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# Nervous Energy

HARNESS THE POWER  
OF YOUR ANXIETY

Dr. Chloe  
Carmichael



**Dr. Chloe Carmichael, PhD**  
Clinical Psychologist,  
USA Today Bestselling Author



Excerpts from **Nervous Energy: Harness the Power of Your Anxiety** by Dr. Chloe Carmichael, and endorsed by Deepak Chopra!

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While it's important to help high functioning people solve these problems, it's also important to help them keep these problems in perspective. **High functioning people can sometimes be really hard on themselves, to the point where their motivation and engagement will suffer; it's often helpful for the high functioning person to realize that many of the stumbling blocks he or she is facing are actually present because the person is so high functioning in the first place.** For example, many first- and second-year law associates at white-shoe firms will call my office in a panic because suddenly they're surrounded by a bunch of Ivy League senior associates who seem to have it all figured out; the younger ones no longer feel like the smartest person in the room, and it's actually a little unnerving.

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Until recently, Christina's style has helped her to stay 100 percent organized and on top of things, just the way she likes it. However, she has now earned a position as a junior associate at a law firm, where the partners give her so much work that it's *impossible* to double-check everything. She is also given so many responsibilities that it's totally impractical for her to keep *everything* "front of mind" all the time. Just thinking about the big projects she needs to execute makes her feel very overwhelmed, since of course she wants to do them *all perfectly and slightly ahead of schedule*. She's now in a situation in which her old tools of making flashcards to review study materials endlessly, meeting frequently with professors to "make sure she's on the right track," combing through each brief to make sure it's completely polished before passing it along to partners, and practicing every presentation till she knows it *perfectly* are no longer practical. Clearly, Christina needs some new tools if

she's going to keep rising. **This is something I see a lot: because completing milestones successfully will generally lead to being given more complex assignments, our old tools eventually need revamping in order to remain viable.**

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**Mental Shortlist.** Christina has a “love-hate” relationship with her exceptional ability for mental tenacity. Her ability to focus like a laser beam can be a cognitive blessing or curse, depending on the situation. **For example, when Christina was in law school, her mental tenacity was a blessing: she studied every case till she knew it like the back of her hand, and she studied for the bar exam with a fervor that made the actual exam seem easy.** However, when it comes to managing sudden urges to call or text her ex-boyfriend, that same mental tenacity can be a real vulnerability. Even though she ultimately feels it's best for her not to reach out to him at this point, she sometimes feels *totally* overcome with the urge to call him, mentally replays vivid positive memories in her mind that only make her miss him even more, or finds herself worrying obsessively that perhaps she is making a mistake by deciding not to reach out.

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### How the Three-Part Breath Helped Christina Win in Workplace Warfare

Christina was accidentally copied in on an email revealing that a colleague was spreading embarrassing falsehoods about her to management. The falsehoods not only spread negative misinformation about her work performance on a recent case; they included references to her painful breakup, with comments suggesting that perhaps she had been distracted at work “because I know her boyfriend recently left her; maybe that’s part of the problems with distraction and focus she seems to be having lately.” She and the colleague who sent the poison-pen email were both being considered for the same promotion, so it seemed likely that this was part of the colleague’s effort to increase his own chances of success by sabotaging Christina’s. The promotion would come with a salary raise big enough to pay off the remaining mortgage on her mother’s modest home to thank her for all the sacrifices she made while Christina was growing up. In other words, this promotion mattered to Christina’s pride in her work, her healthy sense of competition, and her fierce desire to honor her mother.

The moment Christina saw the email, her blood seemed to run both hot and cold simultaneously. Her mind immediately began rapid-firing through all sorts of potential responses to the situation. As a high functioning person with significant cognitive resources, Christina was able to imagine a host of potential reactions within just a few seconds—ranging from forwarding the email to an ally in upper management immediately and copying the culprit so she could simultaneously address the lies and put him on the defensive, to marching over to the colleague’s desk and asking him about the email in a loud voice in order to shame him and expose him in front of the entire office. She also considered

saying absolutely nothing to anyone and instead sending immediate responses to the many recruiters who constantly tried to poach her for other firms, since the idea of drawing attention to her breakup in any way whatsoever, especially in the workplace, felt worse than appearing naked in public or just escaping to another firm. The references to her breakup were so humiliating that a part of her just wanted to hide forever, while another part of her wanted to clobber the culprit; still yet another part of her was focused on how to salvage her chances of getting the promotion. All of these parts were vigorously active *at the same time, and they all wanted her to take action immediately.*

Thankfully, Christina had the mindful awareness to realize that she was feeling extremely triggered (justifiably so), and that the **wisest action to take before committing to any further action was to do a few rounds of the Three-Part Breath**, including the important steps of observing herself before and after breathing deliberately into her belly, middle chest, and upper chest. The point was **definitely not** to “relax and let go,” but to take a careful survey of herself and then spring into action with a fully informed perspective. The first thing she noticed was that it was unusually difficult to get air into her belly, and that her skin had become so hot that the air felt cool as she inhaled, and that a little lump seemed to be forming in her throat as if she were about to cry. She also noticed that she actually felt a touch of the spins.

