

All Footballers Experience: Anxiety

(Brighton & Hove Albion)

Daniel Matharu

Welcome to "All Footballers Experience: Anxiety"

Dear Reader and Supporting Adult

This book is special. It's not meant to be read all at once, like a regular story. Instead, it's designed to be experienced one section at a time, allowing young readers to properly understand and practice each anxiety management technique they learn from their Albion heroes.

Why One Section at a Time?

Just as footballers don't learn all their skills in one training session, managing anxiety takes time and practice. Each section of this book introduces a new technique through a different Albion player. By focusing on one section at a time, readers can:

- Really understand each player's experience with anxiety
- Practice each technique properly
- Build confidence gradually
- Avoid feeling overwhelmed
- Make the learning journey enjoyable

How to Use This Book

1. Read one section (one player's story and technique)
2. Try the practice activities together
3. Use the QR code to access additional resources
4. Spend 1-2 days practicing that technique in daily life
5. When you feel comfortable, move on to the next section

For Supporting Adults

Your role is crucial in this journey. Each section includes:

- Technical explanations of the anxiety management techniques
- Tips for supporting practice
- Signs of progress to look for
- Discussion prompts
- Guidance on when to seek additional support

Remember, this isn't a race. Some techniques might take longer to master than others, and that's perfectly okay. The goal is understanding and practical skill-building, not finishing the book quickly.

About Jude / Belle

Why Football Is Important to Him/Her

It Gives Him a Place to Belong:

Jude feels part of something bigger when he's playing football. Whether it's with his friends at the park or watching Albion, it's about teamwork and connection.

As someone who sometimes struggles to connect at school, football gives him common ground with others.

A Safe Outlet for Emotions:

Football allows Jude to express joy, frustration and excitement in ways that feel natural.

Running around the pitch helps him release pent-up energy and immersing himself in watching Albion play, unknowingly calms his anxiety.

A Source of Confidence:

On the pitch, Jude sometimes feels like a different person—focused and brave. Even if he makes mistakes, he knows his teammates have his back.

Small successes, like scoring a goal, making a tackle or improving a trick, build his self-esteem.

A Bridge to His Heroes:

Watching Albion and collecting stickers is more than a hobby - it's a way for Jude to connect with players who inspire him to overcome challenges.

For Young Readers

You're about to go on an amazing journey with some of Albion's biggest stars! They're going to share their own experiences with anxiety and teach you their special techniques for handling it. Remember:

- Take your time
- Practice each technique
- Ask questions
- Be proud of your progress

Are you ready to start your anxiety-management journey with your Albion heroes?

Let's learn how to understand and tame the Worry Monster...

Jude bounced his football against the faded blue patch on the wall of his bedroom. He caught it perfectly on his instep just like his hero Kaoru Mitoma, whilst ignoring the rhythmic thud echoing through the small space. A bedroom wasn't the best place to practise football skills, and his mum always complained about the constant banging, but Jude loved the repetitive nature of this skill.

Posters of Albion players - Kaoru Mitoma mid celebration, Danny Welbeck taking a free kick, Lewis Dunk making a tackle, covered most of his bedroom. His cluttered desk was piled with schoolbooks and stray Panini stickers that he needed to swap with his mates.

The faint smell of his mum cooking Jude's favourite meal of spaghetti Bolognese wafted up the stairs.

Jude had practised catching the ball with his instep a hundred times but today felt different. Today was Saturday, and Saturdays meant football in the park, with his mates.

Usually, that would make Jude's heart soar with excitement. Football was his absolute favourite thing in the entire world. But lately, even though he still loved football more than anything, something strange had been happening to his body when he thought about playing.

It started with his stomach doing backflips, like he'd just gone down a really big slide. Then his hands would get all sweaty, making it hard to grip the ball. His heart would start racing super-fast, like he'd just run around the pitch ten times. Sometimes he even felt a bit shaky, even though he wasn't cold at all.

His mum had a name for it - anxiety.

Jude called it his worry monster.

The confusing thing was that these feelings showed up even when he was thinking about things he loved doing. Like right now - his stomach was tied in tight knots just thinking about playing football in the park, even though football was his favourite thing in the world. The worry monster didn't seem to care if something was fun or not; it could make anything feel scary.

The worry monster often showed up on Sunday evenings before school on Monday, when he had to answer questions in class, or when he had to partner up with someone for group work, or even when he was just thinking about his upcoming school football tournament.

