

The Anxious Girl's Guide to Dating

Sample Chapters



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Foreword

My Anxiety & My Heart: They Just Can't Leave Each Other Alone

"Can you describe what it felt like?"

The doctor stood at the foot of my hospital bed, pushing at my ankles and feeling my shins. An assistant placed sticky, white, circles around my chest.

I tried not to fidget. "Like my left boob was suddenly detaching from my body."

Cracking a smile, I waited for the laugh that never came. The doctor just continued pushing at my legs, but come on. The mental image of a breast falling from a body, like a college student marching out of a dull philosophy class, flipping the bird and shouting "I don't need this." It'd felt like my breast didn't want to listen to my musings on life anymore.

Earlier that day I'd called my general doctor's office. I'd been experiencing odd tightness in my chest. Mild nausea. Fatigue. These were all symptoms I'd experienced off and on since childhood -- symptoms that are familiar to anyone living with anxiety. Another doctor told me in college I probably have Generalized Anxiety Disorder, but really, I'm just always nervous. So when I called my doctor, it was in hopes of getting a general checkup. I wasn't feeling great. But the real reason was the boob thing. A few days before, I'd been in the shower and suddenly felt like my left breast had detached from my skin. Like a fork was jammed against my ribs. I'd even looked down, expecting to see a crooked set of breasts. Instead, I was met with the same sight as

always. An average set of breasts and my pale skin being coaxed to a shade of red usually reserved for flowers in Shakespeare sonnets.

The doctor's office told me I needed to visit an ER. They told me I could have blood clots.

My brain said, "pssh, it's just my anxiety, I'm fine" but my anxiety said "yep, it's finally happened. The cancer found you. Start googling how to draft a will."

As I sat in the hospital bed, the technician performing an EKG, the assistant botching the IV *whoops let me try the other arm*, I kept explaining how I had anxiety. I pointed out all the tests felt excessive. I sat there and tried not to roll my eyes at myself. At my patterns. At the fact that my entire life has been dominated by my anxiety, my desire to be cautious, and my poor, desperate, heart.

My anxiety and my heart have been intertwined since childhood.

From elementary school on and into adulthood I can see how my anxiety has directly affected my romantic life.

Negative thought patterns, excessive worry, over-analyzing everything, avoidant behavior, depression, isolation, fear, fear, the majority of my actions coming from a buried seed of fear that bloomed into a friggin' redwood tree of control over my life. Do you know what I mean?

And now, here I was once more. Being wheeled across the hall in a thin fabric hospital gown, being asked to stand in front of a white metal box while the doctor X-Rayed everything held warm and safe within my ribcage. Here I was, once again, over-analyzing everything going on in my heart.

I wasn't surprised. The previous month I'd quit my decent-paying job at a tech startup in Seattle to pursue my writing, a move that both baffled and concerned the same people who had applauded me almost exactly a year prior when I landed the job. "What a lucky break for someone with a Master's in Poetry," they'd said, as if thankful they could all sleep better knowing I wasn't moving to Paris to try and sell poetry outside the Moulin Rouge. Breathe easy, folks. The poet has been contained.

The same month I quit my job, my boyfriend Jared proposed to me. Something that, for a pessimist like myself, was more anxiety-producing than squeal-inducing. I knew I wanted to share my life with this man, but the idea of an elaborate engagement and wedding made me want

to furiously dig a hole in the background, crawl in, and pull a camouflage sheet over the top. *Don't look at me*, my hand-painted sign would say.

I was unemployed, expected to plan a wedding, and was flying to Virginia the following week to attend the wedding of my sister. A lot was going on. So naturally, this would be reflected in how blood circulated in my body.

After the test results came back, I waited to hear the doctor scream *cancer* at me like a carnival barker.

"We've ruled out all the major concerns," the doctor told me. He held a small stack of papers and read from them.

"Your symptoms are most likely anxiety related. Take one of your Ativan's when you need."

I was left alone, the paperwork explaining what anxiety was, telling me to contact my primary care physician, and suggesting I take a pill. I took a few shaky breaths and told myself it was a good thing. I am familiar with my anxiety. It has been my constant companion since childhood.

