

*Maybe I'm
Just Crazy*

Amber Lynn Anderson

Going to the grocery store is usually nothing special. You go in, grab a shopping cart—or buggy if you are from the South like me—and venture into the vast, fluorescent-lit world filled with endless aisles in search of this week’s meals. You grab your nutritional (or not-so-nutritional) meals, and you get out. For most people, it’s another boring errand to check off on their to-do list. But my list includes an unexpected item: a full-blown panic attack.

Some people pick up milk and eggs; I pick up panic in aisle five.

The store is a minefield, filled with triggers that can set off an anxiety bomb. I’m the commander, trying to manage a full-blown emergency while pretending I’m just looking for peanut butter. All because my body can’t tell the difference between grocery shopping and surviving a warzone.

The Thirty Minute War

To understand what I mean, let me relive a recent experience I had at the grocery store. On my way out the door, I prepare myself with an internal pep talk: *I’m just going to the grocery store. Everything will be fine. I am fine.* As I descend from the stairs of my third-story apartment, each jolting rhythmic step feels like marching into battle.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, my eyes desperately scan the parking lot for my car. *No, no, no . . . Did someone steal my car?!* I clench the metal stair rail to stop myself from swaying; the cold metal feels nice on my sweaty palm. Just as I grab my phone to inform my husband that we are victims of grand theft auto, I finally see my car peeking out from behind a big SUV, allowing me to breathe again.

The drive over offers a sense of peace. The sun’s warmth wraps around my body like a gentle hug. That calm shatters the moment the oversized grocery store blocks my sunlight, taking away my warmth and leaving me with chills.

I don’t slow down for the closer parking spots near the entrance. I refuse to endure the public humiliation of a failed parking attempt and the immediate surrender. I skip that entire step and head directly to the empty spaces in the back, providing the room I need to breathe—physically and mentally. *Let’s get*



in and get out.

During my trek to the entrance, I scout the first battle. A marketer stands nearby holding shiny brochures and frantically shouting for a minute of my time. *Nope. Not today.* I instantly pretend I’m deaf and power walk past him.

I make it inside and grab a cart. The first one has a wonky wheel that’s screaming for help. Feeling betrayed, I yank another. Satisfied with my new (and silent) companion, I take a deep breath and begin my journey into the unknown.

I rush through the aisles like a contestant on a game show, unsure if I’m trying to beat the inevitable headache from the lights or outrun the possibility of human interaction. I find my items with focus and precision, tossing them in the cart like a well-oiled machine. *Milk. Check. Eggs. Check. Peanut Butter. Check.* After my haul is complete, I bolt to the check-out lanes, only to find the self-checkout closed.

My stomach drops.

I see a cashier waiting patiently at her station. *I guess the human interaction finally caught up to me.*

I arrive at the counter, and the cashier starts scanning my items, chatting away.

“Did you find everything okay?” she says through a big smile.

I manage a smile and a quick nod, giving my best impression of a normal functioning adult. Avoiding eye contact, my eyes fixate on the glowing card reader, waiting for the prompt to swipe my card. The cashier keeps chatting, but her voice fades into the background noise. Instead, I focus on the sound of the scanner. Every beep is a tiny cheer, counting down the seconds to my escape.

Once the prompt appears, I swipe my card. The machine blurts out three deep, accusatory beeps—announcing to everyone that I can’t afford my groceries.

Through the drumline that is now my heartbeat, I fumble through my phone to unlock my card. Behind me, the line is growing, and I can feel their frustrated stares burning a hole in the back of my head. One man sighs loudly, “Can you hurry up?” I ignore him, but now my chest is so tight, I can barely breathe. I swipe my card.

Finally, the payment goes through. I snatch my bags and practically sprint out the door like I just robbed the place. Back in the car, I sit for a moment and breathe, allowing myself to feel safe before the drive home.

The short drive home gives my heart time to slow its rhythm. The warm sun on my skin welcomes me back with a loving sensation. The worst is over. This is the final stretch before the war ends.

Pulling into my apartment, I notice the only parking spot left is wedged between two trucks. *You’ve got to be kidding me.*

At this point, I do what any self-respecting anxious woman would do: call my husband to come park it for me.

He walks out, shaking his head, not even surprised anymore. I slip out of the driver’s seat, flash him a sorry-not-sorry smile, and race inside.

My mind and body call a temporary truce as I reach my threshold. The war is over. *I’m safe. Home at last.*

This “boring errand” leaves me physically and mentally drained. It may sound dramatic, but it’s my reality living with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD).

