Why You Can’t Think Your Way Out of Anxiety Transcript

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Introduction and shared perspective on anxiety

Hello and welcome to yet another episode of the Anxiety RX podcast. I am thrilled to have Dr. Martha Beck with me today. And we're going to talk about both of our books, but especially hers because I find so much is written about anxiety from this left perspective changer thinking change your anxiety kind of thing.

And I think that's indicative of the left hemisphere dominance we have in our society. We believe that we can fix everything by thinking. And it's not.

It's actually you can't fix a problem of overthinking and rumination with more thinking. It doesn't work that way. Right? But we get sold that. Right, Martha?

It's so nice to have you here. Oh, it's wonderful to be here. I am a big fan of yours from way back, so I'm honored. I'm a big fan of you too, but I'm a big fan of you too.

So yeah, I know it's just wonderful to have you here and I wanted to jump in right away to your book. There's a part of your book, I mean, other than The Art Toad, which we'll get into, but there's a part of your book called The Left Hemisphere Hall of Mirrors.

Oh, yeah. I read that and it's like, That's exactly what happens. And of course, cause I add everything to, to stuff all the time. So, but it's like a left hemisphere hall of rear view mirrors.

Right. So we're looking at the past, right? We're always, we're looking at the past thinking we can see through the past and see our future. Yeah. We can't, it's futile.

So we keep doing it and doing it and doing it, and we get trapped in our left hemisphere thinking. Yeah. And it's hard to get out. Oh yeah, I mean, because there's this interplay between the most primitive part of the brain, as you know much better than I do, which doesn't understand language, but it really understands mood.

And then when it sends a pulse of fear to the part that talks and storytells and creates images, We end up telling ourselves stories about the past, the future, and what's happening to us now that are completely based on our own fear instead of what's really around us.

And it's that fear, not the present situation that is read again by the primordial part of the brain as, oh my God, I'm in a horrifying environment. So everything is distorted.

Everything looks crazy. Everything stays crazy because the brain is kind of stuck inside itself. Yeah. Daniel Siegel calls it a memory for the future.

That's brilliant. So we're always projecting our past worries onto our future because the brain's an anticipatory machine, really. So I think those of us with trauma, as you've guessed, For sure.

You know, we don't like uncertainty. And I think on a lot of levels, anxiety is really uncertainty intolerance, like the inability to tolerate uncertainty.

So immediately we go into the left hemisphere, like the known, the convergent, and it just leads us down this path that we can't get out of. Well, the thing is, it's not actually the known.

It's the imagined, it's the remembered, it's the conjured. And it's not, the only thing that is actually known to us in a total sensory way is the moment we're experiencing right now.

There is never anything but now. And the left hemisphere gets so stuck in wanting to use the past to project the future so it can control the whole thing.

that it never lets us come home to right now, where most of us are almost always pretty safe. And even if we're in danger, it's then fear, which is another deep primordial response that takes over.

I interviewed so many people who'd been through horrifying things, like my friend was nearly killed by a crocodile. I had another friend who was in a horrific accident.

And they all told me, people who'd been through stuff like this, the moment of actual fear is really calm. and there's this strong impetus to act, it is present.

And anxiety is the opposite of that. It's always in the past, future, how do I control things that I cannot control? And it just spins around in there without any purchase in reality.

So anxiety always lies. And it's always about the future. So it's always about the future. So it has to lie because the future hasn't happened yet. So it basically has to make up a story.

The left hemisphere hall of mirrors

And I think so many of us, when we have trauma, when we're younger, we develop this, what I call this alarm in our system, this physiological alarm that's stuck in our system.

So staying in the moment is not comfortable for us. So it's almost like we're railroaded into this left hemisphere because it's the only path the child in us can see as a way out.

So, and when you're a child, it does work. It does sort of distract you and dissociate you away from this feeling of alarm in your body being stuck in your left hemisphere, but you'll just never get out of it.

No, you just get stuck forever. And the interesting thing is that if you can come right into the present, you stop thinking in language at all. Because the thing that makes you afraid, the thing that got alarmed and is constantly alarming, it's interesting.

When I go into nature, especially when I'm in the African bush, every animal has what's called an alarm call and they sound alarming. They'll be like, I can do a great alarm call of a vervet monkey seeing a leopard.

Do you want to hear it? and you hear that there's a whole troop of monkeys and they're running up and down and it's like that's a primate alarm call and it actually activates my alarm system when i hear it and it's very primordial so when we're in for example i don't know a business meeting and somebody says something that makes us really worry about our jobs all these alarm calls start going but they're not actually They're not factual.

They belong to an animal that is frightened. And so the alarm is coming from a creature, not from a well-spoken adult. And so many of us try to talk to that creature or attack it.