The poet Jericho Brown once said he believes "every poem is a love poem." And I feel this is also true for every person who lives with anxiety. Your story, is a love story. Your experiences help you learn how to love yourself and the world around you. The pain, setbacks, and frustrations you may experience from your anxiety are all helping you better understand yourself. This, in turn, will teach you truths. And this, in the end, will lead you to truer love. I believe this. And it is why I started *The Anxious Girl's Guide to Dating* in the first place.

Chapter 1

Seeking Connection and Understanding

It Is Okay To Want a Connection

My grandfather passed away when I was in elementary school. Years later, when I was in college and visiting my grandmother, I remember sitting with her and discussing a man I had a crush on. Having never remarried, she spent a great deal of time in solitude and as she listened to me describe the man I liked, she nodded and said, “It’s just nice to have someone to talk to about your day, isn’t it? That’s what I miss the most. Just talking about my day with someone.”

And through the mess of all my crushes, my failed dates, and bruised emotions, I remember this. That, above all, I would like someone with whom I can simply talk about my day. Someone who will listen. Someone who will share their day with me.

When I first started writing for The Anxious Girl’s Guide to Dating blog, I worried that simply the act of giving dating advice I was sending a message to readers that they should be dating. I was a late bloomer and know firsthand how abrasive it can feel for someone to act as if they know more about my heart than I do.

Above everything else, I believe my readers should follow their gut and live their life in the truest, most honest way possible. Whatever this looks like for you as an individual, I encourage you to follow what feels most closely aligned with how you want your life to look.

However, I also know my grandma was onto something. It is human to crave connection, to be drawn to community, intimacy, and being known by other people. We develop friendships as early as infancy and continue to develop friendships throughout our lives. It is okay to want to be in a romantic relationship. Is it weird that I'm even saying this?

I remember feeling stubborn as a late bloomer. I bristled at anyone telling me I should start dating. I rolled my eyes at people who talked incessantly about wanting to get married. There was a small part of me that took pride in not "needing" to be in a relationship. But there was an even smaller, softer, yet somehow louder part of me that often marched up to me in the middle of the night and shouted that I wanted to share my life with someone.

I wanted to talk with someone about my day.

There is no weakness in wanting to be known by another person. Wanting to share your days with someone else is different than needing to. It took me years to understand this difference.

And it's quite possible that my anxiety, and all the fears that come along with it, were behind the stubbornness I felt in being single.

While it may not be the case for you, try and understand if you associate wanting to be in a relationship with any negative associations. Being aware of how we perceive relationships can inform how we approach the pursuit of one.

Defining Your Anxiety

It has taken me years of living with anxiety to even begin to try and understand how I define it. I believe the best way to take back control of your life is through education. Learn as much as you possibly can about yourself. Give it a name. Understand how it affects your thoughts and behaviors and make small adjustments accordingly.

For me, one way I've come to look at my anxiety is I imagine I'm like a balloon. The air inside me is my anxiety. It is what helps give me shape. When I start to gain control over one aspect of the anxiety, compress it, squeeze the spot until I think I've forced it gone, the anxiety finds its way into another area of my life. The air just shifts. It still pops out. I can manipulate the form the anxiety comes in, but it will always be there. Knowing the inevitability of my anxiety being present in my everyday life prepares me for the vigilance I need in learning about it.

When I first was given a full name for what I was experiencing, I was in my junior year of college. My every day anxiety was escalating out of my control as I tried to start dating a handsome, intelligent, biology major, who also happened to Irish step dance. I was smitten. And I also recently told him that I was too nervous to eat in front of him. The conversation went something like this:

Him: Why aren't you eating your dinner – does it taste weird?

Me: (looks down at untouched meal he bought me) No, it's fine.

Him: Do you want something else?

Me: I'm afraid if I eat I will throw up on you.

Him: Do you want to make out and frolic on the beach?*

*some statements have been edited to create more sexy tension in the scene.

I cried a lot during those few weeks of trying to date that man. Frustrated by my reaction to a simple meal with a very nice, very agile, Irish jigger, I went to the campus clinic. After filling out a few questionnaires (on a scale from rarely to as frequent as the sun rising, how often do you get diarrhea?) a nondescript doctor told me I suffer from Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

To me, I imagine my Generalized Anxiety Disorder as a creature external of myself. Like a large, hairy, bright red creature not unlike Sasquatch. He sleeps in the corner of my bedroom. I can hear the light whistle of his breath as I lay in the dark. Sometimes he wakes up and stands over me. Sometimes he follows me out of the apartment as I go about my day. Sometimes he barges into parties, meetings at work, or plops down in the seat next to me on an airplane. I try to tell myself he is harmless. One day I will tie his shoe laces together and watch him stumble as he tries to chase me.