If you’ve ever wondered what it’s like to live in constant fight-or-flight mode, here’s a glimpse into that reality. It’s exhausting, self-deprecating, and raw. But by putting my invisible struggle into words, I hope to validate the silent battles of others, turning private panic into public understanding, one raw page at a time.

The Girl Who Was Silenced

I wasn’t always an anxious mess. In my teen years, I had a healthy social life. I was in Girl Scouts, had a part-time cashier job, and had a decent number of friends at school. However, my favorite childhood memory was Girl Scout camp every fall.

It wasn’t just a trip; it was an escape. A chance to spend a whole weekend away from home, where I could sing loudly, dance freely, and laugh genuinely without the fear of being silenced.

My aunt doubled as my troop leader and my personal photographer. Almost every picture you find of me smiling, laughing, or being silly in my childhood was taken by her. She pulled out the child in me, and for that, I’m forever grateful.



At camp, the smell of the fire-roasted marshmallows, the warmth of the fires, and the soothing crackles transported me to a different world, a world where I was finally allowed to be a child.

There, I felt safe. My only fears were innocent. *I need to wake up in time for breakfast. I can't miss the late-night hike. I hope I don't forget the words to the campfire songs.* My home life was very different.

When my parents were around, I had to suppress my childlike tendencies. Speaking increased my chances of being yelled at, hit, or punished, so I stopped talking.

Every time I forgot that rule, I was painfully reminded. Once, on a long family road trip, Dad was driving, Mom was in the passenger seat, and me and my little brother were stuffed in the back seat. When “When the Sun Goes Down” by Kenny Chesney came on the radio, I had to sing along.

“When the sun goes down, we’ll be feelin’ alright. When the suuu—”

“Shut up!” Dad demanded.

I jumped. The sudden silence in the car was louder than my singing.

From then on out, I didn’t dare sing in front of him again. Those two words burned my feelings and left a permanent scar.

Those unpredictable demands weren’t just limited to the car. My dad would tell me and my brother to “go play somewhere.” We would go outside to play and come back in to use the restroom or get a drink of water, unaware of the rule change: “In or out! Pick one!” It was always a setup—just confusing demands that kept me walking on eggshells.

Even asking to attend a Girl Scout meeting or church event felt like a negotiation. On the easy days, I had to write an essay explaining why I deserved to go. My reasonings were ridiculous and focused on self-minimization: “You’d save toilet paper if I wasn’t here.” “You wouldn’t have to feed me.” “You’d finally get peace and quiet.”

Always thinking about others and never myself.

On harder days, I had to clean the whole house under a tight deadline before receiving approval—a race I couldn’t afford to lose.

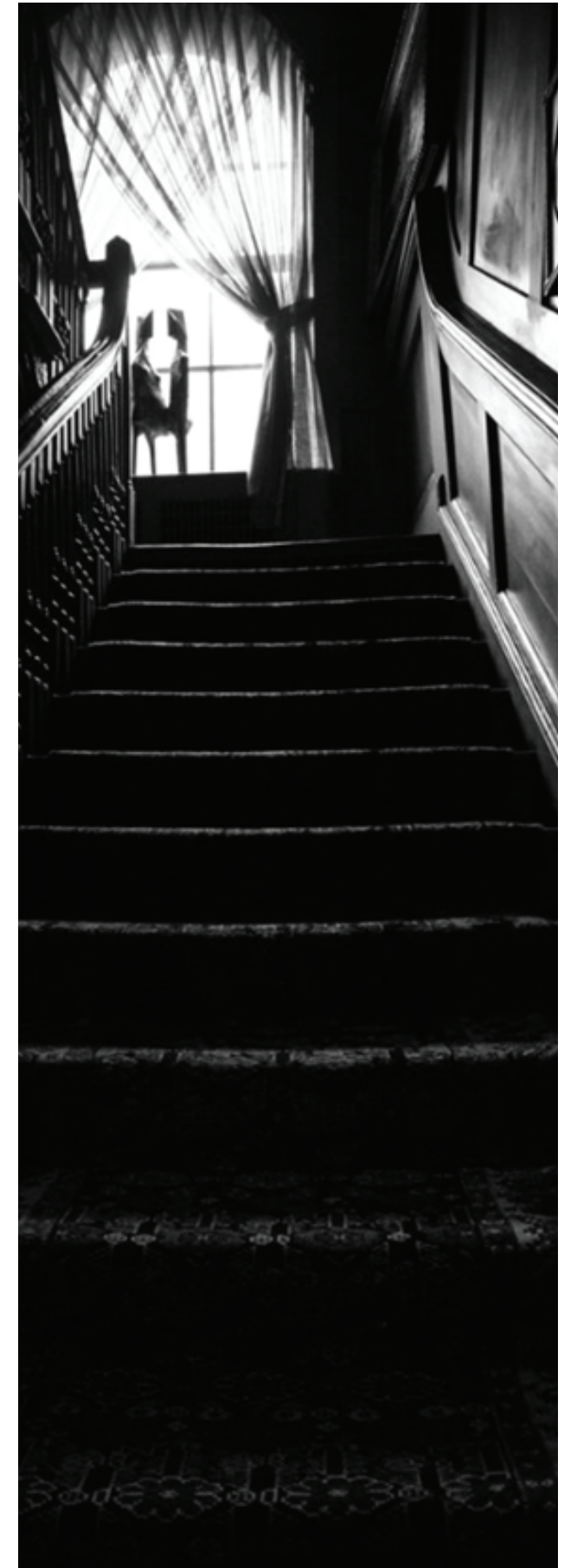
One time, I asked if I could go to my best friend’s sleepover. Next thing I know, I’m on my hands and knees. Scrubbing the built-up scum off the bathroom baseboards. With nothing but a dull, cold butter knife and a holey rag. Just to earn a reluctant “I guess.”

