

Future Tense with Tracy Dennis-Tiwary

[00:00:00]

I think a lot of people feel broken and hopeless, and that's on us too on us mental health professionals, because this whole disease model also suggests to people that if they're struggling with a mental health problem, That there's something wrong with them.

Like there's a disease wrong with you, like an infection, like a cancer, and that is disempowering and it makes you less able to tolerate what really are the natural expected ups and downs of life, and sometimes really bad ups and downs of life. And it just sets you up to be less kind to yourself and less accepting of the full range of your experiences.

Yael Schonbrun: That was Tracy Dennis-Tiwary on Psychologists Off the Clock.

Yael Schonbrun: We are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work, and health.

Debbie Sorensen: I'm Dr. [00:01:00] Debbie Sorensen, practicing in mile high, Denver, Colorado, and coauthor of ACT Daily Journal.

Yael Schonbrun: I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the upcoming book Work, Parent, Thrive.

Jill Stoddard: And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of be mighty and the big book of act metaphors.

Debbie Sorensen: We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Jill Stoddard: you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

Yael Schonbrun: Psychologists off the clock is proud to be partnered with Praxis Continuing Education Praxis is the premier provider of evidence-based training for mental health professionals.

Jill Stoddard: And here at psychologists off the clock, we are huge fans of Praxis. One of the things I love most about Praxis is they offer both live. And on demand courses. So if you're really looking for that, live interaction with other people who are taking the course, you can get that. [00:02:00]

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And every course I have ever taken from Praxis has really been of such value to me.

Debbie Sorensen: I get questions a lot from clinicians who are looking for act training or other types of trainings, and Praxis my go-to place that I send people no matter what level they are, because they have really good beginner trainings for people who have no experience.

And they also have terrific advanced trainings on different topics and just people who want to keep building their skills.

Yael Schonbrun: You can go to our website and get a coupon for the live trainings, by going to our offers page at off the clock, psych.com/sponsors. And we'll hope to see you. I'm here with Katie, our dissemination coordinator, to talk about a wonderful episode, about mindset around uncomfortable emotion. I had the chance to interview author [00:03:00] psychologist and wonderful conversationalist Tracy Dennis-Tiwary about her book, *Future Tense*.

And I'm so excited that Katy is here to join me. Because Katy's an anxiety specialist and Tracy's work is really about anxiety. Although there's a lot of themes around uncomfortable emotions in general, but Katy, I'm really excited to hear your take on this episode, given your specialization.

Katy Rothfelder: Yes. I think I almost wish that our listeners could have seen me when I was listening to the episode. I almost felt like, well, I'm not a religious person, but I, I, I almost imagine it being as if I was in one of those church sermons where you can't see me, but my hand is in the air. And I'm like, yes, yes, yes.

Um, because I think, you know, Tracy really brought. To our listeners, that, you know, anxiety.

Is is not bigger than us. You know, [00:04:00] we, we are the ones and the holders of anxiety. And so if from that lens and from that view, like our perception of anxiety will, will change. And then our limits that we have for ourselves are gonna change. And so I, I just really appreciated everything that she said.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And one of the major take home messages is that if you're experiencing anxiety or really any other uncomfortable emotion, even at pretty high levels, that the primary experience of that emotion is not an indicator of there being something wrong with you, but rather. An indicator that there's either something really important to you.

That's getting tripped up or that you may need to be learning different ways to navigate your internal experience. That it's really our response to those emotions, that can be healthier and unhealthy. The emotions just are they're human. Some of us are wired to be more anxious or more depressed. Um, I speak as somebody who's wired to be more anxious.

That that [00:05:00] used to, you know, before I got into acceptance and commitment therapy, I used to really think that there was something wrong with me. And being able to get exposed to literature, like the studies that Tracy references and talks about in our conversation has really helped me to change my mind around my own brokenness.

And I think it's such a powerful message this is an idea that has existed for a long time, but we operate largely in a medical model around mental health that it's, you know, there's something that needs to be fixed, but.

I think more and more, this message is getting out. And one of my kids was given this book that the title is there's no such thing as a dragon by Jack Kent. And it's an adorable story about a little boy who, who wakes up one morning to discover that there's a little dragon in his house.

and his mom and his dad refused to acknowledge the Dragon's presence. They say there's no such thing as a dragon. And the more that they [00:06:00] deny the presence, the existence of this dragon, the bigger the dragon gets, he gets bigger and bigger and bigger. And so it's this really nice metaphor for, for what psychologists call emotion, suppression, or thought suppression.

And the more we try to pretend that something isn't happening or shouldn't happen, the bigger the stickier, the more. Intolerable it becomes. And the end of this story, not to give it too much away is that they start to accept the presence of this dragon and the dragon doesn't go away. But he stops being such a huge monstrosity.

And I think that message is so powerful and I'm so excited that it's getting out outside of academia, cuz I think this is something that researchers have known, but it just, you know, because of pop psychology and our medical model that we typically operate under, it is a message that I think has had a hard time gaining a foothold.

So I'm really happy that Tracy's out there getting the message to, to more people.

Katy Rothfelder: Yeah. I, you know, one thing that struck me with Tracy's message is. Even [00:07:00] just considering sort of the, the meta of this, of we're we're taught to think that anxiety is bad or having an anxiety disorder is wrong. And even from that lens of knowing, like there are societal messages and ways that we learn that.

Learning is, is a gift like learning words to help us to describe and categorize. These are all things that are gifts, but it can be to great detriment when we start labeling things as good or bad, especially when they are. Inside of us. And so if society has taught us, especially with that sort of medical model that you need to get rid of anxiety, then naturally when feeling, show up in our body, that don't feel comfortable.

Our brain is going to label that as bad, and you [00:08:00] have this beautiful brain. That has a wonderful ability to problem solve when it notices a problem. And so, as long as you see anxiety as a problem, or this message that's showing up, or this idea or memory that's showing up as a problem, your brain will do exactly what it's designed to do and it will problem solve.

And it will. To like continue distress and continue reinforcement of, of anxiety. And so what we really, you know, I think Tracy even said that is just taking a step back and seeing that anxiety is something that exists in our body. Um, it's not a problem to be solved and. Building that confidence that like, Hey, actually I can have anxiety and still do all of these things will.