People say, I've got to attack my anxiety. I've got to fight my anxiety. When you attack a creature that's already frightened, it doesn't calm down. No, it doesn't help.

So having that concept that there's an alarm call going out, that there's a creature inside you that is already scared, one interesting thing that I love is that every human being has intrinsic knowledge of how to calm down a frightened animal.

If you found a kitten or a puppy sick and miserable on your doorstep, everybody listening to this would know exactly how to behave. Bring your voice down, bring your movements down, be kind, be gentle because it can't talk, all right?

So if you use words, just let the tone of your voice And when we use that same strategy on our own anxiety, guess what? The alarm call animal inside us goes, ooh, this may be better.

It may be okay. Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah, it's kind of like having, like, the way I describe it to people is there's a child coming up to you in a grocery store with their hands up like they've lost their parent.

Right, right. So you would, of course, pick that child that, well, maybe not these days because, you know, all this stuff. But in general, you would, you know, 50 years ago, you'd pick the child up, you'd, you'd sue them, you'd rub their back and you'd find their parent.

Right. Right. So, but unfortunately, we have a child in us, which is our anxiety creature. You know, I think the inner child is our anxiety creature. Same, same.

But why won't we do it for ourselves, Martha? Why won't we pick up that child that's holding up their hands? I have this acronym I call should. This is what you should have got when you were younger.

You should have been seen, heard, opened to by your parents, understood, loved, and defended. Now, if we didn't get that, we have to give that to the child in us now.

But to go back to the hemispheres of the brain, the left hemisphere, which is the one that tells stories, also has just one mechanism for trying to deal with difficulty, and that is control.

I am going to control this situation, which is kind of the original impetus that helps us grow up and learn to take care of ourselves. So it's not evil.

There aren't any bad parts, as they say in IFS. But that part of us that wants to control dominates the entire scene. And so instead of saying, oh, little kid, you look so scared.

Come and be with me. It says, stop it. Stop that right now. It's disturbing me and it's disturbing others. You're doing it wrong. Let's talk about this and rationally decide why you should not be afraid that your parents are gone.

Like, it's nonsense to this frightened child, but we do it because the urge to control is such a… It's deep in us, but it's also massive in our culture.

And you've talked about this with physicians that, you know, you have eight minutes per patient, somebody comes in, they're worried and the doctors are going, okay, what medications do I have that will control these symptoms right away fast?

That's what our culture does. And it's great and it's useful and there are no bad parts. And that never calmed me down, not once in 60 years. When I figured out how to treat myself like a frightened child or a frightened animal, I came out of anxiety and have been almost entirely anxiety free for like a couple of years now.

And it's so weird. Well, it becomes a familiar friend, I think. And I think that's the old saying about anxious people will take an unfamiliar, a familiar hell to an unfamiliar heaven.

Oh, that's so brilliant. Uncertainty was so painful for us when we were younger. We've had certainly trauma and so many of us had trauma when we were younger.

Not that everything's trauma, but uncertainty is so painful for us that we will do anything to avoid uncertainty. And I think what happens with worry is worry makes the uncertain appear a little more certain, appear more certain.

So in our nucleus accumbens in our brain, we get a little shot of dopamine that says, hey, you're on the right track. That pain you have in your stomach, that's cancer.

Now, when you say, when you, when you sort of are allowed to tell yourself that this is cancer, of course that's

going to make it worse.

Alarm, fear, and the present moment

But immediately where our brain gets that little dopamine hit, we start becoming addicted to that worry. Because that worry when we were younger, that worry was the only thing in a lot of our lives that actually kept us away from this horrible alarm.

Yeah, it kept us like hiding in the basement behind the water heater, which for me was a really good idea. And the problem is that we actually never could control it.

It's always an illusion. So then if you get, and another interesting point, I'm a sociologist, another interesting point is that the society around us is reproducing what's going on in our brains.

So when we look at social media, for example, we get a dopamine hit when we see something that says, this group of people is horrible. We hate them. We want to control them.

So we give that a little more attention. And then the algorithms, which are blind, just feed us more of what our attention is fixated on. And it creates in our online presence a state of reality that is a mirror of the anxiety in our brains.

And that has become a really, really big problem. And I think it's one of the reasons that anxiety continues to just go up and up and up all over the world.

Yeah, my mentor in developmental psychology, Gordon Neufeld says that all anxiety is separation anxiety. And then I tag on to that. But and it's mostly separation from your very own self.

So this thing about social media, there is something in our brains that we also get a hit from when we blame when we when we ascribe meaning, when we ascribe something that makes sense to us.

Okay, well, these people are bad, so that makes sense to us. So, okay, so you get a bit of a dopamine hit. And then the media gives you all the stuff on your side and never anything from the other side.

