How To Change Your Posture To Improve Anxiety Transcript

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Introduction to embodiment and anxiety

Welcome to this interview on the Biology of Trauma Summit. I'm your host, Dr. Aimie. And in this interview, we're talking about how you can go to yoga, you can go to meditation, you can do all these things that promote embodiment or being in your body, and yet still not actually be embodied, still not actually attuned and aware to what's going on in your body and your sensory experiences that are informing you of whether you are safe or not, what emotional state you're experiencing, or even if you are hungry or not.

So what do we do? Well, we are here because we are learning more about our nervous system, more about our body and the inner workings of it. But if we're not connected to it, how can we really do that?

But how do we know if we're connected to our body? Because many people and in my biology of trauma modules, explain why many people don't even know that they are disconnected from their body.

So you're going to hear more about that in this interview. Now, if this interview intrigues you about embodiment and its relationship to anxiety and how anxiety is like a phantom limb pain, then you will also want to watch the interview with Irene Lyon, where we talked about functional freeze because functional freeze is dissociation.

Is this disconnect? Now don't be scared off by that word dissociation. It is merely the idea that we disconnect ourselves from our body. And so we prefer to live up here in our brains and think about everything, analyze everything, talk about everything, rather than actually sensing what's going on in my body right now.

And so we can then live in what's called a functional freeze, which is this aspect of being disconnected and dissociated without even knowing it. And so you will also want to watch Irene Lyon's interview on that functional freeze.

To join me today to talk about embodiment and anxiety is Sukie Baxter. She is an embodiment, coach, author, speaker and educator on nervous system regulation.

And since 2005, she has worked with hundreds of clients to get relief from physical and emotional pain through body based healing approaches, and now specializes in helping healers to integrate embodiment work into their personal and professional practices.

Anxiety as a body-based experience

And so with that, let's jump into this interview on why anxiety is like a phantom limb pain and how to change that. I would love for you to share with the audience how you see anxiety, because you see anxiety different than how probably most people see anxiety.

For you. It's a very embodied experience and definition. So Sukie, how how do you describe and how do you see anxiety through your lens of embodiment?

Right. Well, so anxiety is often classified as something that we experience in our minds, but it's related to our thoughts and more broadly to our emotions, which are often also linked to our thoughts.

So everything is typically considered the realm of psychotherapy, but the reality is that our bodies express and experience anxiety as well, and they can actually influence our brain, they can influence our emotional state.

So when we're talking about emotions, the way that we know that we feel, any particular emotion is that we have a collection of sensory experiences. We don't necessarily consciously acknowledge this, but our bodies feel a certain way, and we have learned over time to give that sensory experience a certain label.

So what I may be experiencing in my sensory body, I may call anxiety. Now, if I shift the sensory experience through various practices, through changing posture, through practices that can shift the tension in my muscles, that can shift the signaling in my nervous system, the signals that are being sent from my body to my brain, my sensory experience is then different, and then I may call that something else.

I may call that calm, I may call it joy, I may call it excitement. But really what we feel in terms of emotions is that interpretation of the sensory experience.

And our emotional states are heavily influenced by our physical experience in our bodies, by our posture and the way that we are literally moving through the world.

So here's the crazy thing, Sukie, is we have people who are so disconnected from their body and their sensory experiences of their body that they are experiencing these sensory experiences as you describe them, and not even realizing that they're experiencing them.

And so all of a sudden there's like, Oh, I feel sad, I feel lonely, I feel anxious, not not even realizing at all that there's this whole sensory experience that their brain is calculating and saying, Well, it's just the label that we've put onto these body sensations and the sensory experiences that you're finding.

I would completely agree with that. And I would add to that that when we're really dissociated from our bodies, that is a very threatening state to be.

And so if we look, we can kind of look at the pain science as it relates to people who have experienced amputation. So when somebody has amputation, it's really common for them to experience something called phantom limb pain, where they start to have pain in a part of their body that there's nothing there.

There's no nerve to actually send a pain signal or any kind of a signal to the brain. And so what we know about pain from from that and from a lot of other pain science is that it's not actually happening in the body.

It's an interpretation that we get in our brain when there is signaling from the body that something is not safe. So if you're missing a limb, that's pretty severe, you know, your body's going to send information to your brain like I can't find this limb.

And your brain sounds the alarm in terms of panic. Where is this limb? And it tries to locate it with this pain sensation. And so I really look at that and I really consider that when we're dissociated from our bodies, it's metaphorically like an amputation.

So we can't actually have a sensory experience.