I mean, I'll allow some uncertainty for all of our anxious folks of usually when we do what [00:09:00] matters with the presence of anxiety, it is that much

more rewarding. It is that much more confident building. And I think Tracy really bring. In that message with, um, how we, how we need to rethink anxiety.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And she has these three principles that I just wanna list out because threaded throughout our conversation are specific things that you can try to really put these principles into action. And the principles are learning how to be anxious in the right way. It's not how to not be anxious. It's how to be anxious in the right way.

How to sort of. Optimize this experience that you're gonna have, no matter how hard you try not to infect the harder you try not to, the more you'll have it. So the three principles are to see anxiety's information and to listen to that information. And the second principle is. after you've listened. If you determine that that anxiety isn't useful to let it go.

And she offers a number of strategies for how to do [00:10:00] that. And the final principle is if that anxiety is useful and there's so many ways that it can be useful. And she talks a lot about the various ways that anxiety really can serve us to do something purposeful with it. So we hope that you listen to this episode with those principles in mind and get as much as you can out of it so that you too can be anxious in the right way.

Dr. Tracy, Dennis Towari is an anxiety researcher, author, founder of wise therapeutics and a psychology and neuroscience professor. We are here to discuss her amazing book, future tense. Why anxiety is good for you, even though it feels bad and a shout out to Moises Hernandez. One of our listeners was suggesting to have you on psychologists off the clock.

Welcome Tracy. Oh, thank you. It's such a pleasure to be with.

Adam Grant's blur.

Just captures the essence of this book, which is, and he writes this book is gonna smash your existing views about anxiety and replace them with more helpful ones. I love this [00:11:00] reconceptualization of what anxiety is. So You say that anxiety has a major PR problem so I wonder if you can start us off by explaining why anxiety as a bad guy is inaccurate.

I think that we all know that anxiety. Is one of the crises we face today. And, um, and certainly when we look at the world around us, anxiety really fits, right? Because this is a world with a lot of change, a lot of uncertainty, you know, as a mental health professionals. , I, well, I actually, um, became a

mental health professional on, uh, September 11th, 2001 defending my dissertation, like literally at 9:00 AM.

Yeah. So that was a moment when the world changed and yeah, anxiety is something that, you know, has always been a problem. It's been on the rise as a disorder. , and as our world has changed and become so complex, this is something we share as a [00:12:00] struggle and, and that's, you know, and, and I, and I really do want to acknowledge too, that anxiety disorders are not a PR problem.

You know, they're not. Just change your mind and you're not gonna have an anxiety disorder, but I do think that when we look around and say, Hey, wait a second. We've been doing amazing science for the past 20 years. Plus our advances are incredible. We have excellent treatments. We have science that shows us through randomized clinical trials that, you know, we can, we can help a lot of people.

A lot of the time we have problems with access. We have, you know, we have a lot of extra burdens today. But why aren't these solutions working? Why are not only mental health problems, but anxiety disorders in particular on the rise, especially in our youth, uh, you know, the stats is, I think you and your listeners probably know, well, some, you know, some estimates put us at a half of us in our lifetime will struggle with a mental health condition.

A third of us in our lifetime specifically will struggle with an anxiety disorder. [00:13:00] So why aren't these solutions working? I think there are many answers, but one answer we have. Really investigated as a society is the fact that our beliefs about anxiety, you know, anxiety is sort of the prime case study here.

So let's, we'll start with anxiety. We could talk about other emotions and, and problems, but, that our, our beliefs about anxiety are actually getting in the way of us making helpful decisions, coping as well as we can, and even benefiting from treatments. When we are struggling with an anxiety disorder.

And I, you know, when I say it's a PR problem, it's a little funny. And I like to be a little funny about mental health, because I think we need to loosen up a little and we need more, have humor. There have more hope, have more, you know, you know, know that we can do it. And it's the it's part of being human.

, but I think that, that we underestimate the power of these beliefs and these mindsets, because not only do they shape our thoughts, they shape our choices.

They shape how we understand our life and they even shape our biology. So if [00:14:00] we don't realign our mindset about anxiety, I believe that we actually will keep going further down this destructive path and also have fewer opportunities to benefit from the great treatments that do exist.

So I think this is the crucial one we have to unwind, um, at this moment in time. Okay. So there's two different directions that I wanna go. And I'm, I'm, I'll just sort of put a pin in one, but I wanna dive into mindsets in just a moment. But before we do that, I wanna have you help me define and distinguish between anxiety and anxiety disorders, but also between anxiety and stress.

And anxiety and fear. They're all kind of related mm-hmm and I think your book doesn't pretend to capture all of it. And so it's important that we're clear about what it is that we're talking about. So, , yeah, help us, help us disentangle some of that stuff. Thank you. No, I love starting with definitions because you know, anxiety feels bad and it feels like stress and it feels like fear.

And so it becomes this big kind of [00:15:00] in, in, in Coit sort of monster of unpleasantness and suffering. so until we make these distinctions, I think it's even more overwhelming. So thank you for, I love that you started with that. , I'm also an academic and a nerd, so I love definitions. So so right. So what is, why isn't anxiety the same as fear?

Because it feels a lot like fear. It feels a lot like stress. Yeah. Um, I like to start with fear because I think it's the clearest distinction. So fear is, the reaction we have when we face certain and present danger in the moment. So like someone's holding a knife to your. There's, you know, there's a stranger coming towards you down the dark alley name, name, your fear.

You have a snake, you know, you have a snake in front of you and it's, and you're scared of snakes where it's about to bite you. So it's in the present moment and it's certain that you are in danger right now. And you know, the typical response we think of is it's this kind of threat response and detection system, right?

The fight flight or freeze sort of response. So we often just say anxiety's the same thing, but anxiety has nothing to do with the present tense. It's and that's, this is why I [00:16:00] named the book, future tense. It's really all about the future. It's this anxious, nervous apprehension that we have when we look into the future, which is always uncertain by definition.

Anything could happen at any point, honestly, right? So it's, we look into the uncertain future and we know that something bad could happen, but anxiety also helps us tune into the fact that something good is still possible. Cuz you're only anxious when you still have. So think about a great, you know, an example that I, I think illustrates it well is we have a big job interview or podcast tomorrow, right?