So, of course, we're looking at the other side going, How can you actually believe this stuff? Because they're getting fed something that we're not. Totally different world.

And it's very left hemisphere driven. It's trying to make certain an uncertain world, which is a difficult prospect these days. Yeah. And it's interesting because the way out for me is often, well, the first impulse that pulls me into more right hemisphere thinking is curiosity about what's going on.

And it's amazing to me how that silences my anxiety almost immediately. I was on a small plane in Costa Rica a couple of weeks ago, and the plane got tossed around a lot, a lot of air turbulence, and it was a little scary.

And I found myself gripping the chair in front of me. And then I looked out the window and saw these little huts. And I asked a question that I found during research, doing research for this anxiety book to help like elevate my curiosity.

I asked myself, I wonder what the people in those huts have for dinner. And the moment I asked myself the question, All the physiological indicators of anxiety just went away.

Boom. One curious question and it was like flipping a switch. It was the most dramatic example I've seen of how moving into more whole brain thinking because the right brain doesn't exclude the information from the left brain.

The opposite isn't true. The left side of the brain excludes. I wish. Yeah, but at the moment I became more whole brain centered and curious about what was going on beneath me, I felt what I'd been writing about that when you

get curious and you start to connect things and you start to feel compassion for other people, the anxiety goes away.

And I've been pushing this in my own head for two years. And what fires together, wires together, right? And even through all the political chaos and everything I've noticed, I've been upset.

I've been worried about the, I mean, I've been intellectually worried. Never have that panicky feeling unless I stop remembering to stay curious and stay connected and stay in the unknown because the unknown is comfortable for the right hemisphere.

And I think that's what your drawing did. Like your drawing takes you when you're art toad month, right? It took you into this whole right hemisphere, you know, time isn't a deal.

There is this thing about just being in that right hemisphere flow state. That allows you to kind of go, oh, okay. And then you can, you can be curious about the, you can look over at the left hemisphere going, Hey, you know, you guys are going crazy over there, but, but we're good here.

I started coloring recently because of your book. Yeah. Yes. And it's, it's amazing. I love a jet aircraft, like military aircraft. So I got a coloring book.

Like F-16s, Harrier jets, and I do it every night. And it makes, it just settles me into this place. Cause I'm, I'm a pretty left hemisphere driven guy.

So it is one of those things where I love getting into that sort of right hemisphere place, you know, where, and I just, I really envy the art toad that always escapes.

Yeah, I wrote about this in my book. I gave myself a month just to do things that I knew called on the right hemisphere. I was a teaching fellow at Harvard in a studio art course, and we used books like Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain, which had exercises that they knew were causing the right side of the brain to be more active.

So I brought those all out, those exercises, and I started drawing every day. I've had anti-anxiety medication and it was very helpful and I'm very grateful for it.

This was like taking 20 doses of that stuff. It was like It was during the pandemic, so I didn't have to do anything else. We were in lockdown and I was just like, whoa.

I was just like a little kid drawing every day the way I had when I was a little kid. And it was not just calm. It was wonderful. It was joyful. It was intoxicating.

And at the end of the month, which was the end of my trial period, it would not stop. I was going to ask you about that. That was my next question. How did you go from this kind of desert island, kind of just living this paradise kind of life to moving back into that sort of, because we need our left hemisphere for sure.

Obviously, yeah. But how did you move back in? Well, I called a therapist, an IFS therapist, and I said, I can't get out.

Curiosity, right-brain flow, and art toad

Somebody I'd worked with to study the method. And I said, I'm in this part that just wants to draw and it won't go away. It won't shut down. And she asked me about my parts.

She said, first of all, why is that a bad thing? And I said, well, I have to live in the world. I have to provide for things. She said, well, go and see what your parts think of that.

What does your true self think? And I was like, this is not helping. My true self also thinks I should draw all day. And

she said, this very academic, very brilliant therapist, she goes, well, Full disclosure, I've been taking an oil painting class and I can't stop either.

There you go. Yeah. But you know what's interesting, Dr. Kennedy, should I call you Russ or Dr. Kennedy? Russ is good. Yeah. Okay. You are a comic. How many physicians have been stand-up comedians?

More popular in Britain, but here it's a bit odd. Yeah, sorry to interrupt you there. It's fantastic. And every time I read books on the right hemisphere, it would say there are only three times that the right hemisphere really values as a plaything the language that you've learned in your lifetime.

And those three occasions are when you are singing songs, telling, reciting poems or writing poems and telling jokes. So when you take your fear and take your trauma and spin it into comedy, it actually holds you out of going into complete catastrophe of intense anxiety.

Humor can pull you out of it and hold you out of it. I thought that was so fascinating that you had done that in your life. And tears too, like that's the combination too.