The actual clinical definition can be found below:

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

From the DSM - IV, the diagnostic manual used by medical professionals

- A. Excessive anxiety and worry (apprehensive expectation), occurring more days than not and for at least 6 months, about a number of events or activities.
- B. The person finds it difficult to control the worry
- C. The anxiety and worry are associated with three (or more) of the following six symptoms:
 - (1) restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge
 - (2) being easily fatigued
 - (3) difficulty concentrating or mind going blank
 - (4) irritability
 - (5) muscle tension
 - (6) sleep disturbance
- D. The focus of the anxiety and worry is not confined to features of an Axis I disorder
- E. The anxiety, worry, or physical symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- F. The disturbance is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance or general medical condition and does not occur exclusively during a mood disorder, a psychotic disorder or a pervasive developmental disorder.

While DSM definitions are always helpful as starting points, you will get to know your own anxiety more intimately over the years. Unlike the DSM definition, you will start unearthing all the complexities and intricate layers that come along with your own form of anxiety. You may find that your anxiety is like an unwelcome houseguest, barging in the front door, throwing its body on the couch and laughing in your face when you politely ask it to leave. Or maybe you'll learn to greet your anxiety with open arms, welcome it as if it is an old friend. Maybe, instead of fearing your anxiety or resenting it, you simply smile. "Haven't seen you in a few days," you might hear yourself saying. And then, satisfied to know it hasn't been forgotten, your anxiety evaporates again.

No matter how you learn to recognize and define your anxiety, it's important that you do. By learning more about yourself you continue to grow. In this growth you will fine-tune your ability to share yourself with another person. In the end, the better you understand your anxiety the better you will be able to talk to someone, connect with someone, at the end of the day.

Chapter 2

Late Blooming

Like a Kickass Butterfly Who Wants to Make a Sexy Grand Entrance

Never underestimate the importance and value of knowing yourself. Of truly knowing who you are as an individual. Spend a few moments trying to think how you would define yourself. If I were to ask you to describe yourself, what words would you use? Does the fact that you're a late-bloomer affect how you see yourself?

Anyone who has attempted to fill out an online dating profile knows the dreaded “tell us about yourself!” section that forces you to try and explain your complex personality in a few words. It’s always awkward talking about yourself (I am a cool person, trust me. No seriously, you can trust me because I’m cool). As uncomfortable as the experience might be, it’s always important to try and understand how you see yourself.

For example, there are people who only know themselves as one half of a romantic relationship (Married to the best hubby in the world!!!!!!).

There are people who only know themselves as defined by their career (associate executive to the supreme leader of everything).

Some people would be lost without being defined as an athlete, a musician, a high-power executive, or a straight-A student.

If you're a late bloomer, you might feel it is part of your identity. If so, then you're part of a fortunate group. One of the only ways to truly know yourself, as an individual, is through solitude. There is a difference between loneliness and solitude, which we'll explore soon. But the sooner we remind ourselves how vital it is to have alone time the sooner we can let go of the notion that everyone "should" be in a relationship.

Why Being a Late Bloomer is the Best

Throughout my teenage years, and even now as an adult, I felt like a late bloomer. I remember looking around and wondering, "Why is every single person I know in a relationship? Even that guy who wears t-shirts covered in penis cartoons has a girlfriend." Then I'd go back to brushing my cat and reading Sylvia Plath.

Just the other day I was sitting with Jared, trying to explain to him how I feel a lot younger. How *we* feel a lot younger, as a couple. Despite nearing our thirties and planning a very adult future together (we're hoping to maybe have kids *when?*) we still feel young. It's the first serious relationship for both of us. This means we have a lot left to learn about our individual relationship styles. There's a lot left to learn about each other.

I didn't have my first kiss until I was 22. At the time it felt like I was the last human on earth to not be kissed. Hell, I was the last creature with a mouth who hadn't been kissed because I saw how often those Real Housewives kiss their Pomeranians on the lips, I mean seriously?