Dissociation, posture, and nervous system regulation

And I really have come to realize that people who have a lot of dissociation tend to also have a lot of symptoms that relate to a dysregulated or activated nervous system.

And I think that is because we can't self locate it, can't find ourselves in space. We don't know where our physical self is, and that's incredibly dangerous and disorienting to our brains.

So this is big because what I see is more and more people and more and more kids going into this dissociative state, not even realizing that they're dissociated and they're living disconnected without even realizing that they're disconnected from their body.

I think that that's probably the for me, the the hardest group to reach is those individuals who don't know that they're disconnected. This is just how they've always been.

This is how they've always only seen other people live. And so not even knowing that they're disconnected from

their body. And what we know is how much posture and our physical body actually plays into this sensation of our body being safe and thus the sensory experiences that our body is having.

Does posture have anything to do with the degree of disconnect or dissociation that we might be experiencing from our body? Yes and no. So posture both influences our brain state and is expressive of our brain state.

So it's it's really the interface between our inner world and the outer world, the environment around us. And it's theoretically, hopefully always shifting and adapting to our external world. Right.

So as we encounter different changes in the environment, our posture is going to be different. We're probably not going to have the same open, welcoming posture when we're walking through maybe, you know, a dark alley in the middle of the night, as we are when we walk into a social gathering full of people that we know well and are excited to talk to, we change our stance.

We change our facial expression. Hopefully. Now, what does tend to happen is that we can become frozen in certain postures, frozen in certain facial expressions, right?

So the tension patterns in our body become habituated. And then those habituate a stressed state potentially, or they habituate at some stage in a nervous system, often a stressed state.

But the reality is that there's just no resilience. Right? We're not shifting and adapting. And actually in concert with our environment and the people and organisms around us, we're more stuck in this state all the time and we can't respond in real time.

We're kind of reacting out of usually a past condition. Usually this is something that we adopted because it helped us in some way. It helped us navigate situation.

Maybe we were locking down an emotional experience that was very intense. We didn't have the capacity to deal with at the time, locking down a traumatic experience and we didn't have the resources to process at the time.

And so we had this habituated posture that then tells our brain, again, you know, you're not in a safe place. And then that creates that cascade of overactive nervous system.

I would say that one of the big problems in terms of young people that I see is that we have such a heavy emphasis on the intellect right now. There's so much pressure for young people to have very knowledge based jobs, which is not in and of itself bad.

But the way that we approach knowledge is that it is something that we learn while we are in stasis. You know that we must sit at a desk or sit at a computer and not move.

And the reality is that movement facilitates learning. We are organisms that biologically evolved to move. And so when we don't get a lot of kind of novel stimulation, a lot of different types of environments, movement on different terrain, varied terrain, even just walking across a grassy meadow or walking on hills that have kind of variances.

There are systems in our body that don't get stimulated, and so our posture will become very static and we lose that resilience, not ability to adapt simply because we just don't have the information coming into our nervous system.

And this is huge. And I was actually thinking about this just yesterday as I was doing some work, and I realized once again that my brain just works better when it's in movement.

It does not work best when it's sitting at a desk and having a lot of compassion for my younger self that sat for years in school at a desk when that was clearly not how I was learning the best, but yet figured out how to do it just pushed my way through it.

And I and I think that that's part of the disconnect of the dissociation that we can have from our bodies and is pushing our bodies through different scenarios, different environments that are not best conducive to our learning or our best health or our best emotional states.

And yet figuring out a way to adapt and just push our way through. So as we look at all of these, all of the ways in which we are stagnant and in spaces and not moving, how is that contributing then to emotional states?

Well, I think that it contributes to a lack of emotional resilience and a lack of emotional regulation. So just for myself, I notice that I am so much more able to regulate my emotions when movement is consistently built into my day, when I've had a day where I have just been sitting in front of the computer, I may be doing things that I really love to do.

I might be, you know, nerding out on subjects I'm fascinated by and connecting with people that I love around the world. And that's all wonderful. But I also notice that if I have too much of that without movement, that I am not as centered in myself.

So I think that by and large, when we are static and we're not getting all of this different movement, it causes us to have challenges in regulating our emotions.

But we don't get a lot of what's called non nociceptive data sent into our body, which is sensory data that tells our brain that we are safe.

Movement, learning, and emotional resilience

So I'm sure people are familiar or may not be familiar with the nocebo effect, which is the opposite of the placebo effect. The nocebo effect is like if you say to somebody, wow, your back is really messed up and all of a sudden their pain intensifies.

