

Worrying is Optional w/ Ben Eckstein

[00:00:00] **Ben Eckstein:** I think we so often get pulled into the sense of, oh, if I'm worrying about this thing, it's going to increase my chances of doing well, but that's not really true, right? Worrying doesn't do that planning, preparing, problem solving

these things might be helpful but just. Mentally turning over all of these different scenarios that's not really a useful strategy. I think it's hard because there is this part of it, that problem solving part that, that is actually very useful and important.

But there's just, there's a point of diminishing returns. There's some place where it stops being useful, it stops being practical.

That was Ben Eckstein. Stein on the psychologists of the clock. We are four experts in psychology here to bring you cutting edge and science based ideas to help you flourish in your relationships, work, and health.

[00:00:59] **Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, a clinical psychologist practicing in Mile High, Denver, Colorado, and author of Act for Burnout, Act Daily Journal, and the Act Daily Card Deck.

[00:01:09] **Emily Edlynn:** From America's Heartland, I'm Dr. Emily Edlynn a clinical psychologist based in Chicago, Illinois, and author of Autonomy Supportive Parenting.

[00:01:17] **Michael Herold:** Calling in from Vienna, Austria. I'm Michael Herold, ACT coach, confidence trainer, and author of an upcoming book on being a better conversationalist and making friends.

[00:01:26] **Jill Stoddard:** And from coastal New England, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, The Big Book of Act Metaphors, and Impostor No More.

[00:01:32] **Emily Edlynn:** We hope you take what you learned here to build a rich and meaningful life.

[00:01:36] **Michael Herold:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock.

Hey everyone, I am here with Jill to discuss my interview with Ben Eckstein on his excellent book *Worrying is Optional* break the cycle of anxiety and rumination that keeps you stuck. Jill, what were your thoughts on the interview?

[00:02:01] **Jill Stoddard:** Well, I have to say I'm a pretty tough critic when it comes to all things anxiety, because of course this is my training and area of specialty. And I give this interview five stars. I loved everything that Ben was talking about. I think listeners are going to get so much out of this. Um, it felt even a little bit like you, you're getting a taste of what it would be like to be in therapy with Ben.

So. Um, I just loved it. I loved it. And one thing that I was thinking about as I was listening to the interview and just thinking about worry in general, I love how you talk about the difference between worry and worrying, and that was new to me and I love learning new things.

So, and sometimes I think I'm not going to learn anything new when it comes to anxiety and that was new and I loved it. But the other thing I was thinking about. Is how, when we are worrying about a catastrophe, a worst case, some bad thing happening, our bodies don't really know the difference between worrying about a thing that's not happening and the thing actually happening.

So, for example, Michael, if you and listeners, if you right now, take a minute and imagine that I hand you, I have like a book big yellow, juicy lemon. And I cut it up into quarters and I hand a quarter, you know, a lemon wedge to each of you. Imagine you take that lemon wedge and you take a big giant Bite out of it like really use your imagination to imagine you're taking a bite of a lemon Which and then what do you notice Michael happens when you do that?

[00:03:29] **Michael Herold:** my face almost contorts a little bit and then I'm like have this little like a shiver of like, Oh, this is like really, really bitter, really sour and it's almost like I was biting into the fricking lemon wedge

[00:03:45] **Jill Stoddard:** Exactly like and I even get that that weird little like puckery feeling in my lower cheeks Right and a little bit of extra salivation under my tongue. And so of course, it's not as strong as if you were taking a bite of an actual lemon, but just thinking about a lemon, you can have a similar emotional and physical response.

And so then imagine what's happening in your body when you're thinking about, you know, your plane crashing or an earthquake happening or whatever it is that we tend to worry about. You're basically putting your body through a

similar response to a catastrophe or a trauma, even when it's not happening. And so the idea of learning how to manage worry or let go of worry or, you know, relate to it in a different way. I just think it's a really critical, important skill that people can learn that will give them a lot of relief.

[00:04:36] **Michael Herold:** And I have a follow up question to this one, because this is something that I've heard so many times. I've completely started to disregard it because to me, it's always sounded. Way too easy and not very much on point. And this is the idea that anxiety and excitement feel the same way. So the cliché thing is to say, well, if there's something that makes you feel anxious, you just interpret it as being super excited.

You have to go up on stage, give a talk. You are anxious. Why don't you just behind stage, reframe this as being excited. This has always hit me as something that I was completely unable to do. And it didn't, it sounded like almost too good. To be true. Um, and while we both don't have any studies to refer to, what are your thoughts on, on that like mind trick?

[00:05:27] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, that's, I'm glad you're bringing that up because that, that is out there in the ether, and then I think people feel bad when they fail to be able to do that, and I guess I understand why there is this belief that anxiety and excitement are kind of the same, but the way that I would think of that is when you're feeling anxious, it's your mind and body saying there's danger up ahead.

Or if you're feeling fear, it's that acute in the moment I am in danger right now. And so the, what happens in your body is it triggers your fight flight response. I need to do the thing to make me safe. And with excitement, it's not really a fight, flight response. It's not a reaction to danger. So I suppose if you could, Reframe the situation as not being dangerous, you know, and kind of changing your relationship to that anxiety.

Maybe that would create some change. Um, I don't think there's science behind this and I, I, I suspect they're not really the same thing. It's your autonomic nervous system, right? That fight flight that, that happens when you perceive danger versus excitement is usually. I'm, this is something that I want to do that feels happy to me.

That does not pose any threat to me.

[00:06:41] **Michael Herold:** Yeah. It's very difficult to think about something that gets me excited. And look at this from the point of a fight and flight

response, like very, not, not, not even very rarely. I'd never, was there something that really excites me? And I'm like, Oh, this feels like, just like I want to run right. Someone

[00:06:57] **Jill Stoddard:** Or the opposite of that, like you're saying like, okay, if I have to give a talk on stage and I'm really nervous, the perceived danger is I really care about doing a good job and I care about staying connected with my audience. These people, I don't want them to judge me or my performance negatively. So that's the perceived danger.

So in order to turn that into. from fear or anxiety into excitement, I would have to be able to convince myself that this is a thing I'm looking forward to and there is no threat here. And that's, that's a very difficult shift to make. We don't generally have the ability to change our thoughts quite in that way.