Thanks to her mindfulness skills, Christina didn't become *alarmed* about these observations—she simply logged them into her awareness. Taking the time to notice these physical sensations in a nonreactive manner helped Christina step back and get some perspective on exactly how disoriented and overwhelmed she was feeling. By realizing this from a bird's-eye view of herself rather than just *being* disoriented and overwhelmed, Christina was then able to realize the best next step: to practice a few minutes of mindfulness of her thoughts and feelings (using

the “passing clouds” technique described earlier in this chapter as an add-on technique for the Three-Part Breath), rather than just focusing on mindfulness of her breath. This allowed her to fully recognize *all* the pieces of herself that had become activated by the email to the point of causing such a profound physical reaction.

Christina was better able to slow down and scan herself in a nonreactive way after having done the Three-Part Breath, since the extra oxygen and slowed breathing had interrupted the “fight, flight, or freeze” reaction she initially experienced. As she delved into her next step of practicing mindfulness of her thoughts and feelings, she noticed she was experiencing a mix of anger, betrayal, fear, and even shame due to the embarrassing nature of the falsehoods and their potential impact on her goal of a promotion. She also noticed that she was experiencing a spike in sadness and insecurity just from having had her ex-boyfriend’s name called to mind by reading the email, and she realized that she would have felt some of these feelings by encountering his name independent of any workplace drama. Interestingly, she also observed that she was feeling jealousy toward the colleague. The colleague seemed to come from a background of privilege, and Christina always thought he seemed to have such an easy life in comparison to her own. She realized that this incident reminded her of having been made fun of by “rich kids” on the playground for her secondhand clothes as a little girl, and that this current incident was also triggering parts of her childhood self that had always felt fearful of deprivation.

**Once Christina was aware of all the reactions and the “sub-reactions” she was having, she was able to identify the wisest next moves.** She spent a few minutes practicing Anchoring Statements, assuring herself that she was now a perfectly safe adult no longer in danger of deprivation so that whatever reaction she chose in response to the email would not be guided by old fears from

childhood. She also deliberately focused her attention on the reasons for the breakup in order to keep a sense of perspective on the sadness, so that she would be able to address this “low blow” from the colleague without becoming consumed or overpowered by sadness from the breakup. She knew that coming to tears over the “boyfriend remark” in front of management may have garnered sympathy, but it would also have been humiliating. Moreover, crying could have endangered the promotion by potentially bolstering the colleague’s claim that Christina may have been “off” because of unmanageable feelings about the breakup. She was also able to consider her feelings of jealousy in an objective manner and remind herself that she actually didn’t know anything about the colleague’s personal life; she realized that he probably had private struggles of his own or he wouldn’t be sinking to such unprofessional lows. This insight helped alleviate her jealousy and allowed her to (eventually) discuss his behavior with management in an objective way that was not colored by a tone of jealousy; she knew that coming across as jealous or appearing to have an extraneous personal issue with the colleague would have weakened her position in a complaint. The law firm's partners were actually quite impressed with how she handled the situation, and she eventually accepted the promotion—in fact, she now manages the poison-pen emailer—and secretly admits to a bit of schadenfreude-fueled pleasure in having him report to her.



### Locating Matt's Sense of Purpose

Matt was a stressed-out lawyer with a wife and three kids who was suffering from a lack of motivation at work. He did a Mind Map with a starting point of "My job" and quickly saw that thinking of his job conjured up a fear that his job was trapping him into a lifestyle that would cause him to end up overweight and with no life outside of work, which was in stark contrast to the glamorous life his younger self from law school had envisioned when planning a career as a partner-track attorney. The whole *point* of this job to his younger self was to wear great suits, have disposable income for travel, and live a lifestyle akin to James Bond, at least in terms of style and sophistication. The Mind Map also demonstrated that he feared not really knowing his kids because of all the time he spent at the office; yet it also captured that his job was a ticket to provide for his wife and children—and this connected to early memories of feeling "not good enough" when his father's presence in his life decreased dramatically during Matt's preteen years as his parents divorced.

Gaining insight around all of these "background" items connected to his job helped Matt make peace with the part of himself that felt he was "failing" because his life wasn't as glamorous as his law-school self had planned.

"That part of me didn't know the joy that my wife and kids would bring me, so comparing my life against that old standard doesn't actually make sense—and it feels really good to know that I'm not 'failing,' that I've just changed my goals," he said as he reflected on the map. He also came to see that his slowly but surely increasing waistline had been bothering him more than he'd cared to admit; and that a part of him (very logically) *did* blame the increase on his frequent focus at work. This insight nudged him to splurge on a



trainer to meet him at the office come rain or shine so that he wouldn't harbor quiet resentments toward his job over a false choice between health and work. Removing the option to blame his job for a lack of physical exercise significantly improved his feelings about his work, and of course was also very helpful for his health.

Realizing how good it felt to provide for his kids in *contrast* to what his father had done helped Matt reconnect with a sense of purpose in his work and realize that becoming a father himself had stirred some old childhood memories that he needed to unpack. It also helped him realize that providing for his kids was actually a very important way of supporting them, and that he wanted to ask his wife to help him communicate to the kids more often that his reason for working long hours was to *support his family*. He also realized that he wanted to start planning short pockets of travel to places no one in the family had ever been. This offered him a way to connect with his wife and kids on a deeper level while also giving a little nod to the part of himself that chose this career partly as a way to afford travel. All of this insight and ensuing action helped Matt feel emotionally lighter, more connected with his *reasons* for work, and less stressed about family and health. All of this combined to produce greater motivation at work, which was his original concern at the starting point.

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