So we're looking forward to something that we're, we're a little anxious about. So it could go very poorly. That's why we're anxious, right? We're we're, we're thinking, oh, I could bomb it. I could really sound dumb all these things, but when you're anxious, you also consider the fact that wait, or I could do.

Because what anxiety is priming us to do is to hold that possibility in our minds, it primes us to prepare, to focus, to act, uh, when we have that sort of fight flight [00:17:00] response, that feels like that it's actually also our body. You know, you know, our heart's pumping blood to our brain and our body and sending oxygen to our brain.

So we can think more clearly, it's, it's doing these it's triggering things like oxytocin, which is a social bonding hormone, which makes us reach out to others to seek social support, which is the best way to cope with most things. It actually primes us to it primes the release of dopamine in our brain, which is not just the feel good hormone.

It's not just addiction and all those sorts of things. It's also what primes us to work towards things. We really. And it integrates it's this little shuttle cock messenger in our brain that helps integrate all the areas of the brain that can help us pursue goals and do better. So that's anxiety, you know, so to just limit it to the three Fs, the fear flight, you know, oh, sorry.

Fight flight and freeze is I is, is really that's part of the PR problem because anxiety is much more. Yeah. And how so? So I think that you're already sort of starting to dig into some of the positive [00:18:00] aspects that anxiety can really be motivational, that it can be a sign of hope if, uh, and a sign of what we're wanting to work towards.

Backing up a, a moment. How does anxiety, according to psychologist, definition differ than stress, right? And so stress. , it can involve anxiety. It can involve sadness. It can involve joy. Like when we're stressed out about planning a wedding or some other special event, stress is about this mismatch.

Between the resources you have to bear on a situation and the demands that are being made on you and the stress response system, which is recruited often when we're feeling fear or, or, , anxiety or sadness and anger for that matter, it's really, um, allowing our body to meet the demands we face.

And it's always, our bodies are always striving for, for allostasis to find balance and change. And so stress is a much broader umbrella. That encompasses a lot more. It also can feel really bad. And so that's why, you know, we're lumping it into this bad [00:19:00] thing, but we, we assume that mental health is the absence of negative feelings and stress.

And it's just that the opposite is true. You know, mental health is about how we navigate the inevitable struggles of being human. And because we, mental health professionals have, I think unintentionally portrayed mental health in this way, almost robotically like you have it, or you don't like a disease.

You know, and, you know, I think that is part of the mindset problem as well. And it, and, um, and I know you had mentioned a difference with anxiety disorders and anxiety. We could speak to that. I think that's an important distinction as well. Yeah, please. So, you know, you, when you have a, a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder, You have a checklist of things, right?

That the doctor needs to check off and indicate, oh, you have this many symptoms, you know, five out of 10 or whatever it is for this duration of time. and usually that also involves when it comes to anxiety disorders, intense feelings of anxiety, but intense and frequent feelings of anxiety is not enough to diagnose an anxiety disorder.[00:20:00]

You also have to have indicators of what's called functional. That this not just really the anxiety, but the way you're coping with the anxiety is getting in the way of living your life. Well of loving, creating, working, learning, doing all those things we need to do. So it's not that we have a problem with too much anxiety right now when we are struggling as a society with anxiety disorders, it's that we have a problem with how we're coping with.

Now again, that's not to underplay. How, when you're really struggling with this overwhelming feeling of anxiety on a day to day basis, how hard and debilitating that can be, but to villainize, is that a word it might be to ? Yeah. To bake into a villain feeling of anxiety is actually misdirecting where our solutions should go.

The solutions we need to apply are in how we're coping and how we learn to expose ourselves to those difficult feelings and work our way. Yeah. So, so I love that you are framing it [00:21:00] in this way. That anxiety itself is not the villain. It's sort of how we respond to anxiety. And this is really consistent with ideas from acceptance and commitment therapy.

That it's really our relationship to our thoughts and our feelings and our internal experiences that determines whether or not sort of we're functioning well, that the primary emotion of anxiety itself is not the problem, but rather, you know, learning to relate to. Relate to it in ways that work well for us.

That's beautifully put and it makes people feel sometimes I think that if that's the case, then, it's sort of taking away an explanation they might have for why they're suffering, you know, and this whole, like the idea that there's a chemical imbalance or there's this, this destructive anxiety and it's a disease and that's, what's stopping me when, when that approach is question.

You shift it too. Well, there are ways that we can cope that can help us do better. People sometimes feel that that, that, that, that, that sort of, um, that they're blame, it's in a [00:22:00] that it's invalidating gas lighting, that the blame is being placed on them in a different way. And so I love that you brought up acceptance and commitment therapy because there's such great evidence that this is an incredible approach.

There's so much personal clinical experience of this being transformative for people. And I hope that in that discussion, it's, it's not perceived as blaming to say that it's in our response, but is empowering. And I I'm sorry. I think you were about to say something I interrupted you before, but I did want to add that because I think this viewpoint is not, is not, um, pathologizing.

I think it's really empowering and that's my intention. Yeah. So, and, and I guess I'm, I'm, I'm curious how you respond to people who might say that, you know, Tracy, you are basically telling me that it's just in my mindset that this is a problem, or my mindset is the cause of this problem rather than the fact that I have a debilitating disease.

Like for example, O C D has very clear biological markers. R [00:23:00] really, you know, because we understand some of the brain science behind it suggests that it's not just a mindset issue. It's really, it really is a biological disorder. And so how do you help people understand why the mindset piece remains so important?

It's a wonderful opportunity to have these discussions when people push back, even though it can be painful because people feel that invalid. And what I try to explain very clearly is that by, by pointing to mindset as a linchpin in the solution, it doesn't mean that that's the cost. Yeah. Rather what, what, what it's highlighting is that when we shift our mindset, we can benefit from treatment more.

I mean, if you even look at the, at the requirements or the goals, rather. All gold, gold standard treatment approaches, especially for anxiety disorders and obsessive compulsive related disorders and, and trauma related trauma and stress related disorders. What is the key process that has to happen?[00:24:00]

Exposure and response prevention. What's the exposure to the unpleasant experience and what's the response prevention you you're preventing, avoiding. And so your mindset is crucial here because if you really buy into this disease model, Right of, of anxiety. What do you do? You try to eradicate it like, like cancer or COVID you avoid it at all costs like you would at a disease and you can no longer engage with it as anything.