And I think that's why men suffer so much is that we take tears away from them as boys, right? So Gordon Newfeld also talks about this. It's like how when you have tears, you know, your wife is still due, your pet has still died, but the external situation hasn't changed, but your perception of it after tears has changed.

So it's a tough sell. That is so powerful. So I will often get men because often men will get to tears through frustration. So I will tell my male clients, I'll say, go in the car, go out to a quiet place and just start screaming.

I love this. Because what it does is it allows, it breaks through that barrier of you can't cry, you can't cry. And there's nobody else there, so you're not crying in front of anybody else, which is another stage in male development altogether.

Right, right, right. A lot of men will get the tears through frustration. They won't get it through sadness because they're really good at pushing sadness down.

Wow. Through frustration, because that's what gets me. It gets me every time. Like if I'm in a place where I'm just completely frustrated. Yeah. taking the dogs out, they're pulling me every which way, that kind of thing, and they'll start barking at another dog.

I'm already kind of on the edge. It's like the number of times that I've walked around my neighborhood just falling, you know, but I won't let anyone see me, but it's so refreshing.

It's so, it lifts me when I get back. So, It's just like, okay, it's just too bad men can't just do this. You don't have to do it in front of anybody.

But the thing is like frustration. And that's one of the things that I see in men with anxiety typically is it will show up as irritability rather than depression, anger.

Anger is socially unacceptable. But frustration, irritability, road rage, that's a little more acceptable. But it's, it's just a, you're kind of dangling yourself over the gates of hell with irritability because you never get past it.

You always, you'll always stay stuck in it. So can we get our men to a point where we can laugh more, go to the comedy club more, watch YouTube, watch Bilbo, watch, watch some of the comics and laugh.

And then. You know, if you feel called to it, you know, getting some tears when you're on your own, car screaming is one of the most, like the guys come back to me and say, you know, I didn't think that was going to help, but it really, really did.

Wow. I'd like to recommend the same thing for women with anger. I once wrote that the psychiatrist's office are

filled with women who need to rage and can only grieve and the prisons are full of men who need to grieve and can only rage.

So just getting in your car and screaming at the top of your lungs. If you're a woman, try it with anger. If you're a man, try it with, I don't know, frustration.

Frustration is a big one. You can ask a man, any man right now, what are you frustrated about right now? And they will immediately be able to tell you something they're frustrated with.

Oh my gosh. We just live with this. That's so fascinating. But I also tell my men, get glycerin spray first. and and because you're otherwise you'll you'll you'll blow your throat out and the glycerin spray sometimes it's it's a whole thing like it's a whole thing that i get people to do my guys to do not so much with women although i will recommend it to women as well because it does there are some women who can't get the tears either so frustration is one of those ways that that gets you to tears Right, and one of the things that I've found is that women who get assaulted, 90% of women who go to a defense class will not hold up their hands and shout no at the instructor when he or she runs at them, that we're so deconditioned from resisting people or denying requests so we don't have access to enough fight.

We have plenty of access to grieving. The whole grieving process involves periods of anger and periods of sadness and it sort of goes around. And if you don't have access to one or the other, you won't complete the grieving process.

And I really think that the way you heal from a trauma-induced fear or anxiety, which we both have, One of the ways you do it is by, it's the grieving process.

You grieve what you didn't get that you should, I love that acronym, you should have gotten. The only way out of the suffering around that is to acknowledge that it deserves grief.

And that includes anger and sadness. And they go round and round and round. And if you allow them to, You heal. And if you don't ever do it, I love what you said about separation being at the core of anxiety, because I just wrote another book called The Way of Integrity about how if all your parts are aligned, you feel whole.

You are accessible for comfort. And I've used Dante's Divine Comedy as a model. And when he gets to the core of hell, where there's a monster frozen in ice.

The name of the monster, which is a symbol of all of our hurt, is dis. And that simply means separation. The entire concept of evil, as he saw it, was based on a being trapped in separation.

And in medicine, we use DYS all the time. dysfunction, dysphoria.

Humor, tears, and emotional release

But this is one of the things that we use as a prefix in medicine all the time. When you said about the way of integrity, it's funny because I was going to tell you at the start of our thing, it's like you and I have been driving around in the car now for a month.

Because I have, I alternate the way of integrity and beyond anxiety. So on my, on my iPhone, I have the integrity book in my car. I have the beyond anxiety book.

So I listened to Martha like in two, three, and I was amazed at how much they dovetail. I amazed at how much like, like that, that way of integrity, like not lying.

Because I think lying is one of those ways that people with anxiety, because people with anxiety often feel out of control. They felt out of control, they didn't have control when they were younger.

So the way that often they will do it is they will lie to maintain, they will lie about silly things. I look at myself when I was younger, I would lie about silly things.