Some people can in certain contexts, and if you can, great, there's nothing wrong with that. Um, but often, you know, the harder you try to do that, the stickier it gets. they become. So I, I think we can probably debunk the just turn your anxiety into excitement and that will fix all of your problems advice.

[00:07:52] **Michael Herold:** All right. Let's put the debunk stamp on that one then. Well, thank you, Jill. And uh, I hope everyone listening enjoys my interview with Ben Eckstein.

Ben Eckstein is a therapist specializing in the treatment of OCD, anxiety, and OCD related disorders. He is now the owner and director of bull city anxiety and OCD treatment center in Durham, North Carolina. In addition to his clinical work, Ben is a speaker trainer and author.

His first book worrying is optional break the cycle of anxiety and rumination that keeps you stuck is the topic of our conversation today.

[00:08:29] **Michael Herold:** Ben, welcome. You have solved the problem of anxiety for humanity once and for all, congratulations.

[00:08:36] **Ben Eckstein:** Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, I'll, I'll take my bow now. Um, appreciate it. Yeah,

[00:08:41] **Michael Herold:** Yeah. So that was, that was, that was a huge deed. Uh, we've struggled with this for thousands of years and it took Ben Eckstein to

come in and be like, no, like stop it. But okay. So joking aside, you haven't fully solved the problem yet. but you've brought us to a point where worrying and anxiety is actually an optional. Would you like to do this? Yes or no. And so in order to get our, uh, listeners set up and ~~what we're,~~ what we're talking about here, I think before we go into dealing with, worry and anxiety and rumination and all of the fun stuff one tends to do in a lonely evening, let's set the stage by, ~~um,~~ explaining the difference between worry And worrying

[00:09:27] **Ben Eckstein:** Yeah, yeah, so I think it's a pretty important distinction. And yeah, it's one I talk about a lot in the book. So yeah, there's worry, the noun, and then there's worrying, the verb. And yeah, these things are pretty different. So, worry, the noun. This is just sort of a thing that shows up in our heads, right? It's this sort of involuntary process.

It's sort of automatic, you know, our brains are going to conjure up all sorts of stuff. Um, and this is just going to happen. It's simply a thing that we have to accept as part of the human condition. We will have things that we notice that are going wrong, that could go wrong, and I, I often remind people that this is probably an indicator that you have stuff that you care about in your life, you know, that there are things that are important to you, there are things that are meaningful, and when we notice Those things, we will also notice the possibility that those things could all fall apart, they could go wrong.

Um, and so yeah, I think if we have worries in our life, that probably means we're doing something right. You know, there's something that we care about. But worrying, this is a little bit different, right? So this is when we take that initial thought, that thing that just shows up in our head, and now we become an active participant in that, right?

It's not just a thing that. involuntarily showed up. It's a thing that we are to some degree voluntarily doing. And now this may still be automatic. It may not be that we chose to do it right in the moment, but it is something that we have some control over. We can choose whether or not we engage with those thoughts.

You know, do we try to resolve them? Do we try to eliminate the uncertainty? You know, do we do something with that initial thought beyond just noticing it and allowing it to be

[00:11:18] **Michael Herold:** now, ~~the, what, what,~~ when you talked about worry, meaning that there's something that we care about. I was immediately reminded of, uh, something in the, the worry versus worrying cycle that I find

myself stuck in, uh, on this sunny Tuesday, where next Friday, I'm going to take the train to go home and see my family.

And of course, there's this worry that pops up that says, Oh, I'm ~~Oh, I'm~~ have you reserved a seat? Have you gotten the ticket? Have you checked the timetable? Have you checked if the connection is there? Which is just random stuff that pops up while I'm brushing my ~~teeth,~~ teeth. Or I am doing whatever.

It's like, have you gotten the ticket? Are you sure you got it? Do you have the PDF on your phone? And, ~~and that is, that is,~~ To a certain degree it speaks for me because apparently this is important to me, right? I don't want to be the person who sits in the train without a ticket or who sits in the train And it's the wrong train or it's going to the wrong family and then they don't know me and then they kick me out like all of the things that I would like to avoid because I want to see my family.

And, and so yes, this points towards something important or relevant at least, but it's also something that is like evolutionarily, it's just adaptive, that we have this alarm system that goes off. And it just doesn't go off by saying, Hey, Ben, ~~uh,~~ maybe give this a little bit of a thought. I'm not sure. It goes like, Ben, you're going to die.

This is a lion run, right? There's like, there's a lot of evolutionary backing to this thing.

[00:12:51] **Ben Eckstein:** Yeah, yeah, it's a little dramatic sometimes right? Yeah, it tends to not do that You know the subtle soft pedal kind of cues right there yeah, it gets really loud ~~and~~ and insistent sometimes and you know, I think again, that's part of the plan. You know, I think if it was that, Hey Ben, something might be wrong, right?

Like I probably wouldn't react in the same way. And, you know, if there is danger, that's probably not a very effective way to do it. And, , I don't know, we have talked about that idea of, uh, like alarm system going off. You know, if, if you have a smoke detector in your house, it's not a little quiet alarm that says, Hey, maybe there's fire, right?

Like it wants to get your attention. And, and again, this is, A feature, not a flaw, right? ~~This is~~ this is how it's supposed to be. It wants to get your attention. Um, and it's generally going to be calibrated to go off at the very first faintest signs of potential danger. Um, that smoke detector is not very effective if it goes off.

After your house has burned down, um, and you know, I think with the lion example, same idea. It's not going to be very effective if when you're in the middle of getting eaten by a lion, your brain is saying, hey, something might be wrong, right? Like you want to do that at the first whiff of a lion. You know, a hundred yards away, right?

That's when you want that system going off. Not when something bad has already happened. Um,

[00:14:06] **Michael Herold:** It also goes to the extremes. It's to the absolute extreme, like a little bit of smoke and no one thinks, Oh, my neighbor's probably having a smoke downstairs. It's like a little bit of smoke.

And immediately it's like, Oh, something must be on fire. So that

thing is useful, like I hate to admit it, but it's really useful.

[00:14:22] **Ben Eckstein:** It is. And we'll, we need it. And again, it gets a little carried away. It can catastrophize. Um, And again, I think that can be really frustrating when we get these false alarms over and over again. you know, I think it's helpful though just to keep in mind, you know, that this is adaptive.

