Stop Overthinking: How to Feel Your Way Out of Anxiety Transcript

(Transcripts are generated by AI and may contain errors)

Introduction to Neuroplasticity and Anxiety

Hey everyone, welcome back to the AnxietyRx Podcast. I am your host, Dr. Russell Kennedy, doing a solo episode today. And today, I want to talk to you about something that's absolutely crucial when it comes to healing anxiety.

Neuroplasticity, which is, put simply, your brain's ability to change itself. Neuroplasticity is often spoken about in positive terms, but more correctly, neuroplasticity is adaptive.

It can be negative too. I've often said that if you grow up in an environment of connection and attunement with your caregivers, your nervous system learns to be focused on growth and connection.

But if you grow up with adverse childhood events, or alarms as I call them, abuse, loss, abandonment, rejection, having to mature too early, and shame, these things, if they go on repaired, you learn life is about protection and survival, and neuroplasticity can adapt your brain and nervous system to be focused on defense and protection, so it can work against you.

If you struggle with anxiety for a long time, you might feel stuck in the victim mentality of survival and protection. And no matter what you do, you just keep looping back to the same defensive fears, the same worries, the same overwhelming sensations of alarm.

But here's the truth. Your brain is not fixed. Your anxiety is not a life sentence. And you can learn to move out of a victim mentality and into growth and connection.

with a focus on connection to your very own self. You can change your brain and nervous system using a compassionate and consistent connection with your body, developing a sense of connection and growth.

And in that you can use that sense of self connection and growth to heal your mind. I found after many years of my own therapy, that when it comes to anxiety, it's much more effective to use the body to heal the mind than it is to use your mind to heal the body.

How Childhood Alarm Shapes the Brain

Today, I want to break down how neuroplasticity works, how it connects to anxiety, and how my approach, what I call the MBRX method, can help you when other therapies or treatments for your anxiety have just failed.

And this MBRX method employs the concept of neuroplasticity to help you finally break free of the victim mentality that keeps you separated from yourself and locked in anxiety and alarm.

We'll also dive into Hebbian theory. The cells that fire together, wire together. In your child brain, you coupled or connected emotional wounds like abuse, abandonment, bullying, neglect, et cetera, with a pattern of alarm in your mind and body.

Those pathways, like the force, young Skywalker, are strong within you. And those overprotected pathways are stealing your life from you. Those patterns of protection your brain adopted when you were young are a key part of why your anxiety patterns are so deeply ingrained now.

But now we can use that same adaptive pattern of neuroplasticity to begin rewiring them for peace instead of pain. So what is neuroplasticity? Neuroplasticity, put simply, is your brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections.

It's how we learn new skills, adapt to new environments, but it's also how we move to the dark side and form

patterns that create hypervigilance and anxiety when we're young.

Your brain's like a muscle. The more you use certain pathways, the stronger they get. If you struggle with anxiety for years or decades, it's because your brain has practiced anxiety and worry over and over and over again.

But just like a muscle, if you stop using certain pathways and start strengthening new ones, your brain can change. Your brain can change very much for the better.

I know that's been the case for me. Now, some of you will hear this and think, great, so I just need to think positively and I'll rewire my brain. Not quite.

If that worked, you wouldn't still be struggling. The key to real lasting change in your brain isn't actually in your thoughts at all. It's in your felt experience in your body.

If you know my work, you know by now that chronic anxiety doesn't start in your mind. Chronic worry is energized by a state of alarm stored in your body.

And that state of alarm was created long ago by adverse childhood experiences that weren't repaired by your parents or caregivers. Or worse, your parents and caregivers were the source of your alarm.

This alarm stored in your body is the engine that drives the worrisome thoughts of your mind. And the worrisome thoughts of your mind drive the sensation of alarm in your body in what I've called the alarm anxiety cycle.

The Alarm-Anxiety Cycle Explained

So to recap, the worries of your mind today come from the alarm state in your body from the unresolved wounds of yesterday. And those worries reactivate the alarm in a feedback loop or vicious cycle that you can't get out of on your own.

I'm here to help you escape from the alarm anxiety cycle. Not understanding that your anxiety is mostly a function of your stored alarm in your body is why traditional talk therapy and CBT often fall short.

Thinking-based therapies keep you stuck in the intellectual understanding instead of looking deep into the body to create a felt sense of safety and connection that actually rewires your nervous system in the long term.

This is a critical understanding. For neuroplasticity to work its magic in your mind, you must feel safe in your body. Your brain will not rewire for peace and calm while your body is still in a state of alarm.

I spent many thousands of dollars on talk therapy and CBT and got minimal relief because those therapies were trying to fix my mind when the problem of anxiety wasn't based in my mind at all.

It was in my body. There's a fundamental principle in neuroscience I talked about earlier called Hebbian theory from the Canadian psychologist Donald Hebb, summed up by the phrase, neurons that fire together, wire together.

This means that when two things happen at the same time, your brain and body link them. In somatic therapy, we call this coupling, as the brain couples one pattern of firing with another.

