

Anxiety 101 podcast by Ross Anderson - Part one

Podcast transcript

Anxiety. The big five. One in four people experience a significant bout of it and upwards of 80% of people experience it on a day to day basis - low level and ambient anxiety, which can be disabling and prevent you from really realising your potential.

The reason why I choose to do this anxiety session is because it's very, very prominent to me, it's very, very important to me and has played a big role in why I do what I do now. Now I'm a life coach, a wellbeing expert, I qualified as a personal trainer and a psychologist, and focus on the study of the mind, neuroscience, positive psychology and psychological disorders. And the reason for that was because of my own experiences.

When I was 19, I started experiencing bouts of anxiety, which then spiralled out of control and I started taking panic attacks. I was then diagnosed with panic disorder, which is an extreme form of anxiety where you live in fear of recurrent panic attacks. It felt to me as though I was having multiple heart attacks on a daily basis. And that became crippling for me. A very emotional, very challenging time in my life. And that all came about through a number of environmental factors - I didn't have great relationships, I consumed a very toxic diet, I took a lot of drugs, consumed a lot of alcohol, I had no meaning or purpose in my life and had a lot of emotional challenges from the past that I had to face with a calm confidence.

And so I went to the doctor, spoke to the doctors, and unfortunately doctor did, what doctors do. Normally, they gave me more potions and lotions - they didn't once ask me about my life and how I was conducting that life in a holistic manner - it was just you have an issue, let's mask that issue and move you along because doctors...doctors visits now are filled with people suffering from stress and anxiety of some sorts. It's just a common way of life. And people are so nonchalantly accepting of this; it's almost like in modern culture we just accept the fact that it's the norm to be chronically stressed or chronically anxious. But it just isn't the case.

And so, I've chosen to highlight some of the things I've learned along my journey because when I was in my early 20s, after experiencing these anxious tendencies for a number of years, I saw a psychologist, her name is Rhona. And even though I've been struggling with anxiety for three and a half years on medication, in just eight weeks she taught me how to control my mind and body. She taught me to run my days versus them running me. She empowered me to change my health through some simple tactics, mindset tactics, she taught me the mental game. And if you look at our current curriculum from educational institutions, we just aren't focused enough on wellbeing. In fact, less than 5% of our curriculum is focused on and dedicated to the flourishing of individuals. And so these eight weeks taught me that through my own conscious efforts, I could change my mind and body and I didn't have to rely on a substance, or the crutch of the health service so to speak, that I could empower myself to move forward. And that's what I want to talk about, in this session.

I want to teach you five of the biggest and best ideas that I've come across in my life, academically and experientially, that will allow you to regain control and face life with a calm confidence.

Ok, big idea number one. We have to learn to tame our gremlins or your gremlins. What are the gremlins? The gremlins are those anxious thoughts that limit us, disable us from moving forward and realising our potential.

One thing that I should stress and make a caveat before we get into this session is that anxiety gets a bit of a bad rap. We need a substantial amount of anxiety in our lives, because in fact anxiety, an acute form of anxiety (anxiety that isn't chronic) is correlated highly with meaning. The more meaning you have in your life - the more goals, targets and aspirations - then you're going to have to experience, some little bouts or spurts of anxiety and the process of realising more of yourself.

If you want to live a happy life, you have to step into that uncomfortable space. Step out of your comfort zone and enter that uncomfortable space. And in doing so you experience resistance, subtle spurts of anxiety, but that's related to you becoming your best self. And if you can become your best self, you can experience happiness. It's all just a little subtle perspective shift. So it goes: step outside your comfort zone, you experience that resistance, but you know that that's the process you need to take to become your best self. And if you don't do that, then you can't experience happiness. And what is life without happiness?

So, first it's a little perspective shift that we shouldn't completely eradicate and diminish all anxiety from our lives, because in fact we can't, and we shouldn't. Because it can be a good thing, because it's also correlated to living a life of purpose and being on a progressing purposeful path. Secondly, we should learn to develop tactics that prevent an infestation or an overhaul in our minds, of ANTS. ANTS, are Automatic Negative Thoughts, all those negative thoughts, stressful thoughts we get that make us anxious. You've got to think okay, how can I interrupt that pattern?

So if we have ANTS, and they're infesting our minds, and what we have to do, is we have to learn to say okay, what is a tactic to stop these ANTS from completely infesting our minds and preventing us from realising our potential. We have to jump right in there and break that cycle. And one really useful way that we can do that is utilising two formulas.

The first is E plus R equals O, and that allows us to understand this process better. Your experience is governed by your thoughts, your thoughts create your feelings, your feelings create your actions and your actions create your results. That's the flow. Your thoughts create your feelings, your feelings create your actions and your actions create your results. So, if your results in life right now aren't what you want them to be i.e. if you're anxious and uncomfortable and stressed, then you have to work back. You have to work back all the way to the root of the issue: the thought. And then you have to develop a tactic to optimise the thought, make it more helpful. And the way to do that is by utilising this Formula E plus R equals O; the event plus the response equals the outcome or in a more academic sense, the S the stimulus, plus the response to the stimulus, influences your results.