I didn’t know what anxiety was as a child, but the signs were always there.

My upstairs room gave me a rare taste of privacy. But my parents would randomly sneak up there to check on me. The old wooden stairs would creak with the slightest pressure. Whenever I heard that alarm, I froze instantly. A prey animal listening for a predator.

Other times, the crackling sound of my mom’s tires squishing the gravel driveway started a timer I had to beat. It sent me scrambling into a panic. I ran around the room, frantically straightening anything I could and praying it was enough to avoid a beating.

It was a daily dilemma. That small window—sometimes only fifteen minutes—before my mom came home was my one shot at being a regular kid after school. My only chance to watch the Disney Channel before the TV was off-limits. I was expected to have the



entire house cleaned before she walked through the door. I had two choices: risk it all for Hannah Montana or clean and have nothing to talk about with my friends the next day. The choice was always between my survival and my childhood. I never got the best of both worlds.

I can see now that my joy was stolen. My younger self still lingers inside me, longing for laughter and the freedom to be unapologetically herself. But I'm still being silenced, not by parents, but by my own anxious thoughts.

I don't blame my parents for my anxiety. But I also know your childhood has a way of sticking with you. Maybe it came from these high-pressure moments. Or maybe from my most embarrassing one: wearing a dress to church and having my oversized underwear fall to my ankles mid relay race. Who knows? Either way, it explains why I treat boring errands like emergencies.

The Day My Body Betrayed Me

The anxiety I acquired in childhood didn't disappear. It stayed hidden for years, until one day it decided to make its dramatic reveal. It was a typical fall day in the already messed-up year 2020, a year full of lockdowns, job uncertainty, and the threat of dying from COVID. I sat at my computer, submitting job applications, as my husband watched TV ten feet away, blissfully unaware of what was to come.

Then, out of nowhere, a wave of heat flushed through my face, and the room started to tilt. My stomach threatened to eject everything I had eaten that day, and my heart pounded so fast that I became scared of my pulse for the first time.



I searched for my blood pressure machine, hoping it would put my mind at ease. But no. Instead, it stared back at me with numbers that looked more like a death sentence than reassurance. I started to hyperventilate, convinced that I needed to lie down in bed before gravity took over.

My husband stood nearby, looking utterly confused, yet worried. Through my rapid breaths, I demanded that he call 911. For me, the girl who avoids doctors like the plague, those words were terrifying to say out loud. Asking for an ambulance is basically me saying, "Yep, I'm totally dying right now."

As the moments passed, my chest tightened, my breath turned into shallow gasps, and dread was swallowing me whole—like a snake eating its prey. I heard the faint ambulance sirens getting closer. Ironically, the approaching chaos brought me comfort, knowing the cavalry was coming to save me. There was hope for me yet.

The paramedics rushed in, immediately checking my blood sugar, temperature, and blood pressure all at once. The blood pressure machine hummed as the cuff squeezed the life out of my arm. Once it hissed out the air, silence filled the room—too much silence. I took the silence as a sign it was too late. *Great, I'm going to die.*

I looked up and saw a paramedic scanning the room. He noticed my husband's water pipe sitting on top of the nightstand.

"Have you been smoking today?"

"What? No," I replied, dismissing the question. *Why is he worried about a little bit of weed when I am clearly dying?*

"Well, it appears that your vitals are fine. You're just having a panic attack."

My mind started racing like a caffeine-fueled gerbil on an exercise wheel. *Panic attack? No. This had to be a heart attack. How could something this awful not be fatal?*

They offered to take me to the hospital but assured me it wasn't necessary. Within seconds, my panic transformed into embarrassment.