I love being a late bloomer.

This may sound like a defense mechanism. Like I'm someone who took a wrong turn and as we drive along a backroad reserved for hill people and serial killers I sweep my arms and declare, "Look at this beautiful scenery we wouldn't have seen otherwise!" But I mean it. I wouldn't trade being a late bloomer for anything.

While friends of mine jumped from one relationship to the next, developing a fear of being single, I have the deep knowledge that I am fine on my own. I was able to truly get to know myself over my years of solitude. Through this I'm better able communicate my needs, fears, and hopes to future partners.

This doesn't mean being single for so long didn't come with its challenges. I often felt insecure and unloved. I often questioned why nobody had ever made a strong effort to be with me. I often felt like one of those roly-poly bugs, curled into myself, with fear and a desire for comfort.

Family get-togethers were a creature of judgement all on their own. They were a special time for home-cooked meals, gift-giving, and routine questions about my love life.

"Is there anyone special in your life right now?" A well-meaning relative would ask, eyes sparkling with a combination of hope and panic.

I remember preparing my canned answers on the drives over. And while I honestly can't remember specifics, it's probably safe to say I lied every once in a while just to have something new to say. "He's studying to be a doctor," I probably said with a manic grin.

We will cover family and friends more in Chapter 8, but as you bloom later, try your best to quiet the judgmental voices. The voices that whisper *you're doing it wrong*.

This voice may come from your family or friends. But sometimes this voice comes from your own mind. You might become your own worst cheerleader, messing up the routine, falling from the sky, and forgetting to wear your underwear. Stop. Just stop. Train yourself to be the most kickass cheerleader for yourself possible. You may not have control over the things said by other people but you can control how and why you support yourself.

Remind yourself that you are practicing solitude, which is something our contemporary society of attached-to-our-smartphones desperately needs more of. You have the opportunity to become the best possible version of yourself before you decide to take new steps into the dating world. Raise this flag high and watch it flapping with color and life in the wind.

Taking New Steps & Rewarding Yourself

One of the ways I've learned to gently encourage myself to take new steps is through rewards. It is like I am training myself. Plain and simple.

Do something scary? Get a treat. Try something new? Get a treat. Do this over and over and over again until those scary steps became comfortable. Let's take a moment and remember

Pavlov's Dog. In the late 1800's a physiologist, Ivan Pavlov, stumbled across the building blocks of classical conditioning. Pavlov rang a bell every time he fed his dog. And soon, just the sound of the bell made the dog salivate. He became conditioned.

We can do this to ourselves. We can train ourselves to salivate at the thought of taking new steps.

Mmm, tasty new steps.

I don't make a big production out of my reward system, but I always pause to be proud of myself for doing something new or scary. Regardless of whether or not the outside world identifies it as "scary," I listen to my gut and allow myself to feel my feelings. Then I buy myself some motherfuckin' flowers like I'm James effing Bond.

When I started dating one of my first real-life boyfriends I was a nervous wreck. I was 25, inexperienced, and sweaty as hell all the time. Even the act of walking to his apartment would cause me anxiety. So, as a reward, I would buy myself a small bouquet of carnations on my walk back home. Carnations were cheap so I didn't feel guilty about spending money. And they are the cockroaches of flowers: they live forever. Win, win.

As the flowers bloomed they were physical reminders of my own growth. I could look at their soft color and remember I'd been bold.

Your reward doesn't have to be flowers. Maybe taking a hike or bringing a good friend to coffee feels like a treat. No matter what, identify something small, affordable, and simple that brings you joy. Use that. Over time this will help encourage you to be bolder and bolder and soon, just like my carnations, you'll be blossoming more than you thought possible and maybe even become invincible because seriously? Those damn flowers never die.

Setting Your Goals

Maybe you know you want to start taking new steps, but you aren't sure of your exact destination yet. Maybe you know you want a relationship, but haven't figured out what that means for you. Maybe you're overwhelmed by the thought of trying to define what you want. Do all these questions make you want to stop trying before you even begin?