This is our brain's way of trying to be helpful. Even if it's this sort of ham handed kind of approach to it, it's not always accurate. But it's trying, it's doing its best. Um, it's just, uh, it's a little overprotective. Hey, Michael, here. S you might have already heard. I'm currently working on a book on confidence, building, having better conversations and making friends. Would you like to work with me to make this happen? I don't know about you, but I like self development books. That aren't just about the theory and the exercises.

[00:15:14] **Michael Herold:** I like books that are full of real stories and insights from people who have worked through the concepts and have gotten the results they wanted. And that's how I envisioned my book too. So I'm looking for a handful of coaching clients to work with me over the next couple of weeks. If you struggle with confidence or your social skills, we can work together for eight weeks in one-on-one coaching sessions that are tailored to what's your specific goals

and your story will anonymously of course, be featured in my book and help and inspire others. I'm only going to work on this with 10 people. And as a thank you offer 50% off my coaching package. If you think this is for you, then head over to herald.coach/book. And applying that's all back to the show.

And here comes the antagonist of the movie that is our life, and that is worrying. So we have worry, this one thing, this alarm system that pops up, usually for a good reason, even though a little bit excessive. And then we have worrying. Which is me constantly thinking about my train ticket, my travel plans, even though I should be sleeping, working, eating, how did worrying make its way into our human operating system?

Like who installed that piece of software?

[00:16:28] **Ben Eckstein:** yeah, yeah, I'd like to know and I'd like a refund, but yeah, I, I think as humans we have evolved and we don't just rely on instincts like many animals do, we have this capacity to think critically and to analyze and to kind of size up all of these different things. ~~Um,~~ we can make predictions about the future, we can review things that happened in the past, right?

~~We,~~ we have ability to use our, Kind of internal language to make sense of everything, which is really, really handy, right? Like it allows us to do some incredible things humans have done pretty well for themselves by using this tool. ~~Um,~~ but there are some places where it stops being helpful. Um, and so I, I think running simulations about something that could happen.

That's, that's really helpful, right? ~~That I,~~ I think we all need to be able to do that in order to plan and problem solve. Um, but there is some point where it stops being helpful. You know, we're running simulation after simulation. you know, I think when you've run the simulation of the most likely thing that could happen, that might be helpful.

You know, when you go to plan B. Okay, sure. That, could work. Plan C, plan D, plan E, F, right? Like that, as we keep going, you know, there's some point where this is just not really all that useful. Um, and ~~I,~~ I think we often are running simulations about these what ifs with this belief that it's helping us to be safe and something about the lion thing, you know?

So if I sit there saying, Oh, like, what if I get eaten by a lion? That's very different than taking aversive action to avoid getting eaten by a lion, right? Like, just sitting there in my head saying, Hey, I wonder what that's going to be like, right? Like, that's not very helpful. And the example that I, I'm pretty sure I include in the book, uh, that ~~I,~~ I always think of is, you know, if I have a big test coming up on Friday, and I have two options.

If I want to do well on that test, I can worry about the test, right? Or I can study for the test, right? And so I think we so often get pulled into the sense of, oh, if

I'm worrying about this thing, it's going to increase my chances of doing well, but that's not really true, right? Worrying doesn't do that planning, preparing, problem solving in this example, studying, right?

These things might be helpful, right? And if I want to build myself a spear to protect me from the lion, that might be helpful, but just. Mentally turning over all of these different scenarios where I get eaten by a lion, like, that's not really a useful strategy. Um, and so I, I, I think it's hard because there is this part of it, that problem solving part that, that is actually very useful and important.

But there's just, there's a point of diminishing returns. There's some place where it stops being useful, it stops being practical. And now it's just, we're kind of mentally churning through a bunch of garbage that's not really getting us anywhere.

[00:19:27] **Michael Herold:** And maybe this is just me, but I would be surprised. Like my mind will worry about things I can't have a solution for. I can't solve for, there's nothing,

don't know, randomly coming up. What if my family's house gets hit by a meteorite? Now I'm sitting there, it's like, there's nothing I can plan for. I'm not going to build my own rocket system to defend against meteor strikes.

so why worry about something like that? Because our brains like, but I got to do something, I got to at least do something. I can't just sit here. I need to, well, at least let me worry about this. And then I'll feel a little bit better about it.

[00:20:07] **Ben Eckstein:** Yeah, well, I think that's spot on. You know, I think for many of us, I think worrying is what we do when we run out of useful things to do. You know, when, when we've exhausted the useful things and we're still not satisfied, I think it's really tempting to turn to that kind of mental churning. And I, and I, I think it's.

It's sort of this problem of taking a strategy that works really well in some places and then applying it in a place where it doesn't make sense anymore. So I think this breakdown that sometimes people don't always think about is some things are knowable. Some things are not knowable, right? ~~That I,~~ if I am worried that that blob on the horizon might be a lion, I can approach it and figure out, is it a lion or is it just a bush or a zebra or whatever?

But if I am worried, hey, did I say something dumb at that party last night? Or I'm worried, are my family going to be okay? ~~Um,~~ Those aren't actually

knowable things. Um, and so turning those things over in my head, as if I can just solve the problem, like it's a math problem, um, that's not going to work, right?

~~That~~ that's a great strategy for things that are ~~a~~ knowable two plus two is four. That's knowable. We can solve that problem over and over again. We'll get the same results. Did I say something dumb at the party last night? That's not really knowable. I can replay it over and over again in my head. I can text my friend and say, Hey, did I say something dumb?

Right? Like I can do a bunch of stuff, but none of these things will make that unknowable thing actually knowable. All it will be is just speculation and simulations, right? There's always going to be this kind of undercurrent of uncertainty that runs through all of those answers.

[00:21:42] **Michael Herold:** how come our brain having these thousands of years of experience with this piece of software, uh, how come it doesn't just swipe left and go like, no on install. Like I, I will stick to the problem solving. I will stick to. letting go, if it doesn't serve me, I will stick to what works and not worry about the rest.

And in your book, you have the self reinforcing cycle , out of five steps that, uh, basically trains us and So the little note I made next to it was a sketch of my brain that says here is a potential threat. And then Michael says, let's get really upset about this. And the brain goes, Oh yeah, so I was actually right.