It was like having an unwelcome shadow that followed him everywhere, whispering doubts and fears in a voice only he could hear, growing louder with every passing second. It said things like "What if you mess up?" or "What if they laugh at you?"

Through his window, Jude could see the local park where his friends were already gathering for their usual Saturday kickabout. He recognised them all - Malik from his class, Sarah who could nutmeg anyone, and Tommy from Jude's football team who always wore his Albion away kit.

The park's towering oak trees swayed gently in the breeze, but to Jude, the scene felt distant, as though separated by an invisible wall of nerves. Jude had played many times before, but recently, the worry monster had been making it harder and harder to join in.

"What if you miss an easy pass?" the worry monster whispered, making Jude's stomach twist even tighter.

"What if you let in a goal and everyone blames you?"

"What if they think you're not good enough?"

"Don't play today Jude, then you can't mess anything up."

Even though his stomach was in knots, he remembered the feeling of scoring his first goal last month. His friends had cheered so loudly, and for once, he'd felt like a hero. "Football is the one place where I feel like I belong," he thought.

When Jude was on the pitch, he didn't think about schoolwork, what others thought of him, or even the worry monster. All that mattered was the ball at his feet.

Jude hugged his gold World Cup 2022 football tight to his chest, trying to quiet the monster's voice, but it just seemed to be getting louder.

His eyes drifted to his prized possession - his Panini sticker album. He'd been collecting stickers all season, and it always made him feel better to look through the Albion players in there. Maybe he should do that instead of going to the park...

"Yes, that feels safer," Jude told himself, "I'll stay at home and flick through my Panini album."

As he flipped through the pages, he came to his favourite sticker – Kaoru Mitoma celebrating a goal, with a huge smile on his face and his arms spread wide with pure joy. Jude wished he could feel that confident, that free from worry.

"I bet Kaoru never feels anxious," Jude mumbled, tracing his finger over the card.

That's when something magical happened. The sticker shimmered, its edges glowing with a golden light that spilled out across the pages of his Panini sticker album.

Jude blinked, his heart pounding as the glow grew brighter, filling the room with a warm, comforting radiance. Suddenly, the light condensed into a figure sitting cross-legged on the carpet – it was someone Jude instantly recognised.

Kaoru Mitoma himself, in full Albion kit, was grinning up at him as if stepping out of a dream!

"Actually, that's not true at all, Jude," Kaoru said, his voice calm and filled with warmth.

"Everyone experiences anxiety sometimes, Jude," Kaoru said kindly. "Even Premier League footballers. Especially Premier League footballers. Want to talk about it?"

Jude's mouth fell open, but before he could say anything, his mum called up the stairs. "Jude? I heard voices. Is everything okay, love?"

"Mum!" Jude called back, immediately, remembering the very important rule she had taught him about never talking to anyone he doesn't know, even if they seem friendly and even if they were a Premier League football star...

"Can you come here right away please? Something really strange has happened!" his voice squeaking with excitement. "You'll never believe this - Kaoru Mitoma is in my room! He came out of my sticker album!"

Footsteps hurried up the stairs, and Jude's mum appeared in the doorway. Her eyes widened when she saw Kaoru sitting there. "Oh my... you're really... but how...?"

"You did exactly the right thing calling for your mum straight away, Jude," Kaoru said with an approving nod. "It's super important to always tell a trusted grown-up when something unusual happens, even if it's someone you recognise from football or TV. We should never talk to anyone without checking with an adult first."

Jude's mum sat down on his bed, smiling proudly at her son. "That's right, love. You followed our safety rule perfectly." She turned to Kaoru. "This is certainly unusual, but since I'm here and I can see it's really you, would you like to stay and talk with us?"

Kaoru stood up politely. "Thank you, Mrs. Matharu. I know this seems strange, but I'm here because Jude needs someone who understands what he's going through with his worry monster. Sometimes the best help comes from unexpected places." His warm smile and gentle manner immediately put them both at ease.

After they'd caught their breath and pinched themselves a few times, Jude's mum sat down on his bed. "Well, this is certainly unusual, but if anyone can help Jude understand his anxiety better, it would be you, Kaoru."

Kaoru shuffled his bum, getting comfortable. "Before we talk about anxiety, Jude, can you share a memory with me? Tell me about a time when your heart was racing, and your hands were shaking."

Jude thought for a moment. "Well... last week I had to read my story out loud in front of my whole class. My hands were shaking, and my heart was beating really fast."