Take a deep breath. Step back. And stop expecting so much of yourself. Big change occurs with very small, very achievable, steps. Sometimes changing just one habit from your day can transform your life. Before anything, make sure your desire for change comes from your heart and not from outside pressure or expectations. Just because your great aunt Wanda keeps telling you that you *need* to find a nice girl and settle down, doesn't mean that you have to. However, if you do truly crave a new direction remind yourself you have a choice in the matter. You hold the key to opening that door.

Here's where I usually start: I start with an image.

It's as easy as that.

Ignoring what I think my goal "should" be in life, I instead start searching around for an image that speaks to my gut. Something that pulls at me for one reason or another. Your intuition knows more than might realize.

Let's go back in time a few years: It was New Year's 2013. I was single and knew I wanted to start dating. As I sat with a pad of paper in hand, the words *New Year's Resolutions* staring me in the face, I hated the idea of writing down something about dating. It felt so cliché to be 26, single, and writing "this year I will find a nice boyfriend."

But then I thought of something a friend once said. I'd overheard her talking about her partner in a way that stuck with me. She told me he "made her soul feel good." While the phrasing maybe sounded cheesier than a fondue restaurant, it rang true to me. I wanted to be with someone who made my soul feel good. Which, when you think about it, is a pretty tall order. What does that even mean exactly? How do you quantify that?

So instead of listing my goal as boyfriend-dating-oriented, I made my New Year's Resolution to be to "find someone who makes my soul feel good."

To help myself focus on this abstract idea, I went looking for an image to reflect it. I found a few pictures that made me feel filled with joy, ease, and light. I made one of these images the background of my computer and taped the other on my refrigerator, two places I knew I'd see them every day. By placing these images in my line of sight it was as if I was setting my intention every day. Today I intend to seek joy, to seek ease, and to seek light.

Soon, these images became background noise. I forgot their purpose. And as the weeks rolled by I started to feel depressed that I wasn't being more proactive with the dating world.

But then, at the end of January, I met a man who I felt at ease around. He seemed to emit joy, a quick smile flashing across his face with as much authenticity as a newborn baby. As the night came to a close, I said goodbye to him feeling lighter. I remember us both walking to our separate cars, the street and sidewalk dusted with snow, and I remember feeling like I wanted to be around him more. I didn't want to say goodbye to the goodness he made me feel. This man is still my partner and he wants to share his life with me. And to this day I still feel lighter when I'm around him.

If you're not sure where to start, start with your gut. How do you want to feel? What images in the world reflect this? Spend some time soaking in these images every day. The more you absorb the importance of those emotions, the more likely you are to notice them when they come along in real life.

From Our Readers

Dear Hattie: I've set a few New Year's resolutions that relate to my dating life (mainly, I want this to be the year I finally get out of my shell) but I'm worried I won't follow through. What would you suggest I do?

A friend told me about a sign she saw at her local Burger stand: "May your troubles last as long as your New Year's Resolutions."

For some reason, we have a hard time sticking to our goals. Everyone does. Changing our habits often seems simple, yet turns out to be daunting. We are creatures of routine and it takes a lot of persistence and accountability to switch up that routine.

We often tell ourselves:

- *This year I'm going to visit the gym every day before work (*snooze button*snooze button*)*
- *This is the year I'm going to start eating less meat (Gimme those fried chicken wings)*

- *By the end of the year I'll have written the first draft of that novel I keep wanting to write (angry birds, celebrity gossip website)*

So for starters, don't beat yourself up. We all want to grow and have the best intentions, but then life gets in the way. Here's what I'd suggest: break down your goals. Change just one, simple, habit from your daily life.

We tend to make big sweeping declarations at the start of a new year. We say big statements like "this year I'll have my first kiss!" or "this year I'm going on at least one date each month!" What's tricky about these statements is they can feel daunting, overwhelming, or absolutely exhausting. It can result in simply putting it off. The fear of failure is often more powerful than our desire for change. Be aware of this.

Break each resolution down into manageable steps. Then remember to feel proud of yourself for achieving each step.

Maybe one step will be to simply research different online dating sites. The next could be opening up a profile. The next is filling that awkward profile. Maybe do it with a friend to turn the task into a fun activity.

When you break down your goal into smaller, more manageable steps you can look back on the year and see all these small steps you've taken versus beating yourself up for not achieving the "one big goal." I know that I wouldn't be dating the kind man that I am if it weren't for hundreds of baby steps and learning, evaluating, growing, growing, growing, all the growing I've done in my past.