That's a part of you because it's like a cancer to cut out. So the mindset actually, how I believe is a crucial ingredient in how we can really. Benefit most from therapies that are, you know, even though the mindset does not call, you know, shifting your mindset doesn't necessarily have any causal link to why you're struggling with O C D and anxiety disorder or a trauma related disorder.

I love that. So we're talking about mindset and I wonder maybe if we can just. Back up. I first wanna just give note to, I've heard you say, [00:25:00] um, in another interview that you don't see your book as traditional self-help, but rather as a book that you hope will transform a reader's mindset. And I actually love that.

So I'm curious if you could just help us understand what is a mindset, why are mindset so powerful? And then what's the transformation of mindset that you're hoping that readers get to by reading your book? Thank you. It, it really, it's sort of like a meta self help book in that sense. that? Because that's the, so that, that is the sole goal of the book it's too.

And, you know, and that's because a mindset, um, you know, it's not just. A system of beliefs or to say, oh, um, I'm going to, you know, if I believe that anxiety can be an ally, then I'm just gonna talk about it all the time. And it's so much deeper than that. It's actually when we have a true filter, so a mindset is more like a filter, right?

And it's a filter in and a filter out it filters in what we even understand and perceive in the. [00:26:00] And then it filters out the kinds of decisions and choices we make and it even affects our biology. So I'll, I'll give you an example. Um, one, uh, you know, there's been incredible mindset research, um, on stress, right.

And anxiety, and it's kind of, they have actually lumped in stress and anxiety. There's a great study that was actually targeting stress, but they HADS. Uh, folks who had social anxiety disorder take part in it. So I think of it as an anxiety mindset intervention. So this is Jameson and colleagues out of Harvard, their first, um, study demonstrating.

This was around 2013 other incredible researchers who do mindset research have done similar work. So what they did is they brought socially anxious, diagnosed socially anxious folks into the lab, and then ask them to do something that's essential kryptonite for them, which is to give an impromptu public speech that would be judged by a panel of judges.

It's hard for all of us and for someone. Where social anxiety is really about this fundamental anxiety of being judged of being, you know, humiliated of this is a setup for them. So, so they were [00:27:00] brought in, told this was about to happen. They had a few minutes to prepare, to give a speech on a hot button topic like the death penalty or abortion or something like that.

And half of these folks, though, they did something very special. They did a mindset shift, uh, intervention, all they did was they taught. About, uh, stress and anxiety. And what they said were things like, you know, you are going to feel nervous when you, when you're, when you do this, as you know, your heart's gonna race, you might even feel dizzy.

You're gonna have these bodily responses, but you should know that this is not you getting prepared to fail. This is you getting primed to succeed because it's your heart. Is increasing to pump oxygen to your brain. It's because these biological and they, they just kind of went down. The list of here are the biological changes.

Here's the mental changes. That's going to make you more acute and focused and you'll, you know, you'll be able to speak more clearly. They, they just lined it all up and gave the evidence and then even talked about the evolutionary function, because Darwin wrote about the [00:28:00] emotions. His third book in his trilogy was the expression of emotion in men and animals.

And they educated folks a bit about that 15 minutes maybe of. And then they had them do the public speech. And then the other half of the folks didn't learn these things. And what do you, what do you know? Not only did the folks who learned to think of anxiety and stress as a potential ally as preparing them to succeed, not only did they do better objectively when they gave their speech with, you know, fewer ums and OS and, you know, they measured this, but their heart rates were slower and their blood pressure was lower.

Now it wasn't zero, but what, what their cardiovascular profile reflected was this sort of being prime. For action to be primed, to perform at your, kind of the sweet spot right. This sort of, um, um, and, and the other, um, half that didn't learn to think of anxiety and stress differently, their biology was through the charts.

I mean, their hearts were racing and they didn't perform as well. So what does this show us? This shows us that just the way that we are filtering in this experience, and then what we [00:29:00] put back out into the world, and even our biology is fundamentally changed. You know, based on our beliefs about, about what these indicators mean.

So this is something that we can do this every day. We can do this in our own life, as we face challenges as we face stressors and just making that shift. And it's a practice that you can get better at making the shifts over time. They will just make, they will literally promise to succeed much more and to fail much less.

So that's why, again, it might not cause anxiety disorders to have a mindset, or although there are causal factors, perhaps it might not, you know, be the, be all end all for everyone, but it will set us up for more success. And that's really why I believe the mindset shift is the first thing we need to do before we do anything.

Yeah. And I, I mean the mindset research is so powerful. We see it with the power that it has with stress, with anxiety, with happiness, with interpersonal conflict. There's so many areas where when we shift our mindset to see the, the [00:30:00] potential, even in uncomfortable, Situations or internal experiences. And we really can harness a lot more of that, the good stuff that comes along with the discomfort.

And I think that's really what your book hammers home in a, in a really compelling way. And, um, you know, I'll just like recommend that folks check out Alia crumbs you, uh, Ted talk on mindset and it's, it's just really powerful

stuff. And also Kelly McGonigal. She talks about stress specifically in references, Jeremy Jameson's research.

It's it's really cool and mind altering, but what I wanna ask you is, so we know this from research it's, it's pretty consistent that shifting our mindset around anxiety is, is powerful in a very positive way. It's very, uh, healing and yet. Medical science sort of hasn't caught on. We sort of really have gotten stuck in this, treat the discomfort.

And so I'm curious, you know, when you talk to AR Aruba physicians or psychologists, um, who are [00:31:00] really, you know, there to do the work of alleviating suffering, I'm curious how you help them to. Orient in this way, that encompasses, you know, both encouraging people to embrace the discomfort, but also, you know, their role as, as practitioners that are there to help people feel less terrible.

That's a great question. I've gotten almost no pushback from mental health professionals, because I think that they feel what I feel, which is a profound sense of failure. And it's really why I wrote the. because if we have all this, if we've devoted our lives to this, why isn't it working? So I think people are very open to this idea.