Do you remember where you were on 9-11? This is coupling. The images of 9-11 were coupled or linked to where you were. If you experience fear repeatedly in a certain situation, let's say social settings, your brain starts to hardwire a connection between social interactions and danger, and social anxiety is born.

Over time, and sometimes not even that long, that pattern becomes automatic. You don't even have to think about it. Your body just reacts with anxiety before you're even aware of it.

This is exactly what happens in the alarm anxiety cycle. You may not even be aware that your body is in an alarm

state, but you certainly are aware of the worries your mind is pumping out.

Further, the worries distract you from the real source of your emotional pain, this old alarm stuck in your body from adverse childhood experiences that you had as a child.

I'll give you an example that resonates with a lot of people. Last summer, my daughter told me she had a panic attack while driving on the highway. Now, even after she pulled over to calm herself down, within a few minutes of getting back on the highway, she'd have another panic attack.

The next morning, after staying a night at the hotel, she got back in the car, got back on the highway, and guess what happened? Another panic attack.

Hebbian Theory and Rewiring Patterns

Leandra's mind and body had coupled driving on the highway with a state of alarm in her body, and as she drove, each energized the other until she had to pull over again and again.

Now the problem is, once these patterns are wired in, they don't just go away on their own. In fact, like Leandra on the highway, they get more intense.

For Lee, her mind and body had coupled driving with her alarm, and we had to work to rewire that connection so she could make it home. So now I'm gonna show you how to actively retrain your brain to form new connections.

And that's where MBRX comes in. I call this how to rewire the alarm anxiety cycle with the MBRX method. The key to breaking anxieties hold on you isn't changing your thoughts in your mind, it's creating new felt experiences of safety in your body.

And so many people ask me, but what does that really mean? How can I create safety for myself? I realize this is a concept that's very foreign to many of us.

I know it was to me when I first started getting out of my anxious mind and made a choice to inhabit my alarmed body. This does take practice and patience and runs counter to our left brain society that's always looking for the, heal anxiety in seven days your money back.

Or Western medicine's tendency to give medications as quick fixes and band-aids. Not that there's anything wrong with that. Let me say that medications are invaluable and life-saving, and sometimes they're absolutely necessary.

But in my experience, as both doctor and patient, medication just kicks the anxiety can down the road, and they've never healed anybody. I wanna help you heal.

And to do that, we need to engage and create a new-minded body via neuroplasticity so you can move away from a life of protection and survival and towards a life based in connection and growth.

mostly a connection to your very own self because, as I've said many times, all anxiety is separation anxiety. And it's mostly a separation of your mind from your body and your adult self from your child self.

So getting back to Hebb's law that neurons that fire together wire together, we need to create new pairings, new couplings that support your connection of your adult self to your child self and your mind to your body.

So number one, Create an awareness of the old pattern. Seeing how you make your anxiety worse is the first step in recognizing your habitual anxiety response.

Not just mentally, but physically. Where do you feel it? How does it show up in your body? Is it hot? Is it cold? Is it superficial? Is it deep? Does it have a temperature?

Does it have a color? Does it radiate anywhere? Remember, this sensation of alarm is a conduit to the younger, wounded part of you. We can use this sensation to connect to the scared child in you and soothe them now in a way they didn't get back then when the trauma was occurring.

Number two, interrupting the cycle with signals of safety.

Creating Safety Through the Body

Instead of trying to think your way out of anxiety, which is impossible because you can't solve anxiety, a problem of thinking with more thinking, you need to introduce something safe, some soothing experiences while you feel the anxiety.

This could be physical touch, like putting a hand on your heart or belly. It could be slow, deep breathing. It could be connecting with a memory or visualization of warmth and security.

I will often get people to tell me what the best time in their life was. It might be on a holiday when you were young and felt totally free, or when you met your partner, or your wedding, or completing a goal like getting through medical school or law school.

Anything where you felt light and fulfilled and free. We can use that sensation of something positive to buffer the sensation of something negative, which is your alarm.

A huge reason why our alarm is hard to heal is that our amygdala tracks us back to the time in our childhood that the trauma happened. At that time, we didn't have much power because we were children.

And as children, the trauma felt like it was all of us. Because there was no escape. Exactly because we were children. Because back when we were young and the trauma did feel inescapable, we didn't have the resources we have now.

So interrupting the alarm sensation and creating a new pathway that soothes the younger version of us is what actually heals the alarm. And when you heal the alarm in your body, the anxieties of your mind cease to have anything to feed them.

You break the alarm anxiety cycle and you start to truly heal. Number three, repetition and consistency. The more you pair anxiety with a felt sense of safety, the more your brain starts to rewire those associations.

Again, if you pair a sense of safety in your body with the worries of your mind, you break the alarm anxiety loop that's been running your life for years.

As we rewire pleasant sensation into the thoughts of anxiety, the alarm starts to crack a bit, and as the alarm sensation becomes less coordinated and intense, it's no longer the omnipotent, painful sensation we felt as kids.