"And did you read your story in the end?" Kaoru asked with an encouraging smile.

"Yeah, I did! Mrs. Thompson said it was brilliant, and everyone clapped!" Jude's face lit up at the memory, remembering how proud of himself he was.

"That's a perfect example of something really important I want to explain," Kaoru said.

"What you felt then - that was nervousness, not anxiety. And you know what? Nerves are actually pretty cool! They show up when we're about to do something that matters to us. Those butterflies in your tummy, the shaky hands - they're just your body's way of saying 'Hey, this is important to you!'"

Jude looked puzzled. "But isn't that the same as anxiety?"

"It might feel similar in your body, but there's a big difference," Kaoru explained. "Nerves are like that excited, jumpy feeling you get right before a football match kicks off - your heart's beating fast because you can't wait to play! They actually help you do better! They don't stop you from doing things. Like when you read out your story - you were nervous, but you still read it out loud."

"Kaoru gestured toward the window, where they could still see Malik, Sarah and Tommy playing football. "But anxiety... that's what was happening earlier when you decided you'd rather look at your Panini album than go play with your friends in the park. Even though you love football more than anything, anxiety was trying to stop you from doing it completely."

"Oh," Jude said quietly, he was beginning to understand the difference. "So nerves are okay?"

"Nerves are more than okay - they're good! They mean you care about something. I still get nervous before every match, and that helps me stay focused and sharp. But anxiety?" Kaoru's voice softened. "That's when the worry monster tries to stop you from doing things you love altogether. That's when you might need a little help putting it back in its place."

"That makes so much sense," said Jude's mum. "I remember you being nervous before your class trip last year, but you still got on the bus and had a great time. But lately, you've been missing football in the park completely..."

"This is what makes anxiety so confusing," Kaoru said, sitting back down. "It can take our favourite things and make them feel scary. You know, Jude, I felt exactly the same way you're feeling now before the biggest moment of my career so far."

Jude leaned forward eagerly. "Really? You get anxiety too?"

"Yes, Jude, I do," Kaoru smiled. "And that's why I'm here - to help you understand the difference, and to show you how to be the boss of the worry monster when it tries to stop you doing things you love. Want to learn how?"

Jude nodded.

Kaoru continued. "Remember the game against Chelsea at The Amex when we won 3-0? The week before we had just lost 7-0 to Nottingham Forest. During the Forest game we tried to play bravely and attack a lot during our game, but it didn't work out well." His voice grew softer. "So, before the next game, which was Chelsea, my stomach was in knots. My legs were shaking so much that I could hardly walk onto the pitch. That worry monster? It was screaming so loud in my head I could barely hear the crowd."

"But you stepped up anyway," Jude whispered, remembering watching Kaoru's unbelievable goal on TV that helped the Seagulls to beat their Chelsea rivals.

"I did. And you know what? As the game went on, I grew in confidence and the worry monster became quieter and quieter because I used some special techniques to help me."

During the game and with the score at 0-0, Kaoru did something that people said was the goal of the season. The commentator said it was 'absolute genius,' meaning it was something very, very special!

Albion's keeper, Bart Verbruggen spotted Kaoru high up the pitch in Chelsea's half. Bart kicked the ball really high and far and Kaoru caught it perfectly as it came down from up in the sky. He then moved past the defender and curled the ball into the far-right corner of the goal to make it 1-0 to the Albion. It was the stepping stone to a brilliant victory.

"Even though I was so scared in the days before the kick off, special techniques I have learned helped me to work through these fears. My teammates, my family and my trusted friends all helped me to understand these feelings. That's when I learned something really important about anxiety and mental health: we don't have to face it alone."

Jude's mum smiled encouragingly. "That's right. Just like you can always talk to me about your worries, love."

"Exactly," Kaoru agreed. "And you know what else? Some of my other teammates have their own ways of handling anxiety. Would you like to meet them and learn their special tricks for taming the worry monster?"

Jude's eyes lit up, but then he glanced uncertainly at his mum.

"It's okay," Kaoru assured them both. "I think someone is waiting for us right now in your back garden. He's got something really cool to show you about breathing that helps him when he's feeling anxious before a big match."

Jude's mum nodded. "As long as you're just in the garden where I can see you, that sounds wonderful."

"Come on then," Kaoru said, holding out his hand to Jude.
"Ready to learn how to be the boss of that worry monster?"

Jude took a deep breath, feeling a tiny bit braver already. He picked up his backpack and placed his Panini album inside it. He went everywhere that Panini album!