I think, you know, if you're a psychiatrist, you might have a different opinion on the role of medication. And, and usually it's not even radically different, usually it's, you know, well, we do over prescribe or, you know, there are other, you know, we have to get better at the delivery systems. That also support people to have other therapeutic approaches, but perhaps this is the [00:32:00] best thing in the short term.

And so, you know, I think that we're, I really don't think anyone with any thoughtfulness can disagree that, that first of all, that what we're doing, isn't working, but also that when it comes to emotional health, emotions are not a disease. State in the way that an infectious disease state is, it just doesn't work like that.

Tom Insel, about a month or so ago at the Aspen ideas. He, uh, wrote a book recently. Um, I haven't read it yet, but it, it really, I think, and he's the former director of a M H thank you. Yes. He's the former director of the ni M H. And so was in really in control of all the, um, research funds, uh, many research funds that funded me, for example, throughout my research.

I think he had something like 22 billion of research funds under his control during his 12 or 14 year tenure. And he's a, you know, he's a, a MD. And, um, he wrote this book about how we heal and, and he said [00:33:00] at the Aspen ideas festival, the infectious disease model of mental health and mental illness does not work full stop.

It doesn't work now, what does that mean? And he's a guy who funded research that, that essentially. Tested infectious disease models, the disease model of mental illness. What does that mean? It means if you think about emotional discomfort suffering as a, as a infection to eradicate, right. To make go away, that is just not how emotions work.

It's, it's the, you know, in the simplest way, it's like the white bear phenomenon. If I tell you don't think of a white. Your mind is immediately. It's gonna pop up into your mind, probably stronger than ever. And emotions are exactly the same. We cannot suppress them away. It never works. Everyone knows this really in their heart of hearts.

And so for us to decide, well, someone comes to me and they're feeling a little anxious and so, or a lot anxious. And so the O really the only [00:34:00] solution they need is to just suppress it and make it go away. I don't, how could that make sense to. As the only solution. And then given everything we know about anti-anxiety meds, and there are many solutions out there, there's everything from of course, benzodiazepines to SSRIs, to beta blockers.

There are lots of solutions. What they're meant to do. And every bit of science behind them shows is that they're meant to bring us down physiologically to a baseline that will allow us to benefit from other things we do to manage our anxiety. They were never meant to be a long term solution for 99% of people.

And the other thing that happens, especially with benzodiazepines, which are highly addictive and can synergistically call cause overdose deaths. It's a third leading cause of O overdose deaths in this country is they actually change our brain chemistry, such that our baseline of anxiety actually rises.

So it becomes harder to manage over time. So although I think many people can benefit temporarily from benzodiazepines and probably [00:35:00] some psychiatrists would argue with me and say, no, some people need it even, you know, longer than you might agree with. You know, I, I, I think that it's very clear that just to medicate someone is not going to heal their anxiety.

It's like giving a person a fish they'll eat for a day. You need other techniques. You need to build other skills, to learn to fish and to cope with anxiety for a lifetime. So I think that I would get maybe a little pushback from professionals and definitely folks who suffer from anxiety disorders. And then that's a discussion to have what's the balance there?

What role is medication playing in your life? Can, you know, can it be useful? How long is it useful? What else can you do to move towards, towards. Yeah, I love, I love that take on medication because, you know, from the point of view of acceptance and commitment therapy, it's really about, uh, using tools to allow you to really engage in life in value aligned ways.

And so if medication can bring the edge down enough so that you can learn tools over the long [00:36:00] term, then it really might serve you well. But if the, the medication is dampening things down and causing you not to be able. Function in ways that are consistent with how you wanna live over time or, or sort of worsening the suffering.

Then it really isn't an effective tool to be applying. And yet, you know, the short term alleviation can feel so freeing for somebody who's engaged, who's really deeply suffering. And I, and, you know, um, to say, you know, it's sort of like selling broccoli to people to say, Hey, You wanna, you know, you know, honor your anxiety, you know, embrace it is embrace it.

No, you know, it's not. And it's just that the only way to feel good is to know how to feel these bad feelings. There's just no other way. If there were, I'd really advocate for that, you know? And, and it's interesting too, when you shift your mindset about what medication can serve for you, what role it plays for you rather.[00:37:00]

I think you also start to probably use those medications more effectively because you don't equate feeling bad with a danger signal automatically. You don't equate it with being broken. I think a lot of people feel broken and hopeless, and that's on us too on us mental health professionals, because this whole disease model also suggests to people that if they're struggling with a mental health problem, That there's something wrong with them.

Like there's a disease wrong with you, like an infection, like a cancer, and that is disempowering and it makes you less able to tolerate what really are the natural expected ups and downs of life, and sometimes really bad ups and downs of life. And it just sets you up to be less kind to yourself and less accepting of the full range of your experiences.

So I think that's also really important. Well, and I'm curious what you might say to somebody who had a constitution that you know, was leaning towards excessive worry, you know, [00:38:00] somebody who was just kind of wired for more anxiety, you know, of the cognitive and physiological kind. Um, even if such a person were to be kinder to themselves and sort of, uh, recognize that anxiety is just a part of natural human wiring, you know, they might still say, but I'm just uncomfortable all the time.

They, I could imagine people saying that and I can't speak to every experience, my belief, and based on both research and clinical experience is that one reason we get so uncomfortable over time is that we have these opportunity costs in terms of developing the skills that we might need extra of. If we're temperamentally wired, to be more worried and anxious.

Yeah. And the only way out is. Um, you know, I, I'm a developmentalist by training as well. So I really believe that temperament, you know, we come to the world with certain tendencies. Um, my son who is featured heavily in the book yeah. How did he, [00:39:00] he, so he's gonna kill me one day. He's a sweetheart. He's 13.

Now I wrote this book, you know, over the past few years. So he was a little younger. He's gonna kill me sometime. Um, he was wired a little more anxious. He's just a little more temperamentally, a little more of a worrier. He's a first born. Like I am, you know, he is, you know, and I noticed very early on that he needed that extra scaffolding and support and it doesn't mean, you know, you throw someone in the deep end.

But it means, you know, and parenting is hard, you know, we, we also, this is also a self-help culture where we feel there's one right way to parent and that's another whole other conversation about, oh yeah. With a parenting in here. And I, I love how you take it on. Um, so, you know, if we don't have time to go in depth into it, I really encourage people to check out the chapter on parenting.