Yeah, right. That's that what you're saying. So this was my little like TLDR version of the reinforcing cycle. Let's, let's turn it into a more professional approach than brain sketch.

[00:22:38] **Ben Eckstein:** Yeah. So, there is this process of reinforcement that keeps these things stuck, um, and I, speaking of swiping, I always think of algorithm where, you know, if you go on social media and you see an ad for shoes. And you click on that ad for shoes, you can guess what's going to happen, right? You're going to get more ads for shoes, right?

The algorithm has learned, Hey, this thing. Is the kind of thing that you're into. Let's show you more of it.

[00:23:09] **Michael Herold:** absolutely. My, my Instagram is basically Lego Graham by

[00:23:12] **Ben Eckstein:** Yeah. Yeah, I, uh, I, as an aside, I got there at some point during the pandemic, this guy was making these like squirrel obstacle courses where he was trying to get squirrels to jump through all these things

and the longest time, it was nothing but squirrels jumping through hoops and doing silly things on my feed.

In any case, uh, anyway, we click on the things that Get our attention, get our interest. They're not always the things that we want. I, again, I think many people can attest to the kinds of things you get ads for. Sometimes it's kind of embarrassing. Sometimes it's not actually the kind of thing that you want, right?

Like that. It's, it's just the thing that grabbed your attention. Um, and of course you click on it, you're going to get more of it. And so. In these moments where our brain registers danger, right? And sometimes this is just a gut reaction. Sometimes there's a cognitive distortion involved. We're saying, you know, Hey, ~~I, uh,~~ just because there's some potential danger, that might mean some catastrophic thing is going to happen.

There's all sorts of ~~different,~~ different things that might impact whether or not our brains flag something as dangerous, but if our brain says, Hey, that thing's dangerous. And we then take some aversive action, right? And so ~~I don't know-~~ I don't know if I see a dog and I say, Oh, I saw that movie, that Stephen King movie where the dog killed everyone.

And so that dog must be dangerous, And I say, okay, I better, better get away from it. Let's play it safe. Let's cross the street and go the other side of the street. You would think if ~~I,~~ I keep going, that dog didn't attack me. Then I would say, Okay. Like, I guess I'm safe, right?

Like I made it, everything worked out. But that's not actually what my brain is saying. In that moment, my brain is saying you're safe because you cross the street, right? Like that it's, it's coming to this false conclusion about why I'm safe. So when we take some kind of aversive action, when, when we avoid, when we do something to kind of subdue the threat, you would think, Hey, everything works out.

It's going to be fine. But we're actually confirming that there is Danger. And I think the example I used in the book, I always think of it as kind of like, ~~uh,~~ it's our kind of lizard brain, caveman brain, that kind of thing. And so if I see my friend eaten by a bear, let's say it's a black bear.

[00:25:25] **Michael Herold:** happens.

[00:25:26] **Ben Eckstein:** It happens, right?

Um, and I say, okay, quick, back to the cave. You don't want to get eaten. I'm going to survive, right? My friend, not so much, but ~~I, if,~~ if I'm adapting, my brain is going to say, okay, that bear is super dangerous. Don't go near that bear. But if my brain is really smart, it's going to generalize a little bit.

It's not just going to say that bear is dangerous. It's going to say all the black bears, all the brown bears, the polar bears, the koala bears, the panda bears, right? Like lump them all in. Let's just assume that bears are dangerous. Go back to the cave. And that's an excellent strategy. I, uh, koalas may be okay.

I don't know, but it's a solid strategy, right? Like better safe than sorry. Let's just assume they're all dangerous and go back to the cave. But I think where this is problematic is our brains also see, I don't know, a black sheep and now they say, Oh, like four legs. It's kind of fuzzy. It's black. It has a snout.

Go back to the cave, right? And when I do that, my brain is saying, Phew, good thing you went back to the cave. Otherwise that thing was going

to get you, right? Right. And so even though there was never

a threat in the first place, My response to that, and then eventually being safe, my brain ~~is,~~ is connecting these things.

and so, when we have these thoughts show up, if we're doing things to try to subdue them, we're trying to, we're trying to find certainty, we're trying to get away from them, ~~we're,~~ we're distracting, we're pushing them away. Our brain is essentially saying, hey, Like you made it, right? Like you did this thing.

You're okay now. Um, and that's true. You made it. But the next time that thing shows up, your brain is saying, Hey, that thing was dangerous. And now just like the algorithm, when you click on the shoes, right? ~~right?~~ Your brain is saying, Hey, ~~be on the lookout for the sheep,~~ be on the lookout for that thought, right?

Like ~~that~~ this is the kind of thing you want to pay attention to. And so when we start avoiding it, when we start doing things to subdue it and make it go away. It kind of works a little bit right in that moment, but ~~we're,~~ we're actually kind of

shooting myself in the foot because we are making it much, much more likely that our brain is going to keep conjuring up more and more of that thought.

It's going to keep flagging the thought as dangerous, and we're going to get more and more of this content that we don't actually really want. Um, and so, yeah, it's, it's a little counterintuitive, you know, you would think that if you, you make it through unscathed, it would all be okay, but it's actually kind of the opposite because we're, we're showing our brain that there is danger.

There is something to pay attention to. And that's why we're safe because we paid such great attention.

[00:27:49] **Michael Herold:** to any bear listeners. Uh, this is of course a random example. Um, so you made me model this around my dilemma with the train ticket. So if I hear you correctly, then I could now, knowing that traveling is important, that I need a ticket, that I need to pay for the ticket, I could now obsess and double and triple check, have printout, have a pdf on my iPad, have a pdf on my phone, Double check again tomorrow ~~baek it everything~~ back everything up to the cloud and then I'm getting on the train on Friday I'm like, oh this worked.

I'm good. I'm not getting arrested. I'm not getting yelled at because I was so very Careful, so the next time I'm traveling by train like my brain goes like this is why you were safe because you were obsessing So much over this this is why you were safe and then my brain ~~It~~ generalizes the entire thing and says, well, I'm going to go have lunch with friends in the restaurant.

I need to triple, quadruple check that the reservation is made, that it's the right table, that I have my wallet. And then it generalizes to, I'm going grocery shopping. Do you really, like, did I, did I get that right? It's like my brain says like, you've worried so much, this worked.

And now please worry more.