So, if there's a situation you get in, an event, a stimulus that you experience that causes the anxiety, then be very mindful and aware of that and rather than allowing the automatic negative

thoughts to flurry and rush through your mind and overwhelm you, take a breath. And rather than allowing a subconscious response, that automatic negative thought to rule your mind, why not choose a more conscious response? Take a deep breath. And think, is this really something to be stressed about. Don't overlook the simplicity of that question. Because it's a profound tactic, just by asking yourself is this something that is really going to stress me out. Is there's something that I should be anxious about? By answering that question 95% of the time the answer will be no because the majority of us are actually perceiving things in life as stressful, anxious, when in fact they're not.

Everything is perceived as this big challenge, this big obstacle, and we become chronically stressed. So, in order to optimise your thoughts and remove the automatic negative thoughts, we have to jump in between the event, the stimulus, and the response, create calm confidence by breathing and relaxing and asking ourselves - is this really something I should be anxious over or stressing over? And the answer most likely is no. And then you start to interrupt that negative thought pattern and you start to really re-orientate your brain to become calmer, more confident, and more helpful.

Big idea number two, just breathe.

Whenever you experience anxiety, there is one tactic that you can really implement to create effect, that can really serve to reduce, completely obliterate, your anxiety. Can you guess what that is? The title gives you a clue?

Just breathing. But more specifically, a particular form of breathing. I'll ask you a question. How do you breathe? Have you lost touch of how to breathe effectively? Because most humans have. There are two forms of breathing, one is more efficient than the other. Can you guess what those are? Well, to breathe more effectively, we have to become nasal breathers, not mouth breathers. Which one are you? Do you breathe through your nose or through your mouth? People who breathe through their mouth, not only are more likely to experience anxiety, but are more likely to have a troubling sleeping routine.

If you breathe through your mouth, you can even see the difference. You become a shallow breather. You're a chest breather, a mouth breather. And you don't get to fully oxygenate the body, compared to nasal breathing. My diaphragm, my belly is sticking out just know, I am over emphasising but it's just to stress the point: breathe in through the nose. Out through the nose. And it works like a seesaw, this waterbed-like motion, when you press down the diaphragm should raise and when you breathe in the chest will raise in a kind of the backward forward motion. Versus the chest has a completely different influence on the body - it comes with its very own unique physiological responses. When you nasally breathe you are able to exit from fight or flight stress response, more readily enter rest and restore your relaxation response. That's where you can operate more from your prefrontal cortex.

Those who are anxious and stressed out, they have a chronically overactive amygdala, the amygdala or amy, for short, is an area of the brain, housed in the emotional area, the limbic system, and it's called the amygdala. Think of two people – a girl Amy and a boy called Pete. And

essentially, these are relationships that we both share. Amy is the mischievous one, the one that's dangerous to you and your health. Always wanting you to do bad things, do negative things, engage in dangerous activities. Pete however, is your friend, is your best buddy, and he is someone who's more rational, more logical, more forward thinking. He's someone who's calm and content and has your back. He is someone that wants the best for you. Those two individuals represent the two areas of your brain - the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala.

The prefrontal cortex is the area of the brain that when active allows you to take more control, to govern more of your life, so you can dictate your attention where you want, when you want for how long you want. And you can change the themes of your day, themes of your week, months, years, and life if you operate more from that place.

If you look at an fMRI machine, a functional magnetic resonance imaging machine, where you go into this system that looks the blood flow and activity of your brain, someone who's stressed will have a highly active amygdala, and is more liable to be erratic, stressed out, irrational to think and in effect of an unproductive manner. However, if that prefrontal cortex is more active, then more likely to engage in fruitful, helpful, wise, logical reason-based decisions for themselves. So, when you nasally breathe you are more likely to enter into that state, you're more likely to have that calm confidence we all seek. Whereas if you're a shallow mouth breather, the chances are you're going to be more anxious.

Also, a little tip that I've tried in the past and it can be useful. I've already trained myself to be a nasal breather, but what you can do is that when you go to bed at night, or before you go to bed at night, you can actually put a piece of tape over your mouth. It sounds silly. Sounds a bit crazy. But if you put a piece of tape over your mouth, you can train yourself to breathe predominantly through your nose. Number one, you'll feel less anxious when you train your brain and body to breathe through your nasal passageway, and secondly, you will get a better nights' rest which, if you habit stack both things - breathing better, being less anxious and getting a better nights' rest - those can combine together to make you feel more optimal.

Lastly, I want to think about our breathing being more mindful. Mindful, if you think about the root of the word, it's checking in with your mind. Essentially, you want to say, "okay, where are my thoughts?" More specifically, you want to be thinking 'how am I breathing? Am I breathing shallowly or am I breathing through my nasal passageways?' There is a Buddhist monk, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, and his name is Thich Nat Nan and he is peace activist. And he suggests that when you're breathing you want to breathe like a water snake. When a water snake slithers across the top of the water or through the water, it's silent. It's subtle. It's slow, and it's rhythmic. That's how you want to breathe.

Is your breathing slow, quiet, subtle and rhythmic? Or if someone was sitting beside you would they complain about your breathing? Could they hear you? It should be silent. It should be slow, it should be soft. It should be subtle. It should be rhythmic. It should be nasal. Concern yourself with those things. Think, am I breathing? Be mindful; check in with your breath. How am I breathing? Am I breathing nasally through my mouth? Am I breathing like Thich Nat Nan

suggests, like the silent water snake? And also, just remember that anxiety is correlated with meaning.

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