I had never experienced that type of fear before. My own body was staging a rebellion, betraying me. I don't know why it happened that day or what triggered it, but I do know this: it was just the beginning of a long journey. So long that I still haven't reached the end of it.

Living With Anxiety

Since that first attack, anxiety has been a part of my daily life. To outsiders, it may not be obvious, and I may even come off as rude. But really, I'm just trying to juggle my crippling anxiety while pretending to live a semi-normal life.

There was a time when I loved to converse. Now? Not so much. As an online shopper, I rarely go into stores, but I do enjoy the occasional discount bin store with my mother. Those places are heaven for me, but they are also my personal hell. Crowded aisles, zero personal space, and chatty bargain hunters who think we're best friends allow my social anxiety to thrive. Sometimes, people come up to me trying to start a conversation about what treasure they found. Me? I bury my head in the bins and pray they go away. If I could wear a shirt that says, "Please Don't Talk to Me," I would—every day.

To clarify, it's not that I hate people. It's when I do try to speak, my heart rate skyrockets, my brain misfires, and out comes word vomit.

So, naturally, my anxiety decided to introduce itself right alongside me when I met my best friend's mom for the first time. Her house was small, conservative, and proudly displayed crosses on every wall like

she was preparing for an exorcism. We stood in her kitchen, exchanging names. Then, the small talk began.

"Do you work?" she asked with a soft voice.

"Yes, I'm a professional waxer," I stated proudly. My answer intrigued her.

"Oh, like eyebrows?"

I should have nodded in agreement and ended the conversation there. But no—word vomit.

"Yes, but mostly I wax vaginas," I blurted out.

My face instantly turned red once my brain processed what I'd said. *VAGINAS?! Out loud. In front of my best friend's sweet, god-fearing mom?*

I locked eyes with my friend; he was staring at me, mortified. He gave me our understood WTF expression: big eyes and raised eyebrows with the slightest head thrust. I could tell he was regretting every decision he made that brought me here.

I was dying inside: embarrassed, regretful, and hating myself for not understanding the basic concept of small talk. I responded with another understood gesture: big-eyed sideways head jerk (a.k.a. "get me out of here"). Needless to say, he never invited me back.

So yeah, maybe strangers and even my own family think I come off as rude when I don't talk to people, but really, I'm just trying not to embarrass myself. As an introvert living with intrusive, unpredictable anxiety, silence is often my safest option. It's part of my survival strategy, part of my mask I wear in public.

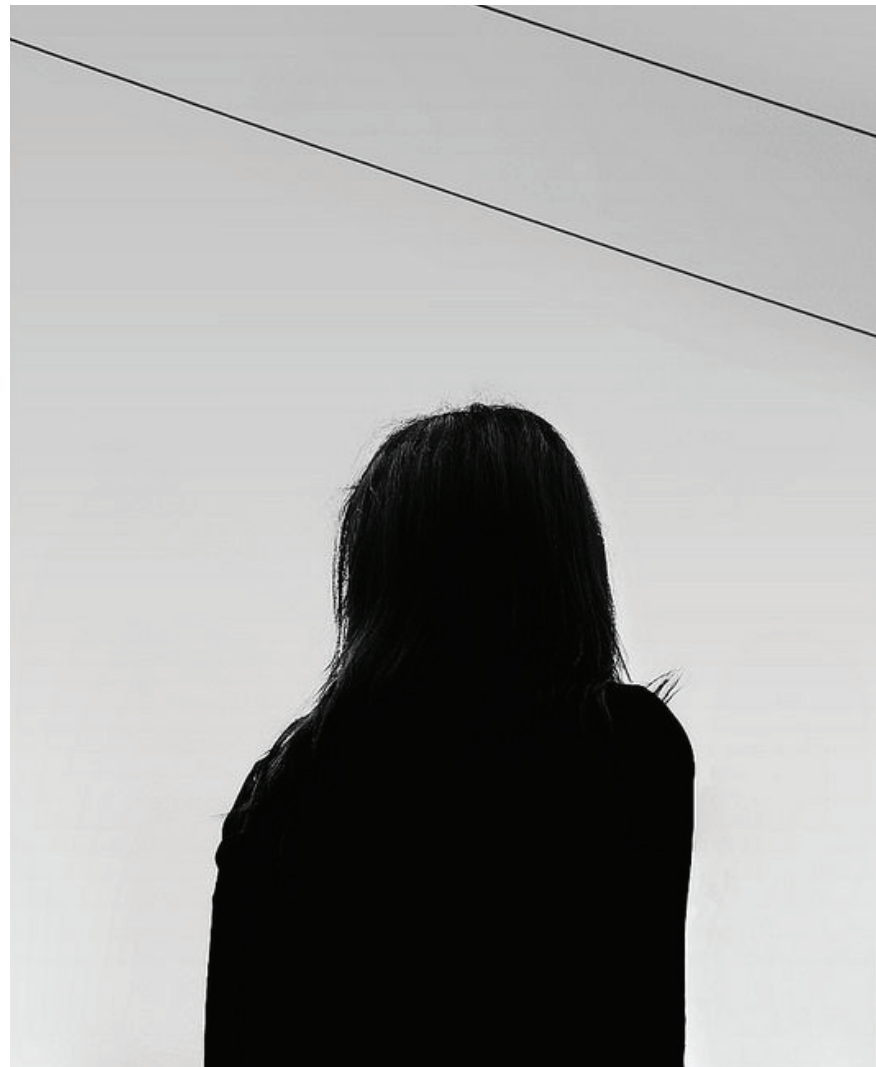
While social settings are clearly a trigger, so is my own body. Anytime I feel nauseous, notice a random palpitation, or see my Fitbit flash a high heart rate, panic takes over. It's fueled by a relentless anxiety monster scratching at the walls of my brain, whispering: *What if I pass out? What if I throw up? What if I'm having a heart attack? What if I die and my baby is alone for hours?* The thoughts never stop.

