

**World's Best Worrier**  
**(A Story about Anxiety in Children)**

**By**

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## **Prologue**

*These are stories written to help children and parents understand some mental health issues, and to help them realize that they are not the only ones with these issues. The story is also written to show them that this condition can be improved with treatment. The story is not intended to be a guide to treatment. This story is written in honor of Dr. Sally Schlise whose compassionate care of thousands of cancer patients has improved the lives of many families and neighbors in Door County, WI.*

## Fall, 2010

Hailey was not feeling very excited about going to school today. She had had the same old nightmare last night about getting to a class and not having the correct books and not having her work done. Her stomach was feeling a little queasy and her head felt like there was a headache there waiting to happen. She tried to focus on last Friday in Mrs. Anderson's math class when the weekend assignments were to be given out . . . did she say the problems on pages 111 to 115 or was it 119? She sure hoped it was 115 because that's all she had done and it was too late now to do anymore; the bus would be here in a couple of minutes. She turned to her friend Heather and asked her what the assignment was, and she confirmed that it was only up to page 115. With an audible sigh of relief, Hailey gathered up her backpack, and waited for the bus. She could see the headlights of the school bus coming which would take them to Elementary School 24, her home away from home. It took about 30 minutes to get there, but she enjoyed the bouncy ride in the back of the bus and the opportunity to speak with her friends. Her friend, Carol, asked her if she would be trying out for the volleyball team and she told her that she was. Carol told Hailey that she was also going to try to make the team so they agreed to meet after the tryouts the following day and sit together on the bus for the ride home.

Hailey made it to her first class, geography, in plenty of time, but she started worrying that Mrs. Malone would call on her and she would not know the answer. This had never happened to her in the past, but it seemed that today was just the type of day when it could happen. As it turned out Hailey was not called on, but this did not prevent the worry from returning in each class. It went away as her last class was ending. She went down to the gym but almost left because it seemed so unlikely to her that she would make it through the tryouts. She decided to stay because she had told Carol she would do it. The coach said that she would be posting the names of the team members on the following day, and she and Carol rode home together on the bus. She was sure that she didn't make the team and she had trouble keeping it off her mind. She found that this was even more of an issue when she was trying to get to sleep that night. She also

found herself not wanting to go to sleep some nights for fear she would have the same old nightmare about arriving at a class and not having the right materials for the class.

In the morning she got ready for school and found herself double checking her backpack to make sure she had all her assignments. She went out to the bus stop early and found her friend Heather was already there. Heather asked her, "How did the tryouts go?"

"They went OK, but I don't think I made it," she replied.

"I'll bet you did; you're a really good player," Heather remarked. "Besides, you always think the worst is going to happen and it usually doesn't. You are a first class worrywart."

Hailey didn't answer Heather but thought there was a lot of truth in what her friend said. She was able to run by the gym before her second hour class and found she had made the volleyball team! She checked and found that Carol had made the team too, so she high-fived her in the hallway a few minutes later. She could hardly wait to tell her family. The rest of the school day passed rather slowly since she was in a hurry to get home and tell her good news to her mother. She got on the bus and sat towards the back as she usually did, but she noticed that "Rhinestone" Rossetti was looking at her in funny way; later she would remember that Rhinestone didn't make the cut for the team. As she passed her row on the bus she failed to notice Rossetti's foot in the aisle, and she stumbled forward just missing a heavy metal handhold on the aisle seat with her head. When she heard Rhinestone giggling behind her she knew this was not an accident. After she got her balance she stumbled into a seat, but noticed that nobody else was laughing. That made her feel a little better.

Her mother did a little bit of her old high school cheerleading routine when she heard the news, and it made Hailey feel good to see it being done in her honor. She also told her mother about Rhinestone. Her mother told her Rhinestone wasn't worth worrying about, and her mother was right. The following week Rhinestone had someone else to be jealous of and Hailey was off her list. Hailey found herself worrying that her teammates might feel that she didn't measure up. Her mother tried to convince her that fretting was not a good use of her time, but the worries seem to have a life of their own and would pop up in her head unbidden at random times. She would worry about grades, about her sports

abilities, and even about her physical appearance. She wished she could be confident about herself like Carol. That night she woke up worrying whether anyone would ask her to the Homecoming dance. She was glad when morning came and she heard her alarm ring because it meant she wouldn't be waking up with a worry again. She thought it was kind of ironic that she was worrying about worrying. She had to be the world's best worrier, or at least the best worrier in the state.

Hailey woke up in good spirits the following morning. Fall was her favorite time of year. She loved the reds and yellows that seemed to cover every tree and bush, and she loved the weather . . . it wasn't too cold and it wasn't too hot. The farm fields were bulging with grain, and the farmer's market was loaded with her favorite vegetables and flowers. She wished October lasted for ten months, and winter lasted for only one. She had gone through her assignment book twice last night, and as far as she knew she was caught up on assignments. She then told herself that her feeling of being caught up was just the time that she had probably missed something so she checked her assignment book again, but it verified the same thing that it did the previous evening-she was caught up. She had to be sure so she called her friend, Lauren, but this only confirmed what her assignment book had told her. Despite this she had the same old feeling that something was wrong, or that something would go wrong. She felt her earlier happiness start to ebb and the same list of worries that she called her "standard worries" started to assert themselves: what if the bus crashed, what if a tornado hit the school, what if something happened to her parents? Fortunately when her mother called up to her, and let her know breakfast was ready the worry list was terminated.