Oh, thank you. And yes. And the, and the tagline of, of that chapter is really that kids are not fragile. They're anti fragile they're antifragile, which are antifragile. Things are things that grow from challenge that require challenge and our emotions [00:40:00] are that way. So we come into this world and maybe, um, we're more anxious or maybe your child is more anxious.

That's the opportunity to not accommodate that anxiety by helping them avoid everything. That's actually the last thing we should do when it comes to helping others in ourselves with anxiety, that's the opportunity to say, how can I

supportively gradually? Help myself, help my child face those things that are uncomfortable and come out the other side and then be able to rejoice when you feel stronger at the end.

And you will, because we're not fragile. That's this other part of this mental health equation, that mental health is the absence of emotional discomfort. It means that we're these fragile teacups that will just smash. And it's just, it's just the opposite. So this is another part of the mindset shift.

That I'm really, , I really hope that in the book, in conversations like this one, You know, , I was, you know, on another podcast and someone responded to it on social and mentioned that, , that they had a conversation with their teenage daughter because of [00:41:00] that, I was like, those are, this is what needs to happen.

Not just more conversations. The different ones, because we're talking plenty about mental health. And I don't think it's necessarily, yes, acceptance is very good that there's mental health issues. We have to be there for each other, but I think some of these conversations are making us feel more fragile instead of empowering us.

And so I, I wonder that this book spurs those kinds of conversations and, and that's what it brings up this controversial area. Trigger warnings and safe spaces that you address in the book. And I wonder if you can share your view on some of the problem problems in the way that we have responded to anxiety and youth or discomfort in youth, , you know, in well meaning ways.

Oh, certainly. I mean, what. Human being who cares about other human beings, doesn't want to alleviate their suffering, especially if it's your kid or a young person or a vulnerable person. , so, so this whole idea of trigger warnings of safe spaces, the fundamental premise of, of, of [00:42:00] those is that when we feel negative or painful emotions, it's the it's, it's damaging.

It does harm. People actually say you you're doing harm to. Because I'm, I'm, I'm feeling these feelings. Now there is harm in the sense of if you are, you know, if there's a bigotry, if there's VI, you know, obviously there is kinds of speech that are violent speech, but being emotionally uncomfortable is not a violent form of speech.

And so what are trigger warnings? Trigger warnings are this idea. If you are a person with a history of either trauma or of emotional discomfort around an issue, then by hearing something or being exposed to an idea that is related to

that, that will trigger you to have a trauma response that then will make you do worse.

We overuse the word trauma. So a lot of time, what we actually mean is emotional discomfort so that, and some people are traumatized and that's a separate discussion, but that's almost why it needs to be used carefully because we conflate [00:43:00] emotional discomfort with trauma when we use it casually. Exactly.

I agree. A hundred percent. And so the trigger warning, if you actually look at research on it. So when you warn someone ahead of time, warn someone ahead of time, that they're about. Be exposed to something that might make them uncomfortable. And then you see, how do you feel? What's your physiology? Like what is, you know, what's your reaction?

People do worse. Actually, the evidence suggests so far after a trigger warning. Not better now, the data are not completely in, I'm a scientist. And I believe we need to keep doing this research, but I believe that these constant trigger warnings are actually shifting our mindset towards fragility. Right.

And also being an opportunity cost in learning. To actually work through some of these uncomfortable feelings when appropriate. I'm not advocating to throw traumatized people into trauma situations in, in an UN thoughtful way, but I think there's much more discussion we need to have and, um, and safe spaces are, are, are similar, um, in, in how we are.

In these spaces where [00:44:00] no uncomfortable speech are people who have, um, you know, you know, really unpleasant opinions, or even really, you know, really objectively objectionable opinions that they aren't allowed to speak, or they should be banned, or, you know, this, this notion of safe spaces. I think that's also problematic in similar ways and actually is completely counter to Hal Luen, uh, that one of the fathers of social psychology first developed safe spaces.

Yeah. I mean, Conversation about anti fragility and, and, and sort of the ways that emotional discomfort actually makes us stronger, more resilient, more creative, more thoughtful, more knowledgeable, I think is so important. And that doesn't mean that emotional discomfort isn't uncomfortable. It is. It's sort of the nature of it, but that by allowing for it learning to.

Be curious about it and that that's really largely what you advocate for is like being curious about that emotional discomfort. What, what is it telling you?

Yeah. How is it informing what's important to you? [00:45:00] How is it informing what isn't important to you? , kind of like a, a pain in your body that you need to be able to look at it to figure out.

Do I need to go to the doctor? Do I need to take rest? Do I need to strengthen that area? Do I need to do more stretching or do I need to just kind of ignore it? Because it's not informative. Exactly. And this really, I think comes from my background as an emotion scientist and really one of the predominant emotion theories.

And one that I was educated in is called functional emotion theory. And it's really almost Darwinian in the sense that we think of emotions as, as being packets of information. That are, um, that are two things that are both appraisals of a situation. Like where am I now in the world in relation to what I need?

That's the appraisal part. And then action, readiness tendencies preparing us to act so emotions, especially the uncomfortable ones are a call to listen. They're not a call to panic now. Yes. Sometimes we panic. This is on a spectrum. So I do not wanna say we never panic or you shouldn't panic. I had [00:46:00] myself have had, uh, you know, panic attacks when I was a teenager.

I, you know, this is something that happens to us, but, but that doesn't take away from the fact that emotions evolved. To give us information. And each emotion gives us different types of information. And this is why I love anxiety, even though I hate it at the same time, because it's very unpleasant. I'm I , I don't sit around inviting, believe me.

I've I am had plenty of anxiety lately. I'd love to not, but, but it's a call to really understand what you hope for. You know, one, one person told me once it's one, one of the most beautiful things I've heard in relation to this book, she said, oh, I realize now that I'm not a person who struggles with anxiety, cause that never.

Who I thought I was, I'm a person who struggles with hope because anxiety orients you to this future of possibilities. So it's a call to listen. What, what is in this future? You know, what does that podcast hold in store for me? You know, can I, and if it holds something good, can I prepare now in the present to make that or avert disaster?