[00:29:01] **Ben Eckstein:** So not an argument for being mediocre, but I think we, in general, should strive ~~to do~~, to find the lower limits of what we can do to be okay, right? ~~And so I,~~ the example I sometimes use, ~~so~~ if we have ~~that~~ test coming up on Friday, And I, I say, you know what, ~~I'm not going to worry,~~ I'm going to study.

I'm, I'm going to double down and really, really put in the effort to study for this test. I'm going to study for 10 hours for that test. So let's say I study for 10 hours

and I get an A. I would rightfully conclude you got an A because you studied for 10 hours. But what I would not get to see is what happens if I study for 9 hours, or 8 hours, or 5 hours, Or not at all, right?

Like I never get to see the lower limits of, Hey, what would it take for you to be okay? So if I just say, Hey, every test I take, I need to study for 10 hours in order to get May. I'm never going to get a chance to see what would happen. And so again, I think this is our Our brain doing a thing that ~~is~~, is really handy.

It's saying, Hey, this thing worked, do it again. Right. Like ~~why~~, why not? Right. Makes sense. ~~Um~~, but I think we never get ~~to kind of~~, to discriminate between what's helpful and it's. it's risky, right? But I think I would say, I think this is really just about being. efficient, right? So like, sure, maybe it maybe it takes 10 hours to get an A, but this means I might be signing up for a lifetime of studying for 10 hours, when maybe I could have really been studying for one hour.

And so it's a gamble, right? And so I'm just sitting here saying like, hey, that sure, I could, if I really find that lower limit. It might be that I get a, I get a B, maybe I get a C, maybe I fail, I don't know, right? Like, but I, I personally, I would rather take that risk that maybe we start to see a place where maybe the results suffer a little bit, but knowing that I have not spent a lifetime going way overboard doing these things that I just don't need to be doing. And so again, I'm not making an argument for mediocrity or for recklessness, right? I, there's nothing wrong

[00:31:03] **Michael Herold:** Hey, you're preaching to the choir. Like low effort is the motto of my life.

[00:31:07] **Ben Eckstein:** There's nothing wrong with checking to see if you're on the right train, but there's some point where, yeah, ~~do we~~, do we double check every time? Do we triple check every time? What happens if we, if we get on the wrong train? At some point we're going to notice we're going to get on the right train, right? Like it'll be okay. You know, and I, I think a lot of this is not saying, Hey, the bad things are never going to happen. I think a lot of it is saying, Hey, sometimes the bad things happen, but.

We're capable of managing. Things that are hard. We can manage adversity. We can manage distress, right? These things are not, uh, We don't need to have them up on a pedestal like it's something that we have to avoid at all costs. ~~Um~~, things are not gonna work out for us all the time, inevitably, and that's actually okay.

We can manage a world where Yeah, we hit some bumps and we learned from them and learned something new. That's okay.

[00:32:00] **Michael Herold:** and that is the, uh, exposure and response prevention you write about at the end. So I love getting, getting there as the end goal, especially since it also allows me to geek out about the legend of Zelda.

Uh, that's just like spoiler. Everyone, you need to listen to the end, but let's, let's see how we, we, we get there because doing something like what we've just described might call not.

Checking for the train, or what would actually be a much more realistic example in my life is preparing for a podcast interview Because I read your book exactly once I went through my notes once and I wrote down questions exactly once I could have done this 10 times and probably the interview would be Uh, a little bit better because there's more prep.

Would it have been worth, okay, this is, we're saying this to you, but would it have been worth reading the book 10 times? And the answer is, sorry, Ben, no,

[00:32:51] **Ben Eckstein:** no,

absolutely not

[00:32:53] **Michael Herold:** times would have been too much. Like one was enough, maybe two if, if I'm on vacation, but. It's one and it's enough. um, so how do we get to this thing where, um, not checking, not reading your book 10 times, not excessively prepping.

It's scary. Like, we need to train some skills. We need to talk about some skills. that come into play when the scary thing of not acting on our worries comes in. And, and this is where we talk about dealing with anxiety more effectively.

[00:33:26] **Ben Eckstein:** Yeah, so I would be cool if there was a thing we could do to just make this all feel good, but it doesn't, and whenever I have clients come into my office, a lot of the time they come in saying, hey, I want you to make my anxiety go away. And I like to set expectations low and I start off by immediately disappointing my clients by saying, No, that's not really what I do.

You know, I'm, I'm not in the business of just making anxiety go away. I'm in the business of getting you really good at being anxious, right? To, to foster a

different relationship with anxiety, to get to that point where you're a pro at being anxious. And, and I think this is not about eradicating anxiety.

I think it's more about kind of shrinking the footprint of anxiety, getting it to this place where, yeah, it shows up. It's part of your human experience as it is for everyone, but it's not impacting your life in these really significant ways. It's not deterring you from being the kind of person that you want to be.

It's not interfering with ~~you~~ the things that are meaningful and significant in your life. Um, and so I like that example. I agree for the record. Yeah, don't read my book. I don't know. Once is fine. ~~Yeah, I~~

[00:34:42] **Michael Herold:** buy it 10 times and read it once.

[00:34:45] **Ben Eckstein:** you go, there you go. That's a good compromise. Um to read a book 10 times My book or any book.

We are doing that at the cost of something else. That time is time that you could have spent doing something else in your life. And if the only thing that's important to you in your life is reading my book, I'm sorry for what your life has become, but like, yeah, that, That's probably not the kind of life that you want to live, right?

Like, that you want to live a life where, yeah, ~~maybe~~ Maybe a little self help is important to you, but you also have other stuff that you care about and I think We're trying to figure out how do we Learn to relate to anxiety in a way where we're not fighting it constantly. We're not struggling with it We're not perpetuating it by keeping this cycle going, right?

So I think we essentially want to get really good at allowing that feeling to be there But then kind of putting it in its proper place where you know that ~~You~~ ~~You know~~, the alarm system going off, it's really distressing. It's really uncomfortable. None of us really like it. But to fight with it constantly, to struggle with it, that's not going to get us anywhere.

Um, and ~~I~~ I think we, understandably, I think many people go with this sort of short term solution of, hey, let's just try to make it go away. Let's make that anxiety stop as soon as we can. And that it's well intentioned. It's totally understandable. It's really uncomfortable.