Really? Yeah, just because it was just, I realize now it was a way of me, I mean the funny part is, once I became a doctor, I would find a way of getting in the conversation that I was a doctor.

Like I could be at the grocery store, like peanut butter. Oh, peanut butter. Oh, one of my patients came in with some peanut. You know, it was just my, it was so much my identity, right?

So when I left medicine in 2013, because I just felt like we were just treating symptoms and I have nothing with medical doctors. I love psych meds. I love medications in general.

I just think that we're overusing them. So it's, it's the matter of. you know, this whole lying thing, because it's this whole left hemisphere hall of mirrors.

You have to build this structure and you have to maintain this structure to be able to have this control, which takes a tremendous amount of energy, which you don't have as an anxious person.

Right. So that's what I loved about how the two books seemed to dovetail together, was just in this, the integrity and the anxiety just seemed to be, you know, one in the same, really.

They're super connected. I wrote The Way of Integrity and it was like, this is the last self-help book I'm ever writing because when all of us is in integrity, not morally, but that just means like structural integrity.

Everything's aligned and working as it was meant to work. When we get to that place, we don't experience any more psychological suffering. And I had people come to me after I wrote that book and they said, I am in complete integrity, but I'm always anxious.

I'm always scared. And I was like, how could that? I had not had that experience. I'd spent 30 years meditating quite a lot. And in meditation, when a fear or anxiety comes out, you know, oh my God, I'm being audited or whatever.

There's immediately a question, is that happening now? Because meditation is like, be here now. And I could see that no, the anxiety came when I was sitting on the floor thinking about being audited.

I came to think of that as a non-truth. But other people, when they read about integrity, they still got caught in fear for two reasons. And I think one is that the brain is naturally attuned to anxiety and often has trauma-related continuous anxiety that we're not aware of, really.

That's one thing that happened. And then the other thing was that the society around them was telling them, oh, yes, you should be afraid. Everything is calibrated to grab our fear centers and hold our attention there.

So between the brain and the society, they weren't able to see that the things that made them anxious weren't there and were therefore not true. So they were separating from the truth of themselves by believing in the fear in the brain and in the society.

And I sort of had to go, oh, here's a patch you may need. So I wrote another book. And it's a great patch. Oh, thank you. That's what I really loved about this book, because I've read every book on anxiety.

Thank you. Thank you. Um, I really loved the fact that we're, we're leaning towards this sort of feeling solution for anxiety as opposed to this thinking solution.

Cause most books will say, well, you just have to change your thinking. There's so much of that manifestation. Like just change your thinking and you'll feel better.

And it's like trying to think in opposition to how you feel. It's like swimming against a riptide. What you have to do is you have to go along with it.

You have to make friends with your alarm, which is basically your younger self. And as you make friends with them and show them that their love care, seen, heard, open to, understood, loved, and defended, then they start to soften.

Because really what anxiety is, in my view, is a separation of your adult self from your child self. The adult doesn't want to go back to the child because the child holds all their pain.

And the child presents the adult in us because the child sees the adult there our whole lives. And they're like, well, why aren't you helping me? And then the separation of your mind and your body.

So the separation of adult self, child self, and mind from body. Those two things work together to keep you separate from yourself, which doesn't allow you to get into that sort of right hemisphere flow feeling state that allows you to heal, which is coming back full circle to your book.

Your book is a lot about how you get into the right hemisphere. I can see this book being kind of visionary in a way. I can see people kind of not getting it because it's So much of our society is built on this premise that if you fix your thoughts, you're going to fix your anxiety.

Yeah. And unfortunately that. doesn't work, not, not there's anything wrong with cognitive therapy. We have cognition and we have feeling, but we have both, but we need both.

We need the feeling aspect of it. And I think we need the feeling aspect to ground the thinking aspect. My wife is a somatic trauma therapist and she often says, well, I think people need the somatic piece first and the IFS piece as well.

Before we can build something on top of that, there's no point in building stuff on top of it that has no foundation to ground. Right. Sorry, I kept getting so excited.

I knew it was gonna be like this. I knew I was gonna be like, my daughter said, let her talk, let her talk, let her talk. It's very exciting. But it's, it's really interesting that people Sit and try to calm down using a cognitive structure that just evolved a few hundred thousand years ago.

And you're talking to a nervous system that goes through the whole body and has been evolving for 300 million years.

Integrity, separation, and spiritual healing

And it's much, much more sophisticated and powerful. I would read, I know exactly the books you're talking about. Just change your thoughts, change your life.

And I was like, I have never been able to control anything with my thoughts, including my thoughts. I can't control my thoughts. I need something different and receptivity to this incredibly ancient and intelligent system that is our entire somatic being.