Can I do something to take care of myself and [00:47:00] my loved ones? It allows you that opportunity. It tells you things like your purpose in life. Like what really matters to. Because you're only anxious when you care. So yes, it's in, you know, it's, you know, cuz you don't, you don't get anxious about, you

know, stuff that doesn't tie into your sense of self or your priorities in life or what you know, and you don't get anxious when you've given up hope because that's despair.

So you're only anxious when you're in it to win it. When you're hopeful, still even a shred of hope and you care about the future. So this is how can we silence. Information, what an opportunity cost. It's not easy. It's an ally that needs a lot of negotiating with, but it's still right, but it's still an ally.

And then you can, and then sometimes as you mentioned, you have to let go of it because sometimes it's not the perfect messenger it's giving, you know, it's giving us bad information or unclear information. It's overwhelming. There are times in our life, you know, it can orient you towards things you can control, but sometimes we can't control things in [00:48:00] life and it's just so terrible.

And so sometimes we just, we do need a break to replenish ourselves to rest and recover, but we can't know that unless we listen to anxiety first, right. And then sometimes after we rest and recover, you know, and immerse ourselves in the present, there's so many great ways to do it in the present tense, whether it's therapy, yoga, meditation, uh, seeing a spiritual counselor, talking to a friend.

Taking a walk in nature. There's so many ways we can care for ourselves. And we know those things. We are empowered to know those, you know, we do often know those things, but then we can turn back to anxiety and say, okay, it's not going anywhere. What is it telling me I need to do? Is there an actionable here?

Is there something I can work for? That's valuable to me. What are the possibilities in this uncertain future? Like that's what anxiety, those are the gifts that it can give us. If we give it a chance. Yeah. So there, there really is so much to value about anxiety, but it is like a very loud, irritating passenger on the bus of life.

I [00:49:00] love that. That's great. and, and I say this as somebody who I've definitely struggled with lifelong anxiety, mine is more social and it points to the fact that it came very deeply about being likable. And recognizing that anxiety holds that packet of information is really useful and yet it, it can be really disruptive.

So for example, you know, anxiety can really come up while you're performing, you know, if you're on stage and you're worried about, is this review gonna be bad? You know, are, is this gonna end my career? Mm-hmm it can really be so,

so disruptive. And so I'm curious. You know, how, how you guide people, you know, through this mindset change how a mindset change can help to, uh, orient people to manage the, in the moment, anxiety that really can be disruptive more effectively.

It it's, it's all about practice. So once you can start to, and not even perfectly, don't try to be perfect, [00:50:00] please. you know, because that's an enemy of the good, right. Once you, you feel like, okay, I'm more open, I'm more curious. Now I'm about to give this public speech or I'm about to go on a podcast or, , and now that I know that maybe anxiety is there to prime me or it's because I really care.

Let's see if I can get a little, like, maybe I'll figure out a little bit more effectively. How to handle that anxiety right before I go into that, you talk to performers like artists and, and you know, performers. And they say this all the time. They're like, oh my God, I've been doing this for 20 years. And I'm still throwing up in the bathroom, like before every performance.

But I have built these skills. To know that I, now I need to channel this energy. It needs to go somewhere like a wave, right? You need to ride it. You need to surf it. And so I would say that, yes, it might not work so great the first time or the second time or the third time, but I bet you money that it's gonna start working the fourth time and the fifth time and it will get better.

And then you realize, wait a second, I might be struggling with [00:51:00] anxiety, but it doesn't mean that there's this infection that needs to be eradicated. It means I have an opportunity to build more. Yeah, and I'm gonna discover things I never would've considered because now I'm open to this possibility. And usually if you're really tune yourself to the, the hope that hides an anxiety you'll you'll, you'll, you'll kind of find that, oh, wait a second.

That opened up a new possibility cuz I took a chance or, oh, I didn't think I would like that, but wow. That's something really amazing in my life. So I think that the cost benefit analysis, it almost always wins out when. You just, you know, you just keep believing that practice. Doesn't make perfect, but practice makes better

Yeah. Well, and that's where the mindset interventions are so powerful. They're like throwing a stone into the middle of a lake. They have all these ripple effects that, you know, there's sort of the initial change, but also just the changing of the frame in which you understand your internal experience just [00:52:00] changes how you experience it over time.

And the, it gives you more of a chance, like growth mindset. Yeah. To seek out those positive experiences and have. Kind of count more. Yeah. You can't even see these things in the world. That's why it's, it's like this filter. Cause if you don't even. You know, I, I could have in front of me, there's something in, um, that I actually study in my research called the threat bias.

And it's this unconscious bias that we have to notice negative things at the expense of the positive. So if I'm giving a public speech, there's a, there are a hundred people in the audience. One guy in the back's falling asleep. Or blur or that's, whatever's the guy I see, see can't anything besides that guy.

That's why I can't do public speeches. And this, this from somebody who understands that that's not a useful way to think, but that's why I don't do public speeches. Well, this is very cannot take my eye off that guy. Yes . No, and it's hard and, but it, but you know, and actually there's this, this therapeutic technique you might have heard of called the attention bias modification.

I actually founded a whole company. I'm not gonna do a whole plug for my company, but it's called wise therapeutics and we [00:53:00] created. We create gamified techniques, computer they're they're digital native, actually, cuz they were meant to be on the computer. So we make these brief mobile games. That retrain these kinds of biases.

And we started with stress and anxiety for that very reason. So, um, it's out there, we're doing an FDA route to get sort of a, you know, there's this new, exciting field of, of prescribed digital therapeutics of, um, which is very interesting. Gotcha. We also have a commercially available version called personal Zen.

Um, so anyway, just to say that, but because these are unconscious biases, right? It's this filter where you don't even realize till. Five minutes in that you've been staring at that guy and not been able to see, literally not been able to see that 99 people are smiling at you. And of course that is a, a linchpin in the vicious cycle of anxiety and nervousness in the moment.

So if you can gain, if one can gain more flexibility through these very simple kind of cognitive training techniques, it gets at the unconscious in ways that maybe. C B T or except a C T or other kinds of more [00:54:00] consciously focused techniques. Can't yeah, but we, but we have all these it's like biofeedback almost.