It feels like there's an Achilles heel to the indomitable giant of emotional pain it felt like when we were younger. Now at first, your brain will resist feeling good because anxiety is what's familiar and we equate what's familiar to what's secure.

Also, your overprotective ego doesn't like change, even if it's good change. So that ego that thrives on familiarity will try to make you feel that feeling safe was, well, not safe.

But with time and practice, the new neural pathways of safety strengthen and the old, based on worry, weaken. Number four, overcoming resistance and sticking with it.

Here's the thing, rewiring your brain isn't an instant process. At first, your old anxiety pathways will scream, this isn't safe, because they've coupled your worries with a sense of predictability and familiarity.

It's what they're used to. But this resistance is not a sign that you're failing. It's actually a sign that your brain is changing.

Sensation Without Explanation Practice

Now one of the biggest pitfalls when trying to break free from anxiety is the alarm anxiety cycle. This loop where your body feels a sensation of alarm and then your mind starts desperately trying to.

explain it. Maybe your heart races and your mind says, oh no, I'm having a heart attack or maybe your stomach twists. Your mind goes, is this something serious?

Is this cancer? Am I dying? Or you simply start cycling through things you could possibly be worried about. Maybe I feel this way because I have that test coming up, or that meeting with my boss, or that deadline, etc., etc., etc.

And before you know it, you've gone from a simple bodily sensation of alarm to full-blown panic. The alarm in your body from your old unresolved wounds has automatically coupled to the worries in the alarm anxiety cycle.

To break free of the cycle, I teach something called sensation without explanation. Sensation without explanation is a practice where, instead of attaching thoughts to your alarm sensations, you simply feel them.

You notice them. You stay present with them. But you don't let your mind start storytelling, start worrying. You stay in the sensation of your body without compulsively adding an explanation, your worries, in your mind.

To illustrate this, let me totally date myself with a reference from the 1984 movie Ghostbusters. And if you weren't alive back then, do yourself a favor and go watch it.

It's a total classic. There's this scene where the Ghostbusters are told, the next thing one of you thinks of will become the form of your destruction.

And they all try to keep their minds blank. But then, bam, a giant stay-puff marshmallow man appears. Why? Because one of them couldn't help but think of it.

And that's exactly what happens with anxiety. The second you think about what your sensation means, how to make sense of it in your mind, you give it a shape.

And as an ex-worryer myself, I know that the brain is a meaning-making, makes sense machine that hates uncertainty. So when you turn the sensation of alarm into the explanation of a scary worry, the brain loves that you've taken something uncertain and made it more certain.

even if you've created a horrible worry. But if you resist the urge to attach a thought, a worry, if you just let that sensation be a sensation, it can't grow into a hundred foot Stay Puft Marshmallow monster of panic.

This sensation without explanation is a powerful practice because over time, when you stop feeding alarming sensations with fearful predictions of the future, fearful worries and thoughts, and just allow the sensation to be there, even if it's uncomfortable, your brain stops coupling, stops looping the connection, and stops the alarm anxiety cycle.

You retrain yourself to experience sensations as just sensations. No need to interpret, no need to react, no need to worry. You simply say, I'm feeling alarmed right now.

and that's okay. And when you do that consistently, anxiety starts losing its grip on you. You start breaking the alarm anxiety cycle, and this is neuroplasticity in action.

Closing: You Are Not Broken

You begin to uncouple the anxiety alarm cycle by ceasing to add worry to the alarm, by simply allowing the sensation in your body to be there without adding the explanations and worries of your mind.

I'm gonna say the same thing in other words, because this is at the heart of healing your anxiety. When you must find a worry in your mind to match the sensation of alarm in your body, the alarm anxiety cycle traps you.

So when you can stay with a sensation in your body without compulsively needing to give it an explanation or a worry in your mind, you break the alarm anxiety cycle and finally give yourself a clear shot at healing.

In closing, you're not broken. I wanna leave you with this. You are not broken. Your mind and body has simply programmed your system to couple the alarm in your body stored there years ago from old unresolved childhood wounds to compulsively and relentlessly add worries in an attempt to make sense of that pain.

If you've struggled with anxiety for years, it's not because you're weak, it's because your brain did exactly what it's designed to do. It learned to automatically link an explanation, a worry in your mind, to this uncomfortable sensation of alarm in your body.

But now it's time to unlearn that and break the alarm anxiety cycle for good. It's time to retrain your brain via your body, not the other way around.

I've learned that it's much more effective to use your body to calm your mind than it is to try and use your mind to calm your body. If you're interested in learning more about truly healing your anxiety, instead of just learning coping strategies, I invite you to check out my MBRX program.

This is where I guide you through this whole process, sensation without explanation, step by step. We have live calls every month to monitor your progress and help you through it.

But whether you join or not, know this, You are not broken. Anxiety is not a life sentence. Healing is available to you. I firmly believe we all have the ability to heal ourselves.

We just don't need to pay someone thousands of dollars to do it for us. We just need the right blueprint and guidance. And ultimately, it's you that heals you, and I can help.

Thanks for listening. Be kind to yourself, and I'll see you next time.