in order to use them, though understanding it does tend to keep people using them.

Why the Order Is Fixed

Each gate is cheaper than the one after it. Establishing that something does not matter costs less than establishing that you are ready, which costs less than finding an action, which costs less than finding a resource, which costs less than changing the task. Working in order means the anxiety resolves at the earliest point where resolution is possible, and you spend nothing on the gates beyond it. Skipping ahead reverses that economy: you set about solving a problem you have not established you have.

Why Importance Comes First

Both halves of anxiety have to be present for it to exist, and importance is the half you can test soonest. If the matter turns out not to matter, readiness is irrelevant, because there was nothing to be ready for. Beginning anywhere else means carrying an assumption through every gate that follows.

Why Every Gate Has an Exit

An assessment you cannot stop is not an assessment; it is rumination with a structure laid over it. The exits are what make the sequence finite, and knowing that each question can end the process is part of what makes you willing to ask it honestly. A gate you can only pass through, never leave by, will be answered defensively.

Why the Fifth Gate Exists

A method that could only ever conclude "carry on" would not be an assessment either. It would be a persuasion technique, and you would learn to distrust it, because some situations genuinely have no path to readiness. Including resignation as a legitimate outcome is what makes the other four answers worth believing. The fifth gate is the one that keeps the first four honest.

Why No Gate Asks Whether the Worry Is True

Read back through the five questions and you will notice one that is missing. At no point are you asked whether what you are afraid of is actually going to happen. That omission is deliberate.

Anxiety compromises insight. The capacity you would need in order to look at your own fear and judge whether it is accurate is the same capacity the anxiety has already degraded. Asking yourself outright

whether the worry is true makes a single-step demand on a faculty that is not currently available to you, which is why it so seldom works and so often leaves you worse off than before you asked. If you could settle it in one step, you would have settled it already, and the anxiety would not be there.

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This is also why the sequence is worth completing even when the answer seems obvious at the first gate. The value is not only in the outcome you arrive at. It is in the five partial contacts with reality you make on the way there.

What the Gates Actually Offer

The gates turn anxiety from something you endure into a tool in your hands. Each one tests a specific possibility: whether the matter is genuinely important, whether readiness has already been achieved, whether you can create it yourself, whether you can reach it with outside help, and finally whether the task itself has to change. Moving through them in order means nothing is skipped, nothing is assumed, and the anxiety is given a real chance to resolve at the earliest point where resolution is possible.

This is a clean structure you can follow when your focus is at its worst, and it is a sequence you can rehearse so that it is available when your mind is in turmoil.

It does not promise that anxiety will always disappear quickly or easily. Some situations will move through all five gates and end in resignation, and that outcome, when it is honestly reached, is as legitimate a result as resolving the anxiety at the very first Gate. What the model offers is not a guarantee of comfort. It is a reliable structure for navigating a real problem to find a real direction out the other side. The Anxiety Gates exist to manage anxiety, not eliminate problems. Difficult problems are an integral part of daily life, but you can only solve them using the mental and emotional resources that anxiety steals away.

About This Guide

This guide is one of Storm's Tools, a series of practical resources drawn from a larger body of work on human psychology and the principles of practical interventions. Each one takes a single idea, sets out how it actually works, and puts it into a form you can use.

The aim is support rather than instruction. Nothing here asks you to accept a conclusion about yourself, and nothing here depends on your believing anything in particular before it will work. What it offers is a structure to use when your own thinking is hardest to rely on, and a clearer view of what is happening when something feels unmanageable.

A guide has limits, and it is worth naming them. This is a tool for working with something yourself, and it works best where you have enough room to think. Where anxiety, or anything else, has gone past the point where you can work with it alone, that is not a failure of the tool or of you. It is a signal that what is needed is proper support rather than a document.

The full set of guides, practice guides and cards is available at:
https://www.stormsedgetherapy.co.uk/resources-886/

New material is added as the underlying work develops.

Storm's **Edge Therapy**

Storm's Edge Therapy is a central London practice established in 2016, offering online therapy throughout the UK and internationally. The practice specialises in work with Personality Disorders, Neurodiversity, and Gifted and Talented adults.

It is led by Kael Cockcroft, Chartered Clinical Psychologist, registered with the Health and Care Professions Council, British Psychological Society and the American Psychological Association.

If you would like to discuss working together, you can make contact at https://www.stormsedgetherapy.co.uk/contact/ **or** info@stormsedgetherapy.co.uk.

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