Now that I think of it, one of my New Year's Resolutions this year was definitely "Continue to grow in your relationship and appreciate it" but I didn't write any smaller, more attainable steps, along with it!

Loneliness vs. Solitude

There is a difference between loneliness and solitude.

Often, the people around you may assume you are lonely if you are single. I remember a friend once asking, "Don't you get lonely?"

The truth was, yes. I got lonely. But here's another truth: I still get lonely. Even while being part of a relationship.

Loneliness is an inherent and basic human emotion. We experience the feeling regardless of whether or not we are in a relationship. Loneliness comes from missing something or someone, whether it's the friendships you had in high school, your parents who have since passed, or your childhood home. It's inaccurate to think that being in a relationship will suddenly cure you of ever feeling lonely again. The minute we start thinking another person can rid us of loneliness forever is the minute we lose sight of what it means to be human.

I've known people who, from the outside, appear to be in a healthy relationship. But on the inside they feel unable to speak freely. They feel like they have to hide their true personalities, which results in them not feeling known. They are lonely despite being in a relationship.

My many years of being the perpetual single person in my friend group allowed me years of valuable solitude. And this is dramatically different than loneliness.

Loneliness comes from a place of feeling incomplete and being disconnected. Solitude is a place for connection.

Solitude allows you to process what you are experiencing in life. It gives you the space and time to better understand how you feel. It allows you to evaluate, weigh, and adjust your values.

I went to college near the ocean and would often get in my car and drive out to one of the smaller, less touristy beaches. I'd usually wear long sleeves, long pants, and close-toed shoes since I burned so easily. I walked amongst the bikini-clad girls like a nun praying for all the heathens around her (just kidding. I was just totally jealous of their tans).

This particular place had a swing set on the beach. As I pumped my feet, sand kicking up from the bottom of my shoes, I felt like I was flying above the waves. I tended to visit these swings when I felt weighed down by my thoughts or anxiety. I'd feel the sharp salt air in my

face, the warmth of the sun, and feel sorry for myself like it was my job and someone was paying me a lot of money to feel sorrier and sorrier. But more than that, I was giving myself time to be with myself and to try and understand why I was feeling a certain way. Usually, I was hurting from an epic crush who didn't know I existed.

Even if these moments of solitude may have been a form of dwelling or a very sunscreen'ed pity-party, they were special. A lot of people are uncomfortable with stillness and being alone with their thoughts. A lot of people seek distractions like television or video games or take part in avoidant behaviors such as drinking or partying.

It takes strength to be present in solitude. And it will build a strong foundation for your personality as you draw closer to being ready to try the dating world. Never feel weak or embarrassed for being alone. You have the gift of being able to truly know yourself. This is a gift you can share with someone else when the time is right.

How to Embrace Being a Late Bloomer

1

Solitude is an important and healthy way for you to center yourself and truly understand how you relate to the world around you.

2

Remember: Being part of a relationship does not automatically cure loneliness.

3

Your values, beliefs, and personality are being shaped by you alone.

4

You always have the choice to start seeking change, when you are ready.

5

Reward yourself when you achieve something new. Acknowledge your growth.

Chapter 3

Let's Talk About Talking: How to Talk Good and Other Flirty Word Things

I signed up for Speech 101 my first semester of community college. It was a pre-requisite and I figured it would be an easy class to get out of the way. On the first day of the semester I sat in the back listening to my classmates chatter nervously. Everyone quickly made the connection that they'd waited until their last possible semester to take the class. Everyone spent years dreading it.

"I almost contemplated not graduating just to avoid Speech," joked a guy wearing his wallet on a chain. Everyone nodded or laughed, understanding his thought process.

As I soon learned in my Speech class, public speaking is the top-rated fear among Americans. It ranks higher than death. *Death.*

Speaking in public makes you feel exposed. It makes you feel vulnerable. Even people without everyday anxiety can experience the symptoms of anxiety because . . .

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Other Chapters

- The First Time(s): First Dates, First Kisses, and First Under-the-Underwear Stuff
 - Moments of Pain: Breakups, Heartache, and Unrequited Love
- All Your Other Significant Others: How Our Family, Friends, and Coworkers Can Affect Our Anxiety

About the Author

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