[00:36:11] **Michael Herold:** It also works. It works for

exactly

[00:36:14] **Ben Eckstein:** in the moment, right?

Yeah, exactly. Um, it's just, it's a little short sighted, right? That it's, it's, eh, it's not instant gratification, because it's not exactly a fun thing, but it's, it's short term relief, you know, that ~~you~~, you get a ~~a~~ very brief little reprieve from it, but you do it at the cost of reinforcing that whole system and making it worse.

And so, we need acceptance of anxiety. Essentially, you know, we need to learn to coexist with it. We make space for it as uncomfortable as it may be. Um, and we get really good at living our lives in the presence of that feeling. Um, and I, I think it's really important to kind of. Demystify it to allow it to be this.

Again, I use this phrase before, but you know, it's a feature, not a flaw, right? This is just it's part of the human experience. We're going to feel anxiety. Um, that part we don't get a choice in. We get to choose how we respond to it and what we do with it afterwards. And ~~I~~ I think there are some folks out there who don't feel a ton of anxiety.

They can probably get away with having a really crappy response to their anxiety, right? Like ~~they~~, they might be able to get away with doing all the wrong things. Uh, and that'll be fine for them because ~~those~~, those lucky folks feel anxiety once a year and they do all the wrong things and it sucks and that's fine.

But if you're somebody who deals with anxiety a little bit more, you probably can't, Get away with that. And it's unfair. I'll be the first to say, Hey, that's, that's a bum deal, right? Like you, you are in this position where you have to get really good at doing this. Um, but if that is the brain you have, you have a brain that is a little more prone to getting anxious.

It's a little more prone to worrying about things. Then you are probably someone who has to get really good at that skill.

[00:37:58] **Michael Herold:** And you're probably someone who's in the theme park of humanity, uh, just like everyone else. I, I wonder when, when you said that there are people that, uh, don't have a strong anxiety response. My first thought was like, Oh, that sounds great. And the second thought was I'd be on the wrong train without a ticket all the fricking time.

And then because I'm not anxious at all, I'll steal the ticket from my neighbor and pretend it was mine all along. In short, Michael without anxiety would probably be imprisoned within like six to eight months of getting rid of his anxiety. I'm not, I'm not sure. Oh, and talking of Michael in prison. No, this is just loosely related.

But you make a jaw dropping remark very much towards the end of the book where you say that effective treatment very often means an increase. Thank you. in anxiety. Is this just a lame doctor excuse to say that what you did did not work, and so you're selling it as a feature? No, just kidding. I know, I know that a life that is full of meaning and adventure and all the things we love usually leads to us having more anxiety than if our life is only about couch and ice cream and the latest, TV show binge.

[00:39:15] **Ben Eckstein:** yeah, yeah, and you know, of course, I'm not a Sadist I hope that people feel better and and I I don't want people to have more anxiety, of course I do want people to be willing to have more anxiety if it's in the service of living the lives that they want to live. And, you know, I think there has more recently been some really interesting research around the idea of habituation, which is, you know, if you're doing exposure therapy.

So if I, I don't know, if I touch a doorknob and it makes my anxiety go up to a 10, If I sit there holding on to that doorknob feeling really anxious, Oh no, maybe I'm going to get sick. Maybe something bad is going to happen. If I just sit there doing that, eventually that anxiety is going to decrease. So say maybe it goes from a 10 to a five.

And if I do that over and over and over again, every day,

[00:40:05] **Michael Herold:** And this is just, uh, contact with the thing that scares us.

So I'm afraid of doorknobs and germs, so touch that thing and leave your hand there for an hour. We'll let the doorbell ring ~~when~~, when you're good and you can leave.

[00:40:18] **Ben Eckstein:** Right. And again, I think we could sub in, you know, if you had a phobia of dogs, right? Same thing would be approaching a dog and being in the presence of that dog. So yeah, same idea is we're moving towards something that, a trigger, something that is anxiety provoking.

And if we stay there. We'll habituate where our anxiety will go, it'll go up initially and then it'll come down. And if we repeat that over and over again, you know, day one is a 10 to a five day, two is a nine to a four, then an eight to a three, right? So we habituate over time and it's not always that straightforward, but that's, that's the basic idea.

But the research that has been interesting is that that, that process of habituation, it's not quite as correlated with recovery as we once expected. So you would expect, Oh yeah, you do this thing, um, You habituate it feels better, but that doesn't always lead to meaningful gains in recovery or longer lasting recovery.

And there are a lot of folks out there who may not habituate, but they increase their willingness to be anxious. They start living fuller lives in the presence of anxiety, right? So like that, just focusing on, Hey, my goal is to make this anxiety go away. That's not usually the kind of mindset that we're trying to foster.

So when, when we're approaching that dog that you're scared of, or the doorknob you're worried will get you sick, um, we're trying to go into it with this openness to, Hey, I'm taking a risk. I don't know what's going to happen. My, my goal is not just to make anxiety go away. My goal is to live fully and unencumbered by anxiety.

And so I think just focusing on that. That willingness and acceptance is, is generally a better approach than just focusing on habituating and making it all go away. and so, yeah, I think there are many people who, as they start living that fuller life and doing the things that they want to do, they do it with some anxiety.

You know, and I think social anxiety for me is a good example of this, that I think there are a lot of people who say, okay, I'm going to start taking some risks. I'm going to put myself out there. I'm going to go do some things. I'm going to meet some people. And it's really freaking scary, but then they connect with people and they form relationships.

And again, none of these things are easy or simple or free of anxiety, but you know, I think that often leads to people living lives that are fuller and more satisfying.

[00:42:42] **Michael Herold:** And when, when I first learned about anxiety and how, how to deal with that thing that I so wanted to be like out of my life forever, I realized in very many occasions that to a certain degree, I was. I was,

um, proud of my anxiety with certain things. Like, when I started, ~~uh~~, training people in their confidence and conversation skills, and I had my very first Zoom with, like, group trainings, my anxiety was through the roof, and my imposterism as well.

Probably like very closely related those two and I thought like this kind of sucks. Like I don't want to have my heart racing and all of that self doubt every time I open Zoom. But at the same time, I asked myself, like, what do I have to give up in order to also lose that? And the answer was, well, I just have to stop caring about my clients.