On really bad days, I have even written goodbye letters to my family and drafted a will, convinced I wasn't going to make it through the night.

Maybe I'm Just Crazy

With my anxiety worsening with age, I desperately sought out help. I have tried therapists who seemed more interested in my family drama than in helping me navigate my symptoms. I met with psychiatrists who prescribed me so much medication that the side effects felt worse than the anxiety itself. Even my cardiologist ran EKGs and provided me with a heart monitor, just for him to tell me my heart is healthy and I should seek mental help.

I remember holding my phone, staring at my perfectly normal blood and EKG results, thinking maybe I'm just crazy. There was no medical reason for me to feel like I was dying. The reassurance from doctors was comforting, but only until I had my next attack.



Even though I struggle with my mental health daily, I keep showing up thanks to the little tips I learned along the way. Before I reluctantly leave my house, I'll dab peppermint oil under my nose to keep that nauseous feeling away. When navigating through crowded thrift shops, I attempt to keep my distance like the good ol' COVID days. For social gatherings, I usually shelter behind someone I know who can handle the small talk for me. Some days, it's exhausting and relentless yet somehow still survivable because I'm still here.

Awareness

I realized that anxiety is one of those invisible disabilities that reshapes daily life in ways that others can't always see. I don't always share how I'm feeling because being on edge is my new normal. I usually suffer in silence, concealing my anxious thoughts because I'm afraid of being a burden or mood killer. Sometimes, I close my eyes and give myself the desperate reminder: *You shouldn't worry about things you can't control.*

However, knowledge has become my biggest weapon. Learning what anxiety does to the body provides me with peace of mind during those uncertain moments. I now know the difference between a panic attack and a heart attack, and I can also recognize when the worst of it is over.

For example, my panic would increase when I shivered during an episode. I originally thought the symptoms were getting worse. Now, I appreciate that sensation. It's just my body's way of releasing excess adrenaline (the panic-inducing hormone), telling me I'm moments away from feeling semi-normal again.

I have also discovered the power of distraction. Finding comfort in an activity or starting a conversation with a loved one gives my mind something new to focus on.



Physical movements help, too. Pushing my feet against the floor helps me focus on the present, grounding myself. Shaking my hands or feet when I start feeling symptoms can release that trapped adrenaline before symptoms worsen. It takes trial and error, but the right coping skills can serve as a reminder that strength is greater than fear.

For those who don’t live with debilitating anxiety, be kind. Be patient. Be considerate of the people around you. Some of us suffer in silence. You never know what struggle someone else is carrying. Oftentimes, it’s the invisible battles that are the hardest to fight.

If you carry anxiety too, you are not broken, and you are not alone. Even when the world feels like one big shopping trip, you will make it to the car. You will make it back home.



About the Author

Amber Lynn Anderson is a nonfiction writer and editor based in Little Rock, Arkansas. Serving as an editorial intern for Et Alia Press and a writing tutor at UA Little Rock’s University Writing Center, she enjoys helping others strengthen their writing while pursuing her interest in editing. She earned her bachelor’s degree in Professional and Technical Writing in May 2026 and will start her master’s program in fall 2026. In her personal life, Amber is a wife and mother who enjoys video games, horror movies, and thrift shopping.