It's amazing that when I say that and often to doctors, I'll say that and they're like, yeah, that's woo-woo. I'm not going there. It's your body. It's the most empirical thing you have.

There's nothing woo-woo about saying, I'm getting signals from my body which has been evolving for 300 million years that say there's something off No, no, just teach it that there's nothing off.

Speak to it. It does not care. And now for something completely different. I love when you said that because I grew up with Monty Python. So that was one of my favorite parts of your book was, and now for something completely

different.

The thing about med school, and I'll tell you, we are trained in a very pharmaceutically based environment. So we're based like, this is the illness, this is the medication.

And. It's pretty full medical training. Like we're reading and we're doing stuff all the time. So we're mind, body, and spirit. But the thing is we're okay at body, I think, in medicine.

Mind, you know, even with neuroscience and neurology, we're still, you know, neurology is still one of those fields where it's like, you have a horrible illness, there's nothing we can do about it.

And then there's the spirit part, which we are taught nothing about. In fact, it's like, no, stay away from this. Like, do not enter, do not come in here.

Because we don't I think the reason why we avoid it is that we don't understand it and a lot of doctors are very left chemistry driven That's why we got a medical Well, the whole system is oh it is it is for sure So so it's like when we when we start seeing that and this isn't this is my kind of realm in medicine is to try and go, okay, I If you want to talk about the stria terminalis, if you want to talk about the amygdala and the ACC and its influence on it and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, I can talk about all that sort of stuff.

And I can tell you why IFS works. I can tell you why somatic therapy works. And this is why I kind of wrote Anxiety RX in a way. And I'm writing my third book now.

It's basically to kind of show the, the organized professions of psychology and psychiatry and medicine. There is a huge component of spirit and that's what actually heals us.

You can, you can, when I, whenever I see science based therapy, I think coping strategy. There's not going to heal you, but it will probably help you cope.

But the thing is we can't sell people, as far as medicine goes, we can't sell people a cure for their illness, which we don't typically. I mean, we know that we're just putting band-aids and all that stuff.

We can't tell people we're doing that. But it's really important to understand that so much of mental dysregulation is a spiritual issue. I don't mean religious, I mean spiritual.

And that part of you is separate from itself. That adult is separate from the child. So if you don't connect those two together, you can have the best, as you say, the best cognitive strategies in the world.

It's still not gonna help. I figured out, I went through over $100,000 in therapy. But it didn't really help me. I've been in therapy since I was 20. Well, you know what's interesting, and I know you've had IFS therapy too, and what's interesting to me, okay, you know Dick Schwartz who created IFS?

He's amazing. So what he does, I've had a couple of conversations with him and he's very unusual in the same way you are unusual and that is that you're highly accomplished in these left brain disciplines and you use the word spirit.

And Dick told me, he said, we don't talk a lot about this because I do want to maintain my academic credibility and you can't talk about the word spirit if you really, really want to if you don't want to be laughed out of whatever profession you're in.

But he said, you and I both know that the parts of us that are badly abused or have been through horrors like the ones you went through with your dad and everything, that wound is a spiritual wound.

When you go into parts therapy and the parts say, I need healing, it is A spiritual call and only spirit seems to be big and whatever you want to call spirit.

I believe everything is spirit. I'm not religious at all. But without that, there is nothing physical or mental that is deep enough to heal the wounds that really underlie our worst anxieties.

And I'm thrilled to hear you use the word spirit and to talk about it so matter-of-factly because it's the big no-no in modern intellectualism, let alone science, all intellectualism.

And that's why I use that MD degree as like, okay, you can be an MD. And there's a bunch of us, we're starting to make, I think doctors, the reason why doctors burn out is they realize they really do want to help people.

That's why they went into medicine in the first place. They're smart people. If they went into business, they could make millions. So I think we are smart people, but we want to be able to help people in a way that satisfies us.

And I don't think we're doing that. I think we realize, and I think psychiatry is huge for this, We realized that we are just actually placing a bandaid over the issue.

So when we give somebody an acid blocker for their reflux, well, they've got reflux because they're in a relationship that they're keeping themselves stuck into friend, parental, uh, spousal, whatever it is.

That's why they have reflux. So, you know, we're kind of, and then that's why people are on five, six, eight medications because, you know, it's like whack-a-mole as soon as you, if you stay in that situation.

You're going to get another thing. You're going to start getting migraines. You're going to, and then we start giving you medications for migraines. So this is the thing about me is like, I started seeing it's like, I know why doctors burn out because we realize my uncle who's from Scotland is very, as a very kind of direct way of things.

He calls it the order of the rotating pen. Like just write a prescription. Right. And that's it. And, and when you get 10 minutes or eight minutes with someone, I know that that's what I used to do is like, they would come in and in my mind, like the Terminator was like, okay, Pepsid, Fomotorine, like, you know, a reprisal, all these things would come up.