"Ready!" He replied...

Part 2 - Lewis Dunk

"Come on," Kaoru said, leading Jude into the garden. "There's someone I want you to meet who knows a lot about dealing with worry." Jude followed Kaoru, his heart thudding with every step. The crisp smell of freshly cut grass filled the air, and sunlight danced across the dewy blades, making the space feel almost magical.

There, sitting on the garden bench beneath the oak tree was Lewis Dunk, Albion's captain. His dark brown hair glinted in the sunlight as he sat with his eyes closed and his hands resting lightly on his knees. He was breathing deeply in a way that made him seem calm and powerful at the same time. This energy flowed into the whole garden itself.

"Hi Jude," Lewis said warmly, opening his eyes and smiling in a way that made Jude feel as if him and Lewis had been friends for ages. "Kaoru told me you've been having some trouble with the worry monster too?"

Jude nodded shyly, his hands fidgeting at his sides. He couldn't believe he was standing in his own garden with Kaoru Mitoma and Lewis Dunk!

"You know what?" Lewis leaned forward and his smile turned slightly playful. "I'm actually what you might call a professional worrier. My brain loves to create lots and lots of 'what if' questions, all day long!"

"Really?" Jude's eyes widened. "But you're the Albion captain!"

"Being captain doesn't stop the worrying," Lewis chuckled. "Sometimes I worry about silly things, like if I remembered to pack my lucky socks. Other times I worry about bigger things, like if I'll make the right decisions in a match. My mind can be like a hamster on a wheel, just running and running with worried thoughts."

"I do that too!" Jude exclaimed. "Like this morning, I kept thinking: What if I mess up in football? What if I forget how to control the ball? What if my shoelaces come undone? What if...."

"What if it starts raining? What if I get hungry? What if a spaceship lands in the middle of the game?" Lewis finished with a gentle smile. "That's what worry does - it makes our brains think of every possible thing that could go wrong, even the really unlikely stuff, like a spaceship landing in the middle of the game!"

Kaoru nodded. "And it's not just about football, is it, Lewis?"

"Not at all. Yesterday, I spent ages worrying about whether I'd put enough food in my cat's bowl. Then I worried about if I'd locked my front door. Then I started worrying about worrying too much!" Lewis rolled his eyes. "Sound familiar, Jude?"

Jude thought about how he'd checked his schoolbag three times yesterday to make sure his homework was there. "Yeah... sometimes I can't stop thinking about things that might go wrong - like what if my homework fell out of my bag, or what if I forgot to put my name on it, or what if I did all the wrong questions?"

"That's called General Anxiety," Lewis explained. "It's when your worry monster gets a bit too excited and starts worrying about everything, even normal everyday stuff. But I've learned some really cool tricks to calm it down. Want to learn my favourite one?"

Jude nodded eagerly, he was now beginning to relax in the company of his new friends.

"It's called 'Worry Time.' Instead of letting worries bounce around in your head all day, you give them a special time to show up – like a worry monster playdate!" Lewis grinned, leaning in slightly.

"You set a timer, say five minutes, and during that time, you let yourself think about every single worry you can imagine. Nothing is too big or too small. Imagine it to be a little box that you open up, just for the worry monster," Lewis said, creating a small square with his hands.

"When you've opened the box, you let all the worries tumble out, like pieces of paper with thoughts written on them. Then, when the worry monster's time is up, you gather the papers, fold them back up and place them back in the box until tomorrow."

Jude tilted his head. "Even silly ones? Like, what if I forget my water bottle for a match?"

"Especially the silly ones," Lewis said, laughing. "When you give your worries permission to pop up during Worry Time, you take control. You're telling the worry monster, 'Okay, you've got five minutes. Say what you need to say, but after that, I'm the boss again.'"

Jude looked thoughtful. "But what if I still feel worried after Worry Time?"

"That's a great question," Lewis replied. "It's normal for some worries to try sneaking back out of the box later on. When that happens, you remind the worry monster that its playdate is over. You can say, 'Sorry, worry monster, your time is up. See you tomorrow!' And if you really need to, you can write the worry down on a real piece of paper so you can save it for the next Worry Time. That way, you're not ignoring your worries – you're just keeping them in their place."

Jude frowned slightly. "But what if it's something really important, like a big school project or a football tournament? Won't the worry just come back all day?"