That would solve. I just have to stop caring about being competent, knowledgeable, not getting a question that I might not. If I just drop all of that stuff, then anxiety is out of the window. And I don't care anymore whether I'm watching a TV show or I'm giving a zoom training and that realization come in.

And to this day, I am. That a little bit of anxiety that comes in, even as, you know, I'm, I started this call with you, uh, this little bit of anxiety that says to me, Hey, I'm, I'm glad you still care. Uh, you're wearing pants, you're wearing a shirt, like good job. You made sure the laptop and everything is set up.

Good job. And, um, Yeah, of course now I've done this for so many years that habituation has set in and I'm no longer a completely nervous wreck whenever I open Zoom, but there's still this tiny little bit left that I almost cherish. This is the anxiety that I'm glad It shows me that I still care and that this is still in line with my goals, my values, things that I really worry about screwing up.

So that little alarm that goes like, Hey, be careful, be careful. Um, it's quite useful.

[00:44:51] **Ben Eckstein:** Yeah. Absolutely. I'll say, I identify with that a lot. I have, I think, had a very similar process, I think, especially in giving conference presentations, that kind of thing. Getting up in front of lots of people. And I, I think for some time had this expectation of, okay, well, I'm new at this, um, it makes sense that I'm nervous, you know, if I do this enough, it'll all kind of go away.

And I, I think as you mentioned, like, yeah, to some degree, that's true. You know, I think it's certainly less than it was at some point, but I think it did force me to kind of accept, right, like to come to this realization of, hey, like, You're going to get up there on that stage or behind that podium or whatever.

And you're going to be anxious, right? Like the goal is not to show up there cool and calm and whatever. Like, it's just saying, Hey, no, your goal is go do the thing that you care about. You're going to be anxious for a bit. I've done it enough that I know what usually happens is it lasts for a little bit, and then I start talking and it's all fine and it goes away, but ~~I, yeah,~~ I think shifting that expectation from this should feel.

Cool. Great and okay to no, this is just gonna feel however it feels and it's okay. If anxiety is part of that experience

[00:46:02] **Michael Herold:** You've right. Um, and let me, let me, I'm going to go through my notes here so I don't, screw the quote up. Oh, you know what we're talking about screwing things up and half assing things so what do I worry. So the quote goes something along the lines of, you answer not to your thoughts, you answer to your values.

And going up on stage and giving that talk is not about having the most amazing experience out there. If I want to do that, you know, I can, I don't know, go to the beach. I'm doing, I'm on the stage giving a talk because there's a message that is so important to get out into the world that I'm willing to have the other stuff as well.

So it's like, come on, that's like, that's the price of getting that, that stuff out there is. If that's the only price I have to pay, yeah, ~~bring,~~ bring the anxiety, but habituation. So there's something, there's one point, uh, we need to, we need to connect still because uh, or you write in your book ~~that,~~ that there's a difference between, uh, And in action, like touching a doorknob for an extended period of time.

And so in action, like physical behavior, what we do with our arms, legs and so on. And then ~~the,~~ the internal behavior ~~of,~~ of just thinking. And ~~in the,~~ the way you introduced this, this was so glorious. And I have to point out that this was the first psychology book that talks about the legend of Zelda. So in this, chapter to, to, uh, get us started on the, on the concept, I'll let you explain why, but I want to point out that in case my tax accountant is listening and is wondering why I'm writing off all of those game consoles, it's because I'm doing research and I'm talking to a psychologist here who's using the Legend of Zelda because it helps you with habituation.

So, Dr. Eckstein, please tell my accountant why this is important. What is Legend of Zelda? Got to do with any of

[00:47:59] **Ben Eckstein:** Yeah, so † I really wanted to write a book that addressed kind of the, the nuance of this that, you know, I think we all have our own sort of proprietary blend of factors that impact, you know, our anxiety. Um, and so, you know, I think there are, we've talked about cognitive distortions. We've talked about some of that behavioral reinforcement, right?

So in the moment, how you respond to something, they reinforce it. Um, there are lots of other things. We've had experiences, we have different beliefs, right? There's a bunch of different stuff and it's unique to every person. Um, and † I am a huge proponent of Evidence based treatment. I think it's super important that we are providing treatment that is actually effective for people.

But I think we also need to be mindful that people are not a cookie cutter, right? Like that we have to figure out what interventions actually fit for the particular mechanism. That's driving someone's anxiety, you know, and to assume that everyone with anxiety is going to respond to the exact same things, right?

That's, that's again, it's, it might work in these giant samples, right? But like for each individual, we kind of have to tailor it to this unique blend of factors. And so the example, the Zelda example that I use, um, for anyone, so I'm, I am referring, this is probably true of later Zeldas as well, but I am specifically referring to the very.

first Zelda on the original Nintendo, which came in a beautiful golden cartridge, um, and Kind of the thing that was tricky with Zelda was like, which, with each little boss that you get to, you have to figure out how to defeat them and what their weakness is. And so, the, I think the example I use in the book is from the second level in Zelda with

[00:49:55] **Michael Herold:** So

if you're, if you're still working on finishing cell up, your listeners skip the next two minutes because Dr. Eckstein is gonna explain to you how you beat the game

[00:50:03] **Ben Eckstein:** I'm gonna give it away. Um, There are these, the boss is this kind of, it's essentially a Triceratops, which is sort of out of play. I don't know why it's, there's randomly a dinosaur in Zelda, but for whatever reason there is a Triceratops. And you can hit it with your sword, you can shoot arrows at it, you can even throw little bombs at it.

None of those things will do anything. It is impervious to all those attacks. The only way to defeat this particular Triceratops is to put your little bomb right in front of it, And then it eats the bomb, and there's a little explosion inside the triceratops. And if you do that enough times, you'll defeat it.

And so the whole idea here is, you can't just be throwing these interventions out willy nilly. You have to get really intentional. And, you know, using a particular, you know, even if we're talking about some of the, like, behavioral reinforcement that we've talked about. These are general principles, they apply to everyone.

But it may be for someone that the thing really driving their anxiety is, is a belief that they shouldn't be anxious, that I should not be feeling this, this feeling is bad, I need to make it go away. And so if that's the case, we want to be focused on those beliefs, right? Like that's where the work takes place.

