

HEALING THE SYSTEM

bencareydonaldson.com

# What Protectors Show Up When You're Anxious?

## A Self-Assessment

IFS-informed · Educational · Self-reflection

### How to use this self-assessment

When anxiety arrives, it rarely comes alone. In IFS, anxiety is understood not as a disorder but as the activity of protective parts — aspects of your inner system doing their best to keep you safe.

This self-assessment helps you identify which of those protectors tends to show up most strongly for you. There are no right or wrong answers, no scores, and no clinical conclusions. What you'll find at the end is a description that might help you get curious about what's happening inside — and how to approach it with a little more understanding.

Read each question and tick or circle the answer that feels most true. You may find more than one resonates — that's fine. Choose the one that fits most often, or most intensely.

### Educational resource only.

This is an educational self-reflection tool. It is not a clinical assessment and does not constitute a diagnosis of any mental health condition or disorder. Results are intended to support self-awareness and curiosity — not to replace professional evaluation. Any clinical assessment or diagnosis should be conducted by a qualified mental health professional.

Ben Carey Donaldson is a certified IFS practitioner. He is not a licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, or medical doctor. Resources on this site are educational in nature and are not a substitute for professional mental health care.

## Section 1 — How anxiety tends to show up for you

### Q1. When something worrying comes to mind, what does your mind tend to do?

- A It runs through every possible scenario, trying to work out what could go wrong.
- B It loops on the same thought or worry without reaching any conclusion.
- C It becomes very still — almost blank — and you feel cut off from your feelings.
- D It starts generating tasks, plans, or things to research to feel in control.
- E It looks for reassurance — from people, from information, from anything external.

### Q2. How does anxiety tend to feel in your body?

- A Tightness or tension, especially in the chest, shoulders, or jaw.
- B Restlessness — a need to move, fidget, or do something.
- C A kind of heaviness or numbness, like being under water.
- D Heart racing or a fluttery, unsettled feeling in the stomach.
- E A pressure to act immediately, even when you're not sure what to do.

### Q3. When something uncertain or unresolved is hanging over you, you tend to:

- A Keep turning it over in your mind until you find an answer — even if the answer never quite comes.
- B Throw yourself into work, exercise, or other activity to avoid sitting with it.
- C Withdraw or become quiet — not engaging much with others.
- D Reach out to someone to talk it through, or seek information to feel more settled.
- E Make a plan, create a list, or research your options until you feel some sense of order.

## Section 2 — What your protectors are trying to do

**Q4. If you had to describe what your anxious part is trying to protect you from, it would probably be:**

- A Being caught off guard — something going badly wrong that you didn't see coming.
- B Feeling helpless, out of control, or overwhelmed.
- C Being hurt again — emotionally, relationally, or in some other way.
- D Falling short, failing, or being seen as inadequate.
- E Being abandoned, rejected, or fundamentally alone.

**Q5. When you imagine actually letting go of the anxiety — not managing it, but genuinely releasing it — your first reaction is:**

- A Fear that things will fall apart without the vigilance.
- B A worry that you'd become lazy, directionless, or unfocused.
- C A strange sense of emptiness or exposure — like something would be missing.
- D Concern that others would think less of you or take advantage.
- E A kind of disbelief — you're not sure who you'd be without it.

**Q6. When anxiety spikes in social situations, what's most likely happening?**

- A You're scanning for signs of judgement, disapproval, or rejection.
- B You're monitoring your own performance — how you're coming across.
- C You're trying to figure out how to be useful, helpful, or pleasing so others stay warm.
- D You're looking for an exit — wanting to leave before something uncomfortable happens.
- E You're comparing yourself to others and finding yourself lacking.

## Section 3 — Your anxious protector's style

**Q7. When you're in an anxious state, the people around you are most likely to notice that you:**

- A Become quieter, more withdrawn, or hard to reach.
- B Become busier — filling your time or seeming preoccupied.
- C Seek more connection or reassurance than usual.
- D Seem irritable, edgy, or slightly on guard.
- E Keep talking about the worry — as if naming it will dissolve it.

**Q8. What's the relationship between your anxiety and your self-criticism?**

- A The anxiety often triggers self-criticism — you worry, then judge yourself for worrying.
- B The self-criticism comes first — and the anxiety follows.
- C They don't feel separate — they're more like the same part wearing different faces.
- D The self-criticism quiets when you're anxious — the anxiety takes over fully.
- E You tend to project the criticism outward — worry about others' judgements more than your own.

**Q9. When anxiety passes, how do you tend to feel?**

- A Relieved, but bracing for the next wave.
- B A little flat or empty — uncertain what to do with the stillness.
- C Tired, as though something that was holding you upright has let go.
- D Quickly distracted by the next thing — rarely dwelling in the relief.
- E Grateful, but suspicious — like things going quiet means something is about to shift.

# Your Protector Profiles

Recognising what your inner system is doing — and why

Look back at your answers. Notice which letter appeared most often — that is likely your primary protector style. But many people recognise themselves in more than one. Read all the descriptions below and notice what resonates, even if you didn't choose that letter consistently.

These are not diagnoses. They are not personality types. They are descriptions of possible protective strategies one might develop — often a long time ago — for very good reasons. Approach them with curiosity, not judgement.

## A The Planner / The Worrier

A part that believes safety comes from knowing — from thinking through every possibility so nothing catches you off guard.

- 💬 "What is this part afraid will happen if it stops planning?"
- 💬 "How long has it been working this hard to keep you safe?"

## B The Driver / The Doer

A part that turns anxiety into action — filling space with tasks, movement, and productivity so there's no room for the feeling to settle in.

- 💬 "What does this part worry would happen if you stopped moving?"
- 💬 "What would it mean to rest — really rest — without something to show for it?"

## C The Withdrawer / The Numbing Part

A part that creates distance — from others, from feeling, from the situation — as a way of managing what feels like too much.

- 💬 "What is this part protecting you from by pulling you back?"
- 💬 "What would it need to feel safe enough to stay present?"

## D The Reassurance-Seeker

A part that looks outside for what it can't find inside — comfort, certainty, validation that things are okay and you are okay.

- 💬 "What is this part looking for that it hasn't found yet?"
- 💬 "What would it feel like to be that source of reassurance for yourself?"

## E

### The Critic as Protector

A part that uses criticism, comparison, and high standards as a kind of armour — if you see your flaws first, no one else's opinion can hurt you as much.

💬 "What does this part believe will happen if it goes quiet?"

💬 "Is there a younger part it might be trying to protect from feeling not good enough?"

## Going a little deeper — if you'd like to

You don't need to answer these now. You might want to sit with them over a day or two, or return to them when the protector is active.

### Noticing questions

- When did you first notice this part showing up in your life?
- Can you locate it anywhere in your body — does it have a texture, temperature, or weight?
- If it could speak, what would it most want you to understand?
- What does it need from you in order to feel less alone?
- Is there a part of you that's frustrated with this protector? Can you notice both parts at once?

### What to do with this

Understanding your protectors is the beginning of something, not the end. The IFS approach is not to silence these parts or push them away — it's to get curious about them. When a protector feels genuinely seen and understood, it often begins to soften.

If you'd like to explore this further:

- Read the full article this assessment is paired with: [IFS for Anxiety: How Parts Work Helps You Stop Overthinking \(bencareydonaldson.com\)](https://bencareydonaldson.com)
- If you'd like to explore this in a supported context, IFS-informed therapy or coaching can help you work with these parts directly. You can learn more about working with me at [bencareydonaldson.com](https://bencareydonaldson.com).