

# On learning to be gentle with yourself



Songwriter Anna B Savage discusses the merits of mistakes, the bumps in walking a nonlinear path, navigating criticism, and the importance in taking care of your mental health

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As told to Sammy Maine, 2860 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Mental health](#), [Time management](#), [Process](#).

**You developed a practice of doing morning pages for your new album *In|FLUX*. Do you think it's helpful to create a routine when you're trying to focus on one specific project? Or has routine always been part of your practice?**

I'm terrible at routines, normally. I feel like I have no routine except for my one therapy session each week and when that doesn't happen, I'm totally out of whack. Specifically for this, it felt really important to get into a routine because I wanted to train the muscle and to make it feel like I was showing up each day. I'm not looking for some divine inspiration, I'm not looking for some wild things to happen, I'm just showing up and doing the work, and I was just trusting myself. In getting rid of my demons in the morning with the morning pages, I could then actually do work and show up properly rather than being plagued by negative thoughts which sometimes happens to me. I'm doing transpersonal psychotherapy at the moment and I've been in it for two and a half years. So it's been really nice actually seeing the way that things have changed. Also, as far as routines go, it's quite useful for your body to know when you're hungry, when you're going to wake up, when you're going to go to sleep. I've never had a nine-to-five job, but part of me thinks that I would love it just for that aspect of having a well-trodden routine. Also, because it makes breaking routines so much fun.

**Your album *In|FLUX* seems to act as a reprieve from negative self-talk. Aside from the morning pages, what tools have you put in place for yourself?**

One of the most important things I've realized is that I can't leave that kind of negativity behind. It's not a linear path where I start at the beginning with all the negative thoughts, and I go through therapy and I come out the other end and I never have to see them again. When I started therapy, I thought that's what was going to happen. Now, it's about learning that it's a part of me and a part of what happens, but also learning to be very gentle with that part; sometimes it will overtake me a little bit. Initially in my therapy journey I'd be like, 'I haven't been therapized enough, I'm not fixed.' I thought I was fixed, I thought I was fine. But the longer I do it the more I'm like okay. It's an influx, it's the movement from one to the other and knowing that there is a movement and it will pass.

**Are there things that you put in place while you're working on a project to watch out for your mental health?**

I will do something for a while and then it will taper off, and then I'll feel a little bit guilty. I used to be like why can't I keep anything going? Why can't I sustain anything? This feels like I'm failing repeatedly. But I think I feel so much less guilty now. I have kept a diary since I was 11; I don't keep it every day and I'll go through phases of keeping it for three months and then not looking at it for months. I think up until I was about 25, I was like what is wrong with me? Why can't I just write in my diary every day? Then I realized that I've

kept a diary since I was 11 which means that I've been keeping a diary for 14 years. Just because it's not each day, it didn't feel like that and I think that really helped me to just be gentle with myself. So putting things like morning pages in place, I know they make me feel better. When I do them, I feel really proud of myself and I give myself a pat on the back. But I don't always manage to do them and when I don't... I think it's as important learning to do them as it is being okay with sometimes not doing them.

**Your career has been very nonlinear, it's really cool to see you crafting your own path in that way and doing things at your own pace. You didn't release anything for five years after your 2015 EP. Were you creatively stuck? What do you do when you are?**

That was a really strange time because I'd released this EP and it had loads of nice things said about it. My life didn't change but it felt like it was doing really well but I also had the lowest self-esteem of my entire life. I was in this weird moment where I thought well that I've tricked everyone into thinking that this is good when actually it's not. Or I've made one good thing and I'll never be able to recreate that. There's also that pressure where you've just started that you've got to get more stuff out as quickly as possible. I think the combination of those, and also hearing other people's voices about the songs. I don't need to hear everyone else's opinion on my stuff that is about me, and I think it took me a really long time to realize that. Those five years were a completely unintentional hiatus. I was slowly building the courage and the resilience and the power in myself to be able to be like, 'okay, I'm just going to try this out and I'm going to try and push away all of those tweets or Instagram comments or emails or reviews or things that I've read other people saying about me.' I tried to pretend I didn't have an audience. I wrote my first album A Common Turn and then it took me ages to get it recorded because I'd burnt basically all except one bridge in the industry. I didn't really know how to go about any of it, and I didn't really have any money so it was hard to record it. It was super useful because that felt like the biggest hill I will ever have to climb. I also didn't read any reviews from that point on. It's one of the best lines in the sand that I've drawn for myself that I haven't moved from.