That's the nocebo effect. So non nociceptive data that gets sent into our nervous system and communicates with our brain tells our brain that we're safe in our environment.

So if we're not getting that stimulation, we can have an overactive nervous system that's just not getting calmed down. It can be flooded with cortisol.

We don't get enough, you know, there are certain movements, certain types of movement that contribute to an increased production of, for example, oxytocin, which helps to reduce the effects of cortisol.

So I just think that, you know, there's just so many ways to look at the impact of movement from a postural standpoint, from a neurochemical standpoint.

But if we're not getting shifts in our posture, we just don't get enough sensory stimulation to be able to have a broad emotional experience. It's like the flow of information.

Yeah. And it's collecting data and is there information coming out or has everything just kind of stopped and it's stagnant? And then how can we expect there to be fluid movement and flow within our own nervous system if there is not this kind of fluidity of information that we're gathering from our environment?

Yeah, absolutely. And there's some limited research around how movement can facilitate learning and brain function as well. Research that's looked at things like dancing as ways to prevent cognitive decline. Right.

So we have a lot of data out there, a lot of scientific data on the power of movement. And unfortunately, it just hasn't found its way into popular culture.

We still we still have this erroneous idea that we are somehow these walking brains where our bodies are less valuable, less important, these sort of less evolved aspects of ourselves that hinder us and hold us back, rather

than something that's actually an integral part of our human experience and our human cognition.

That is huge because you're right, we tend to minimize the importance of the body and highlight the importance of the brain. And yet we're not just walking brains.

We we get to experience what it means to be embodied. So for someone, how would they know that they're not embodied? That's such a great question. And I think that it can there's a lot of different ways we could approach that and a lot of different it's going to look different for different people.

But one of the questions that I frequently ask people is, what do you notice? Or what has your attention with with regard to your body? And if you have a very hard time answering that and or if you have a hard time answering that in ways that don't include pain, because a lot of times we're like, well, I notice my neck hurts or my back aches or I've got this pain in my foot.

And that's typically the first thing that people will say. But if you're unable to identify sensory experiences outside of painful experiences or you just sort of have no sense of your body at all, that's a really big clue.

And one thing that I see people doing a lot is looking for an activity that will cause you to be in body. So, for example, going to yoga, going to places, certain practices are looked at as know embodiment practices.

And there are lots of people who do those practices, who have a lot of embodiment, ability, and there are plenty of people who do those practices and have done them for years who still aren't really able to actually connect to the sensory experience of their body.

So just because you do a certain activity doesn't necessarily mean that you have the capacity for what I call somatic literacy, which is the ability to attend to your felt sense and your sensory experience.

That you're seeing, that people can go to yoga for years and still not be actually attuned to their body on a daily basis? Absolutely. Just because you're doing a thing doesn't mean you're doing it in an embodied way.

And so I always say, you know, you can do yoga in a very disembodied way. You can do weightlifting in a very embodied way. We don't typically think of weightlifting as an embodiment of practice, but it absolutely can be.

You can do walking in an embodied way or a disembodied way, so activities that look very much the same. So two people doing the same activity. They look the same on the outside.

But the internal experience is really where the embodiment is. And I think it's so important for us to realize that embodiment doesn't look a certain way.

It's not a certain size, it's not a certain practice. It's not when you can do a certain yoga pose or, you know, a certain level of flexibility. It is an internal experience of yourself.

How to recognize disembodiment

What I am thinking of is the importance of movement and really then embodiment of infants and newborns as they go through the different stages of brain development and the impact of possibly having some gaps in those neurodevelopmental movements and many common parenting practices with good intentions.

But we have started to really restrict the movements of our newborns and children by putting them in in different devices, different, different places where they can't move so that we can keep our eye on them and we can do our work, whatever that is, whether that's on the computer or make food.

And we and we know that they're not going to go anywhere and get into trouble. And so we put them into a device and block many of their movements that they need to do.

And what we know is that from the hands so lately that first level of brain development, if they're not able to get enough tummy time, for example, and enough of that crawling on their tummy, they will have a much harder time feeling their body at all.

Like they'll have a hard time feeling when they're hungry. They'll have a hard time feeling when they're thirsty. Their level of just a sensory awareness, the somatic literacy won't be available to them.

And I'm just thinking of the impact that then that will have on the rest of their life. If from the very beginning their somatic literacy has been inhibited because their movements were inhibited.

Yeah, absolutely. I think that the the inhibited movements are really important. I think there's also I mean, there's a lot of parenting practices that come in and out of fashion.