It's not behavioral reinforce, even though that principle is, is, it's a good one. It applies to lots of people, but if that's not really the thing driving someone's anxiety, then that's not really the intervention that we want to use. And so I think we have to be. Really intentional about knowing what our tools are and knowing when to use them and kind of figuring out how do we take all of these tools and then tailor them to this unique blend of processes that are driving a particular individual's anxiety.

[00:51:45] **Michael Herold:** and also learning all of those different tools and giving them a chance. Like in your, in your book you talk about so many techniques and exercises and also, uh, therapeutic modalities Act, CBT, uh, MCT, ib, a lot of teas. There's a lot of teas in, in the book. And, and. Of course, if you willy nilly say, this technique number 13, that's going to fix all of your problems.

Now we're going to be a little bit naive. And that is also why my Instagram has turned into a stream of Lego ads. Because ~~the, the,~~ the self development advice on those social media platforms is, you know, three easy steps to get rid of your anxiety forever. Here are. Two things that take less than 30 seconds and you will never ever dot, dot, dot.

And I'm just like scrolling along until the next Lego ad comes along. Um, so what you want to do is you want to learn, ~~um,~~ the different tools that are out there, try them out, not just like maybe for like, I'm going to read them and they're not for me, like, try it out for a day or two, say, see if it works.

The rule of thumb is, if it works, then it's a good technique. And try out those different techniques, have different tools in your toolbox and take out the right tool for the situation you find yourself in. And, ~~um~~, you do give ~~a~~ a lot of tools for making room for that anxiety and, and taking those thoughts and those uncertainties and those.

Self, uh, limiting beliefs and all of those things and some exercise and I, like, it's easy to say, I just, you know, just make room for the anxiety. You'll be good. Play some more Zelda. You're good. But, but just like with the Zelda example, like all of us, we have to go through those exercises and then testing what works for what situation.

So that I can. Live a life that is fuller and not a life that is completely devoid of anxiety because death is probably going to solve that problem for you at one point and

[00:53:58] **Ben Eckstein:** I think that experiential part of it is so important. ~~Um~~, so I think, and I'll say I'm guilty of this, ~~I think~~, particularly with kind of compassion focused therapy, where for me, the first time I heard, I was like, Oh, this is really, there's a little, floofy for me, right?

It seems less focusing on kindness, right? I don't know, it feels a little bit too much. But the reality is like, well, if you do this, it's going to be a much more effective approach, right? Like, I think some of these things, they don't, they may not sound appealing at first, it might not sound like what you want to do.

But I think when you actually practice doing it, and you give it a shot, and you allow yourself to be open to these new experiences, um, I think you'll get a better sense of what fits and what doesn't. You know, I think just a lot of these things sound straightforward enough, but then the practice of them is really where it gets interesting.

[00:54:52] **Michael Herold:** Yeah, talking, talking off compassion focused therapy. We had a Russell Colts on, uh, a while ago.

~~Who's~~, who's one of the, the, the big brains behind CFTM. I'm going to say that he's going to either shake his head or say, I picked the completely wrong, uh, term, but here we go. Imperfect, uh, something. That I learned from CFT and specifically from, from Russell was, uh, trust that your future self can figure something like that out.

Like this is not your problem. This is future Michael's problem. And while my thinking around CFT at the beginning was also something, well, it's like a lot of compassion. Where's the action happening? But having a truth bomb to stay with it, Tris Rattop's example, dropped in front of me.

And I was like, wow, like this was one of the tools that I got to practice a couple of times where the anxiety was hitting me like a brick wall. And I was like, this is not my problem right now. This is the problem of Michael six months from now. And he's going to be like a really cool dude. And he can take care of that.

It's like, whoa, like this is a tool I'm going to like bookmark in my toolbox because this really works for me in that particular situation.

[00:56:07] **Ben Eckstein:** Agreed think in a lot of ways, ~~I think it is,~~ it's having compassion for that. future version of you, right? And ~~I,~~ I think about this a lot with my kids, where I think it, I'm often forced into this place of having to kind of compromise the present moment in the interest of something in the future.

So if I want my kid to clean her room, the fastest way to do that would be for me to yell and scream at my kid. And scare her into cleaning her room, right? Like that is probably the fastest way to get that done.

[00:56:42] **Michael Herold:** that's the Truman approach. Yes.

[00:56:43] **Ben Eckstein:** Yeah. but of course that would come at the cost of my relationship with my kid. Um, having some sense of trust in her to follow through with, right?

Like ~~that it would,~~ it would compromise all sorts of things just in the interest of. ~~I don't~~ expediency, I guess. ~~Right.~~ And it's not worth it, right? Like I would rather the room be cleaned in perfectly. I would rather it take longer. I would rather have to give her a reminder. ~~Would that like,~~ ~~I,~~ I think being able to navigate that experience while maintaining being the person who I want to be is much more important than just getting the results right in the moment.

And I think thinking about this in the context of anxiety or even self compassion, right? Like it's tempting. to motivate ourselves by being mean to ourselves. To say, hey, ~~like,~~ the only way you can do this task is by calling yourself a bunch of mean names and, like, using the stick rather than the carrot.

~~Um,~~ and I think it's tempting to just make that anxiety go away as quickly as we can. Both of those things ~~are,~~ are doing it at the cost of future you, right? Like

it's the long term thing. And I think it requires a lot of patience. I think it requires a lot of wherewithal to remember, Hey, like that's not actually how you want to treat yourself.

Um, but it's worth it in these moments where we can be intentional, where we can be aware of what we're doing and how we're treating ourselves. It's worth investing in. Future you, for sure.

[00:58:14] **Michael Herold:** Beautiful. I, I will leave it at that. Um, I have approximately 29 more questions and we are ~~at, at, uh,~~ nearly at the hour mark here. So I can't recommend this book enough. I can't thank you enough for putting this so succinctly into, uh, Um, and easy to read text that also mentions the legend of Zelda. Hence, you know, all the possible research that I can now write off as, as a business expense.

Um, the book is worrying is optional and we will put your links to your website, social media, and all of the good stuff ~~into,~~ into the show notes.

Yeah. And then if anyone wants to join my or Ben's Legend of Zelda club, you can find that. We don't have one yet,

but we'll get there. Right, Ben. Thank you so much. This was really enjoyable. Thank you. thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock. If you enjoy our podcast, you can help us out by leaving a review or contributing on Patreon.

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