**What's your relationship with criticism like now?**

Well it's that thing, isn't it? You can hear 10,000 nice things and one bad thing and the one bad thing will be basically etched into the back of your eyelids. Every time you close your eyes you'll hear that, but the good things will just wash over you. That's my relationship with criticism. I'm stupidly sensitive. But the more I learn about myself and the more I build myself, the less those comments mean and the more I realize that everyone has an opinion about everything.

**I really love the music video for the lead single, and how the album artwork continues this theme of exploring different facets of ourselves. Do you see a differentiation between Anna B Savage, the artist, and Anna B Savage, who I'm talking to right now?**

I do feel like I differentiate myself from Anna B Savage. That middle initial is really useful, even though it is my middle initial. I don't use that in my day-to-day life, because I feel like if you don't differentiate yourself from your music, especially now when on Spotify you see literal quantitative numbers of how many people like you--how many people have listened to that song, how many people listen to you per month, how many people are listening to this other band who've also come up at the same time. There's too much data around for you to not take that on. So there has to be a line, but I also feel like it is entirely me and it's the most honest representation of me. It's funny to me because of the influx thing, it is both. I have distance from Anna B Savage, but I also am completely inextricably entwined to the music and the output and the creation and I love having a handle on all of the different things that are going on. It is both ultimately.

**You made your EP by yourself and then you brought in William Doyle for your first full length album. Then you've worked with more people on this album. How does collaboration make you a better artist?**

I love collaboration so much, and it definitely makes me a better artist. I really love people, I find them infinitely interesting. I think maybe that's also partly why I love therapy so much, because it not only teaches me about me but it teaches me about my interactions with other people and their interactions. I had spent so long working on my own for the first EP, and then writing the first album before I got into the studio with William

Doyle. As I had written that album, I also then started making a film with my ex-boyfriend and our old best friend from school. So suddenly I was in the studio with Will and then I was working on this film with Jem [Talbot] and I was just like, is this what it can be like? You're allowed to do this, this is fun, this is fucking fun. I'm not in a weird bedroom with all the curtains closed trying to pull this song out of my brain. There's such a beautiful dynamic where you can balance each other out. If someone's having a little bit of a wobbly day, the other person can sweeten them up and vice versa. It's a real exercise in trust and it's a real exercise in communication. Those are things that I find really hard and really interesting and really fun to challenge myself with.

**You played saxophone and clarinet on this record, and you hadn't picked them up in over a decade and I wonder if it's tied in with going to therapy and hashing out your past and figuring out your journey. Do you think it's helpful to journey back to certain past selves, especially when you were creative, and rediscover them?**

There's an element of sweeping up everything, being like, 'Oh, you're invited too. I'd almost forgotten about you, of course you can come as well.' I hadn't really thought about the saxophone or the clarinet in probably well over a decade. Then, I don't know why I said it, but when me and Mike [Lindsay] were first talking about the album I told him I could play the clarinet and the saxophone and when I brought them in, I wondered what the hell I was doing. I feel like I quit them for a reason because they didn't feel like me. So, it felt very gracious to let them back in because I think I was too mean to them before. Now I love the clarinet so much, and I think it's one of the most beautiful instruments and it breaks my heart and it makes my heart sore at the same time. It's evolution, isn't it? Something that at one point I was like, "No, I'm never going to play that. I'm totally done with it," and then realizing that actually there is real beauty in it and there's space for it in what I'm doing. I also like a little bit of a challenge and I hadn't necessarily thought that I was challenging myself as much as I was on this album. It feels like the whole exercise was putting my trust in this album. I trust that I'll be able to play the clarinet. I trust that if I do the morning pages and arrive at the studio that it will just happen. I wonder if that was a lot to do with therapy as well--maybe I can just do it and see what happens.