And then I've just, I just felt after a while that all I was doing was covering up their, their trauma. Yeah. Wow. Which, I mean, God love you for taking away some of that suffering, but you're right, it's whack-a-mole because whatever inside you needs to be healed will keep putting out alarm calls in different ways until it gets heard.

And in my case, it went to autoimmune diseases in my young adult years until I was really, I was bed bound for like 12 years. I'd get up and do things, but then I would lie in bed and shake with pain until I could relax again.

Basically, it was my entire nervous system saying, unless you pay attention to the things that are really wrong with you, I am going to pick you up and slam you down against the mat and hold you down like a wrestler until you start looking inside yourself.

That's why I end up doing what I do now. If I hadn't had so many alarm calls from so many systems in my body, I would have run away for the rest of my life.

Um, but thank God for people like you who get into the professions with the order of the rotating pen and then say, you know, this is not the truth. This simply is not the truth.

It doesn't feel like the truth to me. I'm going to go do all this miraculous stuff that you're doing now to help people. I think that's why doctors are burning out.

I think they don't realize consciously that they're putting band-aids on things, that they're just basically kicking the can down the road. That's one of my favorite things is kicking the can down the road.

But consciously they know, and this is the thing that I don't really like the term anxiety. I like the term alarm because everyone knows what alarm is.

Everyone's been alarmed. So if you're having lunch with a friend and you say, I'm feeling really anxious today, they may have no idea of what you're talking about.

But if you say, I'm feeling really alarmed today and words have consciousness to them. I don't think anxiety as a word has a lot of consciousness to it, but alarm sure does.

So when we start, using the vernacular, when we start using the word, you don't suffer from anxiety, you actually suffer from a state of alarm. And it's like, that's what we need to, that's in your body.

That's what we need to heal because it's the alarm that's driving the anxious thoughts. It's the alarm that's driving you into your left hemisphere and not letting you into that hall of mirrors and not letting you out.

So I think what you have to do is you have to realize I'm in a hall of mirrors, this is why I love the hall of mirrors thing so much. I'm in the Hall of Mirrors right now because I'm wrapped up in my thoughts.

Can I close my eyes? Can I focus on that place between my eyes, which you talk about all the time? And can I just sort of sidle my way over into the right hemisphere and just start feeling my breath?

Because a lot of people say, should I do meditation? It's like, well, if you do meditation and you have anxiety, you know, it's hard. But what I usually get people to do is start with your breath because your breath is something that feels good typically almost always it feels good and it's a nice introduction to Meditation because if you just sit it if you just go to meditate when you're already anxious You tend to just become miserable in that because tell me about it because you don't want it.

You know, you don't want to be quiet That's the thing. That's the hardest part of healing anxiety is that people feel? that the anxiety, that hypervigilance is actually keeping them safe.

Somatic healing, whispering, and self-talk

The child part of them believes it is. So if I'm gonna show you something or you're gonna show someone in a book, how you get rid of this old friend that you perceive in the back of your mind is keeping you safe, you're gonna go, no, no.

That's my big thing about helping people heal from anxiety is I tell them, well, you don't want to. I can't help you do it because you don't want to. And you have to realize that you have to fight through it.

Yeah, I sat there for probably four or five months when I started meditating more than an hour at a time. I felt really compelled to do it, like I was hungry.

And I would sit there and for about four months, I would sit there every day for literally hours with my anxiety just going up. and up and up and up. And it kept saying, I'm the only thing keeping you safe.

Listen to me. Listen to me. It was hell, Russ. It was the worst. But the obsession for me personally, the obsession with I need to do this hung on and after four months, one day something broke and it went.

And I was out of the left hemisphere of my brain. I was fully present in the right hemisphere. Everything became incredibly vivid and acute, and there was this absolute bliss that pervaded my entire body.

So I would tell people if they're anxious, keep meditating if you want to meditate, but know that if you sit down as an anxious person and say, I'm doing this to feel calmer, it actually, you have to face whatever's in there.

And anxiety makes meditation really hard at first, but don't, you know, take it in small doses, follow your instincts. This is another thing I love about the way you talk about anxiety, because you're very respectful of the part that is giving off the alarm call.

I've always thought reading what you've written about living in a house with a fire alarm on all the time, like ear piercing, just angiogenic, awful noise.

Sitting with that, sitting still with that is really hard. So what I put in the book to make it easier for people is something that I'm so embarrassed by it.

It's called kind, internal self-talk. K-I-S-T, kissed. And it's really simple. You hear the alarm and you turn off the alarm by just saying really gentle things to the part of you that pulled the alarm.

