

The Whakapapa of Not Being Good Enough:

Anxiety as a Deep-Rooted Weed and the Role of Indigenous Wellness Within Te Poutama o te Ora

Abstract

Anxiety disorders are among the most prevalent mental health challenges globally, with significant overrepresentation among Indigenous and minority communities shaped by colonial histories. This article proposes a metaphorical and clinical reframing of anxiety — particularly the lived experience of chronic inadequacy — as a "weed" with identifiable roots in early relational and systemic experiences. Drawing on the nine-dimension Māori wellness framework Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO), this article explores how whakapapa (genealogy and explanatory lineage), dimensional autophagy, and Maramataka-informed healing cycles offer culturally grounded pathways for uprooting anxiety at its source rather than managing its symptoms. The author's autoethnographic narrative is used to ground the theoretical framework in lived experience.

1. Introduction

Anxiety is consistently identified as one of the most common mental health presentations across all age groups (Baxter et al., 2013). Yet despite its prevalence, anxiety remains frequently misunderstood — particularly the chronic, pervasive variety that is not triggered by a single event but rather accumulated across a lifetime of relational and systemic experiences.

For many Māori and Pacific peoples, this accumulation is inseparable from colonial history. The systematic removal of language, land, and cultural identity has created conditions in which inadequacy is not merely felt — it is imposed (Reid & Robson, 2007). When individuals internalise these messages as personal inadequacy rather than structural harm, anxiety becomes deeply embedded.

This article proposes that effective therapeutic work with anxiety — particularly what we might call the "not good enough" variant — requires more than symptom management. It requires the identification and uprooting of core dysfunctional beliefs, understood through the lens of whakapapa: where did this belief come from, who and what gave it life, and what would it take to replace it with something true?

2. Anxiety as Weed: A Conceptual Reframing

2.1 The Weed Metaphor

The metaphor of anxiety as a weed is both intuitive and clinically useful. Like weeds, anxiety symptoms are surface manifestations of an underground root system — a network of beliefs, memories, and neural pathways established early in life and reinforced through subsequent experience. Treating symptoms alone is analogous to cutting back the visible growth: temporarily effective, but insufficient to prevent regrowth (Hayes et al., 2012).

Cognitive restructuring approaches within Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and schema therapy recognise this dynamic, emphasising the need to identify and challenge core beliefs rather than simply modify anxious thought patterns (Young et al., 2003). The TPO framework extends this insight into a culturally specific and spiritually integrated model of healing.

2.2 The Whakapapa of the Weed

Whakapapa, typically understood as genealogy, functions in te Ao Māori as a comprehensive explanatory system. Everything that exists has a whakapapa — an origin story that explains its nature and its relationships (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Applying whakapapa thinking to anxiety invites the question not "what is wrong with you?" but "what happened, and where did this begin?"

This reframing carries significant therapeutic weight. Research consistently shows that self-compassion and contextual understanding — recognising that one's struggles are rooted in circumstance rather than inherent defect — are associated with reduced anxiety severity and improved therapeutic outcomes (Neff, 2011; Gilbert, 2009).

3. The TPO Framework: Nine Dimensions of Wellness

Te Poutama o te Ora expands upon Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1994) — the foundational four-pillar Māori health model — to encompass nine dimensions of wellness. These include the established pillars of taha wairua (spiritual), taha hinengaro (mental/emotional), taha tinana (physical), and taha whānau (relational), alongside five additional dimensions: taha Matihiko (digital wellness), taha Pūtea (financial wellness), taha kai (food sovereignty), and two further dimensions relating to temporal and environmental wellbeing.

In relation to anxiety as a weed, three TPO dimensions are particularly salient:

| TPO Dimension | Core Function | Anxiety Application |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Taha Hinengaro | Mental & emotional processing | Identifying and naming the root belief; cognitive and emotional re-patterning |
| Taha Wairua | Spiritual orientation and meaning-making | Reconnecting identity to a larger story of worth; releasing shame through spiritual truth |
| Taha Whānau | Relational health and belonging | Healing relational wounds that first delivered inadequacy messages, restoring healthy attachment |
| Taha Tinana | Physical and somatic wellness | Releasing anxiety stored in the nervous system; somatic regulation |

4. Dimensional Autophagy and the Maramataka

A central TPO concept is dimensional autophagy — the process by which the self-metabolises and releases dysfunctional beliefs, relational patterns, and cultural wounds that no longer serve growth. Borrowed from cellular biology, autophagy refers to the body's self-cleaning mechanism, in which damaged cell components are

broken down and repurposed. Dimensionally, this process requires first identifying what is to be released, then creating conditions — relational, spiritual, physical — that support that release (Te Poutama o te Ora, 2025).

The Maramataka provides a temporal architecture for this work. As the Māori lunar calendar, the Maramataka maps cycles of activity, rest, cultivation, and harvest. Applied to healing from anxiety, it affirms that deep transformation is not linear — it follows natural rhythms, and different seasons call for different kinds of work (Royal, 2012). Some seasons are for identifying the root; others for pulling it; others for planting something new in its place.

5. Autoethnographic Grounding

The author traces the genesis of her own "not good enough" anxiety to age two — the arrival of a sibling, the perceptual loss of primacy, and the accumulated relational experiences that followed. Over subsequent decades, these experiences were reinforced through cultural exclusion within schooling and corporate environments, including the specific intersectional experience of being positioned as a "token Māori" — belonging neither fully to Pākehā professional culture nor to Māori communal identity (Penetito, 2010).

This account illustrates the multidimensional origin of anxiety. The weed's roots reach into taha whānau (relational belonging), taha wairua (sense of spiritual and cultural place), and taha hinengaro (internalised self-belief). Effective intervention, therefore, must be equally multi-dimensional — addressing the biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual layers simultaneously.

Autoethnography as a methodology has been increasingly recognised as a legitimate and powerful form of Indigenous research praxis — one that refuses the colonial demand that knowledge be detached from the knower (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Ellis et al., 2011). The personal narrative embedded in this work is not anecdote; it is data.

6. Bringing the Metaphysical into the Physical

A key principle within TPO is the integration of the spiritual and the material — what the author describes as bringing the metaphysical into the physical, or the spiritual into Te Ao Mārama (the world of light and understanding). This aligns with a growing body of research affirming the role of spiritual wellbeing in mental health outcomes (Pargament, 2011), and with Māori epistemological traditions that do not separate the seen from the unseen world.

Practically, this means that healing from anxiety-rooted inadequacy requires not only cognitive restructuring but also a re-storying of one's identity at a spiritual level. The belief "I am not enough" must be replaced not merely with a more rational thought, but with a truth that is wairua-deep — grounded in whakapapa, community, and relationship with the Divine.

7. Conclusion

The "not good enough" anxiety that plagues so many individuals — particularly those shaped by relational deprivation, cultural displacement, and systemic marginalisation — demands a response that is as deep as its roots. The weed metaphor offers a clinically useful and culturally resonant frame for understanding this dynamic.

Te Poutama o te Ora provides a nine-dimensional architecture for that response — one that honours whakapapa as both the source of the wound and the path to its healing, that employs dimensional autophagy as its primary therapeutic mechanism, and that situates all this work within the rhythmic wisdom of the Maramataka.

The goal is not merely symptom reduction. The goal is uprooting — and what grows in its place is not just the absence of anxiety, but the flourishing of a self that has always been enough.

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