**You played the wrong chord on your song "Orange" but you kept it anyway. How has your relationship with mistakes developed over the years?**

It's been a journey. One of the reasons that it took me so long to put anything out is because it feels like a totally shameful thing to make any mistakes whatsoever. I wonder if that's maybe because I feel like as the daughter of two professional musicians I should know all my musical theory, be able to do every scale on the planet without even thinking about it. I never was good at theory, and I failed my grade five and it was a fucking nightmare. My God, those exams were so painful. The quantitative thing: having a grade put on your one hour that you spent with this person. As a child I was so sensitive; that was not a way to get me to get good at stuff, where you get penalized for mistakes. I think that got so drummed into me and it's really only in the last few years where I've realized that I'm allowed to be wrong. It's not the most shameful thing in the entire world. You just have to lean into it. When I wrote my first album, I would only write it when there was no one else in the house, and the idea of someone hearing me flub even as I was writing, if I played the wrong chord or would sing a note that didn't fit in that progression, it was physically painful. I think letting my producer Mike [Lindsay] in for *In|FLUX* at the earlier point when I was constantly making mistakes, felt really empowering. The mistake on "Orange" is perfect, it makes the song for me. I'm very happy that it's now there as an example of mistakes being good.

**What do you think is the best thing you've learned since 2015?**

It's all kind of mixed in, isn't it? I think there's two things. The first is, in order to have the work done you have to actually do the work. As annoying as that is. I feel like in 2015 I was reading all the books on how to do it and constantly searching for that magic piece of the puzzle that would suddenly mean that 25 songs fell out of my brain onto a CD or whatever; it doesn't happen. You have to keep showing up and it's really annoying, I wish that wasn't the way. So just showing up all the time and being fucking gentle with myself. Speaking gently to myself, allowing myself to make mistakes. I think there's such power in gentleness, and there's such power in being sensitive and being vulnerable. I only saw it as a real crack in me before, and now I'd like to give her a little hug. It's a really important part of me. I cry three times a day. The more I do it in front of my therapist, my therapist is like, "So you're feeling something?" Yes, I'm feeling something, thank you very much.

Whereas before, I didn't know.

**Anna B Savage Recommends:**

**Giving up on books you don't like.** You'll read more that way. ([This helps](#))

**Collecting stones:** round ones, flecked ones, pure white ones. I gravitate towards weird and busy ones, my partner prefers the clean round ones. They feel really nice in your pocket, too.

The best piece of advice I've ever been given by an ex is this: **get a duvet that's at least one size bigger than your mattress.** In that same vein, if you are sleeping with a partner on the reg, get two duvets (same duvet covers if you wanna be extra fancy). No shame, only good sleep. Woohoo! Scandinavian sleep method for the win.

**Birds:** noticing them has been one of the greatest, most sustained joys in my life. It's like a door opened and I walked through it and suddenly I have friends everywhere. In the UK and Ireland, March is the time to search for long-tailed tit nests (listen for their peep peep then follow) before the leaves grow and cover them. Summer has arrived when I hear swifts screaming overhead. If I'm at the coast I seek out fulmars - excellent flyers, terrible landers (hours of great watching entertainment). Today is 6th February and this morning my Mum, Dad and I watched a magpie gingerly follow a squirrel with a slice of bread all around the garden. What more joy do you want?

Lists: here is a list of **my 5 favorite lists** (wishing for more wishes here...)

**10 rules for students - sister Corita Kent**

**68 bits of unsolicited Advice - Kevin Kelly**

**These things I know for sure - Andrea Zittel**

**Two hundred and fifty things to know at the start of a project. After Michael Sorkin - Hanna Thomas Uose**

**How to Whistle with your fingers in your mouth (12 steps)**

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Vocation

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