I am not a parent, so I don't typically comment much because I don't feel like it's my place. I know it's very challenging to be a parent and like you said, it's so hard, you know, when you have a lot going on and you have an infant and maybe other children as well, you know, you need to make sure they're safe.

And sometimes that means combining their mobility so that they can't get into harms, you know, harmful places and harmful objects. But there's a lot of other things that we do, too, you know, with kids, like putting them on schedules, for example.

So, you know, when babies are born, they cannot meet their own needs at all. The only thing they can do is experience nervous system arousal. And then they don't and they don't have a language for this, right?

So like animals, mammals do this, all mammals do this. And at that stage, they're doing what mammals do at a non linguistic level, which is there's something uncomfortable in that feel nervous system agitation.

They don't have a word for it, but they just feel agitated and they fuss in whatever way they fast. They may cry, they may not make me mad or whatever they may mean about they do something to get the caregivers attention.

And then, you know, the caregiver goes, oh, you know, poor baby. What do you need? You need to be rocked. You need a cold. Are you hot? Do you need food?

You know, you try different things and eventually something reduces the agitation and the infant stops fussing and it completes the stress cycle and the infant starts learning, well, I can get my own needs met and they learn like they they don't have to emote a lot to get their needs met.

This agitation comes about the emote a little bit and then the need gets met and then later on that shifts into an extra or excuse me, of the extra locus of control, shifts into an internal locus of control where they can do these things by themselves as they get older and become more capable.

But when we do things like putting kids on arbitrary schedules where they're fussing and we don't tend to that in some way, then they don't they don't get that internal locus of control.

But they also stopped attending to the sensory experience inside their body because nervous system agitation is nonsensical to them. They don't connect it to being able to get a need met because that that loop never got consistently closed for them.

So it's almost like they have no idea how to then attuned to their sensory experiences because it's been shut off for so long and from such an early age that they don't even have memory in the habit.

Those neural pathways of knowing how to connect with their body aren't there. That's all that they really know is I've needed to cut off my sensory experiences in order to manage my physiology and my regulation.

Absolutely.

Starting with external sensory awareness

And that can, you know, that can express in various ways for one person, it may be that they're very easily triggered and overly emotional because the agitation is just always so high.

And they just it doesn't take much for their cup to spill over and they don't know how to attend to their needs. And so they just explode in whatever mood they're in for another person, they may be completely shut down.

You know, non people who have a hard time knowing when they're hungry and having they have a hard time knowing how to figure out what it is they need to be more comfortable to make sure they get fed, to make sure they're warm enough or cool enough, things like that, because they're just not connected to that sensory experience.

And I actually know a lot of people, adults, professionals, who find that they don't really have those normal, normal sensations of hunger until it's until they're feeling faint and then they realize, oh, my goodness, I haven't eaten anything all day, but they don't recognize that from a body sensory experience.

They're recognizing it because like, I'm I'm getting tired. I'm feeling like I'm going to faint. And what time is it? And when did I last eat? Or maybe the same thing with thirst, like they're there seems like the sensory experience maybe has to get so severe for them to be able to recognize it.

And yet, on the other hand, what about those people, Sukie, who are supersensitive and maybe are overly sensitive to pain or to sensory information? Is this also a reflection of their underlying regulation and nervous system?

States? Yeah, I would say that that's still an overactive nervous system. So just because someone isn't able to notice that their nervous system is overactive.

So in the case of like not knowing that they're hungry or thirsty or something like that doesn't mean it isn't overactive. They're just able to dissociate from it.

Which and dissociation gets a bad rap. I mean, you don't want to live your life in a dissociated state all the time. It is a tool. And sometimes we do need to, you know, push through something or disconnect from something for a period of time.

As long as we don't live permanently in that state, it is something that we can do when somebody is like extremely sensitive, their nervous system is usually at capacity and or it's a nervous system that just doesn't take a lot of stimulus for that nervous system to feel a thing.

And so, you know, there's lots of theories about, you know, highly sensitive people and what makes highly sensitive people. And I don't really know why that is same thing for like autism, right?

It's a it's a very highly sensitized, overactive, nervous system that's kind of locked in a stressed state. That is a component of that. Why does that happen?

I don't know. I have no idea. But we can look at the the underlying principle there, which is that the nervous system is overactive. And so you're just reacting a lot to very low levels of stimulus.