Hmm. That's interesting. And you can definitely augment it with biofeedback, but yes, it's, it's like this simple. Yeah, I guess it is in a sense because what you, what you do with ABM attention bias modification is you learn to create an expectation surrounding. The non-negative, you know, kind of threatening thing to a more safe, positive pleasant thing.

And it's not that you're consciously deciding to focus on the positive, but the game directs you there. Yeah. So that unconsciously, you just get into a new habit, which tells us that these, these biases are habits and what happens with habits, you can break them and you can build new ones. And so this is also mindset just on an unconscious level and it just shows.

That we don't have to feel like this is like this. We can't make progress. We don't have to feel broken. Like we can change habits. We know we can change habits even when it's hard. Yeah. Oh, I love that. That's such a nice optimistic message. [00:55:00] Well, I, I definitely wanna check out your company and the, the game itself.

I wanted to maybe finish with one more. Positive association that anxiety has, which is to creativity. This is not something we often think about that. Um, anxiety can make us more creative. So I wonder if you can finish this off with this, the lovely tidbit that anxiety actually serves our creative lives in many ways.

Right? , and it, it, this is, and this is the thing about how to really start shifting our mindset. Some of us can wrap our head around the idea that anxiety's protective. Oh, yeah. It's like you, you feel anxiety and fear and then you do something to take care of yourself. So that's adaptive, but that's almost like a vestigial organ that, yeah, but that evolved for handling saber tooth tigers and all the, you know, and now we don't need it as much and it's outta control.

So that's sort of the story, but what if you start to think, wait, anxiety is not just protective, it's productive, then you have to really dig in. So there is beautiful research out there. Um, experimental research. And if you think about your own [00:56:00] life, you might have anecdotal evidence too, that when we're a little bit anxious and I'm not saying we're having full bone panic, but when we actually have palpable anxiety, there's research to suggest that we actually become more persistent.

More out of the box in our thinking more ready to work at problem solving. And we come up with more interesting ideas. So there's this great, uh, paper by drew and colleagues. Um, was it 2008 back in 2008? I think they published it

and they actually induced anxiety. People by making them write about some really anxiety provoking event that happened in their personal past.

And then they induced other emotions like happiness and anger and you know, and they also induced and, and emotions that they qualified as deactivating. So there's activating and deactivating was their distinction. Anxiety was an activating emotion because it propels you to action, anger, happiness. So there's negative and positive.

That's different, but they share this activation. Whereas sadness. or peacefulness was actually more [00:57:00] deactivating. It wasn't, you know, kind of priming you to do something. And then they gave them a really hard problem solving, uh, creativity, fluency, kind of a task where they had a problem to solve. They had to come up with new ideas.

Um, they had to persist after some obstacles were thrown their way. And what do you know, one of the most effective emotions for actually promoting out of the box, thinking persistence, the quality of ideas was. And, and so just from this sort of intuitive level, you start to think, yeah. You know, if anxiety is what I care about and it activates me to keep at something, even when obstacles are thrown my way, you can understand how you might be more innovative when you feel anxious.

, this wasn't a creative thing, but when my son was born with a congenital little heart condition, I tell this story, , in, in the book. I had to harness my anxiety to really do everything I could think of to make sure he had the best care possible, because I knew that he was going to have to have open heart surgery when he was just a few [00:58:00] months old.

So it's, it's this very, it's this very, you know, when we can channel it and we become accustomed to living with it, we can really use.

You know, Barbara Frickson has this model of positivity broadened and built, and it almost seems like, although anxiety, we don't consider it a positive emotion that it almost fits into that model of, you know, prompting us to sort of scan the environment for ways that we can thrive more.

Yeah. I mean, it's our, one of our greatest tools for managing uncertainty because anxiety, again, it's not about threat. It's about UNC. Because you're always holding the positive and the negative possibilities of the future in mind. So, you know, Fredrickson's broaden, broaden and build theory really speaks to the benefits of when we recruit positive emotion.

It allows us to be expansive in these ways, but sometimes we don't need expansiveness. Sometimes we need laser focus. That's why I opened the book with a story about the amazing, um, American hero, Dr. Scott Parazynski, who's an astronaut who performed one [00:59:00] of the longest space, walks in history to prepare a solar panel of the international space station.

And it was hour after grueling our, of, of crawling out. Literally like in the void of space attached to safety by this boom that was just attached to his foot. I mean, it's insanity in terms of, but he had to harness all of that focus and anxiety. It wasn't a moment to be broadening and building. He had to have laser a moment to be laser focused.

Yeah. Narrow. What we need is we need flexibility. And we've just cut off. So I'm not saying only anxiety's there for you, but we've cut off all the benefits and that flexibility, that alchemy, almost of being able to use different emotions when we need them and to feel confident in our ability to do so.

And that's the flexibility in alchemy that we need to reclaim, and we need to really push back against an industry that I think has become very [01:00:00] predatory in some circle. To try to convince us that we're broken, that we have to fix it that, oh, you feel anxious, better fix that right away. That's not serving us in the long run.

Even if for me, even if there are well-intentioned people that I know there are, I think we're in this spiral now of just losing these parts of ourselves that we need. Right. And that's definitely a part of, you know, what prompted the opioid epidemic and, and other ways that we've begun to think of, you know, pain and discomfort that we, we create this inflexible approach of, we must eradicate anything that isn't, you know, delightful to experience.

And that, that actually causes more suffering in the long run. Mm-hmm I believe that, and that the benzodiazepine epidemic, which is very real as the third leading cause of overdose death, right after opioid. And the is twin to the opioid epidemic. As you say. Yeah. Well,

if you have anxiety, treat anxiety or love someone with anxiety, you should definitely pick up future tenses. Cause there's a lot more that we weren't able to get to. And Tracy, [01:01:00] where should people go to find out more about you and your work? Oh, thank you. Uh, you can go to my website, Dr. Tracy phd.com. I am also on social media, um, uh, just to, you know, try to get some good information out there.

Uh, even though I have mixed feelings so you can find me on Instagram at Dr. Tracy PhD and also on Twitter. Uh, Tracy, a Dennis. On on Twitter, where once in a while, I, I do like to, I do enjoy my tweets. yeah. I have mixed feelings too. Thank you so much for joining us was so great. Was such a delight to talk with you.

Oh, a delight to talk with you. Thank you for the opportunity.

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