Today the bus ride was uneventful, and she enjoyed watching the autumn colors drift by her window. When she got to school, she discovered once again that she had no missing assignments, in fact she was ahead in completing her assignments.

Relieved, she headed off to her first hour class. She was determined not to let outside concerns interfere with her concentration this morning, and she did better than usual. She was half way through the class when she started thinking about her term paper in social studies, and whether she had understood the assignment correctly. What if Ms. Bond had wanted more information about slavery and less about the military history of the year 1861? She had been thinking about this for only about five minutes when her geography teacher asked her her opinion about “the conditions of the workers working on the canal.”

She replied, “There were many problems with sanitation and diseases due to the tropical conditions in Panama when the canal was being constructed.”

Her teacher replied, “I would agree with you, but can you tell us about the conditions workers faced building the Suez Canal?”

She bounced back with, “My answer would apply to the Suez Canal as well.”

This was not a bad answer, but the damage had been done; it was obvious she hadn’t been paying attention. Now she was embarrassed, and her anxiety kicked up a notch. This was particularly obvious when her friend Vicki tapped her on the shoulder after class to ask her a question, and she jumped about a foot in the air.

“Don’t do that,” she hissed.

“Do what?” Vicki replied.

“Sneak up on me like that!” she said.

“I didn’t sneak up on you; I just asked you a question,” Vicki responded.

“Whatever,” said Hailey as she hurried away for her next class.

Hailey was really ready for a break when lunchtime rolled around. She sat down next to Vicki and apologized for being snippy earlier that morning. She told her friend, “I’ve been on pins and needles lately; sometimes it’s so bad I can’t concentrate in class.”

“That’s probably because you’re sitting next to Bill Watson in two of your classes; he’s so cute I couldn’t concentrate either,” she replied.

Hailey said, “It’s got nothing to do with Bill Watson; it’s about worries pushing into my brain when I don’t want them there. It’s about always thinking things are going to turn out wrong and building small problems up in my mind until they look like national disasters.”

“Well if it’s that bad, why don’t you talk to Mrs. Lehan about it; she’s your counselor, isn’t she?” Vicki asked.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Hailey said as she got up and headed over to the guidance office. There she lucked out because Mrs. Lehan had decided to eat her lunch in her office that day, but asked Hailey to come in anyway. They discussed the problem and Mrs. Lehan asked if it would be OK if she called Hailey’s mom about the problem. Hailey said it was, and they mutually decided that Hailey would see a friend of her mother’s who was a child and adolescent psychiatrist named Virginia Barlow. Hailey thanked Mrs. Lehan for her advice, and she told Hailey she would like to see her back in three or four weeks to see how she was doing. Hailey readily agreed because she was pleased that something was going to happen to stop the worrying. Unfortunately this didn’t last long because they had a very bad storm that night with a great deal of thunder and lightning. Hailey was quite frightened of this type of storm, especially at night. When there was a particularly bad bout of lightning and thunder, Hailey let out a scream and her mother rushed into her room wanting to know what the matter was. Hailey was too frightened to speak, but her mother knew what to do. She held Hailey for a long time, and then she sat by Hailey’s bed until she fell asleep.

Three days later, Hailey and her parents went to see Dr. Barlow. She was soft-spoken and pleasant to work with. She asked Hailey to tell her what her concerns and history were, and then she asked questions about the family. To Hailey’s surprise, she learned that many people on both sides of the family suffered from anxiety disorders. Because of this, her parents had been monitoring her to see if she would have problems with anxiety so they were not too surprised when she told that she was. Dr. Barlow recommended that Hailey start working in therapy

to see how she would do. She told Hailey that if the therapy went well, they would probably not need medicine (usually antidepressants). If they were not progressing in therapy, she said that medication might be an option depending on how the family felt about that. The therapy was effective, but it went slowly and Hailey had to do some things she was not completely comfortable with such as attempting to do things that caused her to feel anxious like presenting a paper she wrote to her class. She practiced this many times with her family ahead of time and gradually got more comfortable with it. By the time she actually presented her paper, she could have done it by memory. All the while Dr. Barlow was teaching her relaxation techniques, and reminding her not to blow the task out proportion or assume a bad outcome. When the day came to do the presentation, she was surprised to find that it was much easier than she had expected. As time went on, she saw Dr. Barlow less frequently, and finally the day came when Dr. Barlow told her that she didn't need to see her on a regular basis anymore. She told Hailey that she had done a very good job, and if she needed help in the future she would be available. That was the last time she saw Dr. Barlow, but not the last time she used what she had learned to deal with anxiety.