And generally speaking, I have found in working with people, if you're a highly sensitive person, it's much more comfortable to live in the world when your nervous system is regulated because you're not constantly at max threshold where every little thing you know, the air conditioner clicking on or a car horn outside on the street just doesn't, you know, jangle your nerves so much.

Absolutely. Like life. Life is always going to be better. All aspects of life are going to be better when our nervous system is regulated. So for someone who's realizing, oh, I think this I think this is me, like, I think I've been living

disembodied to some extent.

I don't even know to what extent yet, but I just noticed that, yeah, I don't notice my body. It's hard for me to drop into my body. Maybe even is uncomfortable.

Uncomfortable for me to drop into my body. I much prefer to be in my head and think about things and read about things and watch videos about things. But that what does my body need right now is a hard question for me.

Where are we having them start? Where do we even start with this embodiment practice then? Yeah, this is such a great question. So again, that question of what do I notice right now is a good place to start if you don't notice anything, that's actually a sensation, right?

So nothingness is the sensation then. And so from there you can ask yourself, well, how is it to feel? Nothing. Is it everywhere in my body like you can, you can become the forensic scientist a little bit like, is it that I feel absolutely nothing or that I feel mostly nothing?

You know, is it just my lower half of my body or is it my upper half? Can I feel my skin? Can I feel my internal organs? Like where? Where is it? So you can start to be really curious about that.

I do want to put a little caveat in there, but for people who do have trauma stored in the nervous system, which, you know, comes a whole other conversation in terms of what that is.

But if you have trauma stored in the nervous system and your nervous system is overactive as a result, sometimes that dissociation is protective because actually there's such a strong sensory experience in the body that it is incredibly triggering to put your attention on the body.

And so for a lot of people, when they start to do that practice, they hate it because it brings up all their trauma. So with that, I usually start with noticing external factors.

So like really paying attention to your environment, really noticing, you know, colors and shapes and textures.

Safety cues and closing reflections

You can also pay attention to sounds, you know, birds chirping or the breeze in the trees, things like that, and really begin to have a sensory experience of your environment, which then signals to your brain, I am safe here when someone has established that level of safety and they have that trauma in their body, whether with another person, like a practitioner or on their own, then is a better time.

They're better resourced to be able to start to put attention on their sensory experience internally. Yeah, and I love that you say that because that's exactly where I start.

People with the Trauma Human Program, the 21 day journey, I start with having them notice their environment and all the sensory experiences of their environment.

But you are right, it is much easier to focus on something outside of us. What do I smell? What do I see? What do I feel? And then being able to use that as a resource to go inside.

But there are so many sensory experiences that we're getting from our environment and starting to be able to pay attention to those will help us to start to pay attention to the internal sensory experiences.

From what I've seen. Absolutely. Yeah. It's a resource to be safe in your environment. And the environment. We can actually use that to create cues of safety from our environment.

And so now that I notice that, oh, I am smelling things and I am noticing things, what can I do in my environment so that I am seeing things that bring me cues of safety that I'm smelling, things that are bringing me cues of safety so

that we are again empowering ourselves to be able to do something and to be constantly providing that information, the data, right, the collecting of data and information from our environment that we are safe and allows us to kind of tap into a greater capacity to then for what else can I do?

Where else can I put my attention? Because in the background, my nervous system feels safe from the environment. Yeah, absolutely. And it's so common for someone who has these stress states in this high arousal in their nervous system, because that high arousal actually changes the way we see everything.

A person who's in that state can then perceive a very safe environment as a very dangerous environment, even when there's nothing technically looming as a threat.

And so that's where the fear and the anxiety come in that seem to be there for no reason at all. It's because your nervous system is telling you you're not safe.

So when you do reconnect with your environment and realize, like, actually, this is the fight and this is fine, I'm safe right now in this moment, everything's okay.

Nothing is imminent in terms of danger. It really helps to shift your perspective internally and help the world feel like a lot better place to live. This interview took me many years of mine when I lived so disconnected from my body and not realizing that I was living disconnected every thing has changed.

Yes, even down to how I exercise and work out, because everything is now very mindfully done. Being able to monitor and track what's happening to my nervous system as I do it.

And so this practice, it's a practice of becoming more and more embodied for me, is a practice that never ends. And I hope the same for you as well. Thank you for joining me for this interview on the Biology of Trauma Summit.

Do remember that you can purchase all these recordings that you have them available. I know that I'm giving you a lot of information over this summit, and I want you to be well resourced and have everything that you need at your fingertips.

And with that, I'm your host for this summit, Dr. Aimie and I will see you on the next interview.