Lewis nodded. "Sometimes it might. That's why it's good to have other tools to help – like talking to someone you trust, breaking big worries into smaller steps, or using a trick like Box Breathing to calm your body. But you'd be surprised how much smaller worries feel when they know they've already had their turn to speak."

Jude considered this for a moment, imagining himself setting a timer, opening the box and letting the worry monster say everything it wanted. "It sounds... kind of weird. But also... kind of smart. Like, I get to decide when I listen, not the worry monster."

"Exactly!" Lewis said, smiling warmly. "It's about taking back control. Instead of letting worries interrupt your day whenever they feel like it, you get to say, 'Not now. I'll deal with you later.' And the best part? Sometimes, by the time Worry Time comes around, you realise that some of those worries weren't as big as they seemed."

Jude's eyes brightened. "So it's like putting the worry monster in time-out?"

"Exactly!" Lewis said. "It's your mind, and you're in charge. Now, once you've given your worries their proper time, you're ready to move on—and that's when a technique like Box Breathing can help you stay calm and focused. I use it all the time. Want to give it a go?"

Jude nodded enthusiastically - he couldn't wait to hear what Lewis had to say next.

Lewis held up his finger. "Imagine you're drawing a square in the air with me. We'll breathe along each side of the box. Ready?"

Jude nodded, watching carefully as Lewis began to trace an invisible square.

"Now, as we draw each side of the box, think of it as building something solid and strong – a calm, strong space for your mind."

"Up the first side," Lewis said, moving his finger upward, "Breathe in slowly through your nose. One... two... three... four. Feel the air inside you, as if you're filling your body with cool, fresh air, like you're filling up a balloon with air gently."

Jude followed, his chest rising as he breathed in deeply.

"Across the top," Lewis continued, moving his finger to the right. "Hold that breath for four counts. One... two... three... four. Feel the air still inside of you like it's giving your body and mind a little break, as if it's pausing to rest before the next move,"

Jude held his breath and his shoulders began to relax.

"Down the other side," Lewis said, tracing his finger downwards. "Breathe out slowly through your mouth. One... two... three... four. Let the air leave your body gently, as if you're slowing letting the air out of a football."

Jude let his breath out slowly, feeling a surprising sense of calm through his chest.

"And finally, across the bottom," Lewis said, moving his finger to complete the square. "Hold for four with empty lungs. One... two... three... four. This pause gives your body and mind a moment to rest, ready for the next breath."

Jude hesitated at first, unsure about the empty pause, but when he completed the square, a small smile crept onto his face. "It's like... my mind got quieter."

"Exactly," Lewis said nodding, proud of Jude that he'd completed this simple, but important exercise.

"Each time you complete the square, you're telling your body and your mind that it's safe, calm, and in control. The magic is in the rhythm - steady, smooth and at the same pace. No surprises, just a pattern your mind can hold onto. If counting to four feels too much, start at two and work up as you get better at this skill."

Kaoru chimed in. "This is something that all of us Albion players use, especially before big matches! Sometimes I imagine the lines are glowing, lighting up as I breathe along them "

They practised together, Lewis and Kaoru guiding Jude through several rounds. "In... hold... out... hold..." Each time they traced the invisible box in the air with their fingers.

After a few rounds, Jude's shoulders dropped and he let out a small laugh. "My head feels clearer!" he said, surprised. "It's like I built something invisible that makes me feel better - like a little breathing fortress!"

"That's the magic of Box Breathing," Lewis smiled. "When your worry monster is being extra loud, you can draw your invisible box anywhere - in class, before a match, even in bed if worries are keeping you awake. The best part is, once you know the pattern, you can just picture the box in your head while you breathe. It's like having a secret superpower - nobody can see you're doing it!"

"And remember," Kaoru added, "like anything, the more you practice the easier it gets. It's like training for a match, every time you do it, you'll get better at keeping the worry monster offside and have Albion's special calm-down magic working for you whenever you need it!"

"Remember," Lewis said, "some worry is normal - it means you care about things. But if worry is stopping you from doing stuff you love, like playing football in the park with your friends, that's when you need to use these tricks to show it who's boss!"

Kaoru smiled proudly at Jude. "You know what I've learned Jude - often, the difference between anxiety and excitement is the story we tell ourselves about those feelings."

Jude looked at Kaoru and smiled, as if what he had just said had really made an impact.

"Ready to meet someone else?" Asked Kaoru, as a tall figure appeared through the garden gate.

Jude took a deep belly breath and nodded, already feeling a bit braver...