I'm right here. I'm listening to you. You've got my attention. Tell me everything. I often just sit down with a notebook and say to the anxious part of me, tell me everything.

When I work with an anxious client, I want to hear it all. I want everything. And what that does, it very quickly starts telling you the real story. And then as the real story comes out, this is what I'm feeling, this is what happened to me.

The anxiety, you can feel it go… So if I'd known to do kind internal self-talk, I would have started with that and then gone into meditation because that's kind of a blissful experience.

And I have something for you as far from neuroscience. Ooh, I love it. So when we whisper to ourselves, we kind of lean on the right hemisphere. So the left hemisphere is very language, Broca's area, all that, very language based.

Yes. So when you have kind internal self-talk and you whisper it to yourself You're much more likely to internalize that because one of the reasons why I think people with anxiety suffer from anxiety is because they have these blocks to loving themselves.

Basically, when you whisper kind internal self-talk to yourself, it penetrates so much deeper than if you would just say it out loud or say it within your own mind.

Oh my goodness, that is so brilliant. I could feel it just now when I did that and it reminded me of, you know, ASMR. What is it? There's a part of the autonomic medial system activation or something.

If you hear someone whispering next to your ear, It makes you super sleepy and it creates this kind of buzz of physical enjoyment. And I actually use that at night.

Sometimes I'll put, they have websites where you go on and people just whisper to you. So I can see that, you know, I can see because We're so left hemisphere driven.

We're so language driven. We speak to ourselves in words. There was an MIT study that showed, you know, we don't do anything until eight seconds later, which is basically seconds.

Yeah. The eight seconds is when we tell ourselves we should go get a glass of water. You know, even though it's a feeling based, it's really funny how this how that all sort of links together.

But when we whisper, there is this this paradox between we want to pay more attention, but we also don't don't listen. We shut off that sort of analytical, linear, logical, lying left hemisphere.

You know what else that does is it actually triggers I think the curiosity reflex that's on the right. Because if you think about being in a party and everyone's jabbering and talking and then somebody starts whispering, people will lean in.

There's an obsessive desire to know what is being whispered and that switches us out of fear and into curiosity and trying to connect with that. So it all It all fits the same pattern, but that is absolutely a genius strategy and I'm going to use it every day.

It reminds me of that part in your book where you talk about Judson Brewer and him just, they're being at this sort

of precipice of this thing and going, hmm, right?

It's the same kind of thing. So it just sort of pulls you in and you are now running this from a very right-brained feeling state as opposed to… What do I need to know?

What do I need to know? Which is basically what our society is doing. So I know you have to go soon. So basically, what are the things that have helped you the most with your anxiety?

What are the things that they really have made like the huge difference? So the first thing is what you talk about, learning that I had a lot of trauma from childhood that needed, so there were a lot of hurt parts of me that needed to be recognized in exactly the way you're talking about and were terrified by the fact that I wasn't paying attention to them.

So that was the first thing for me. And then it was getting incredibly focused on which of my thoughts were true and which were not. And this is not the same as cognitive therapy because the only question it ever asks is, is that true?

Can you be absolutely certain that's true? Byron Katie said, I did the school for the work back in March of 2015. So I went to her. So we both have done that.

So there's the trauma and the love that you can give to the traumatized self. And then there are all the thoughts that have been generated by years of trauma and years of reiterating things that actually aren't true.

And if you can gently dissuade the part of your brain that keeps saying they're true, like, nobody loves me. Can you be absolutely sure that's true? How do you feel?

How do you react when you think that thought? Exactly. Because that gets you in touch with the part. Yeah, if it doesn't set you free, it's not the truth.

You know, they say the truth will set you free. I used to think that meant, oh, I'm supposed to learn some equation or some spell and it's going to make me feel better.

But actually I see it backwards now. Anything that's true brings a freedom, a feeling of liberation. So the Buddha said, anywhere you find the ocean, you'll know it's the ocean because it always tastes of salt.

And anywhere you find enlightenment, your own enlightenment, you can recognize it because it will always taste of freedom.

Truth, non-resistance, and closing reflections

So I will ask myself, does that thought make me feel freer or less free? If it's less free, it's a lie. And I have to sort of sit with it and try to figure that out.

But that requires sort of a relaxation into wordlessness while I wait for the answer to come. And this sounds very esoteric, but when you start asking for the truth and waiting for the response, instead of immediately snapping back from your left hemisphere, of course it's the truth.

If you throw that question like a pebble into a well and then wait for the understanding to come up, it will always say of a thought that frightens you, no, I can't be sure that's true.

And the moment you say that, the dissonance, the dis within you, the monster trapped in hell, connects with the part of, with the rest of you, with the rest of the universe.

And it feels this tremendous release that is very liberating. And if you just continue to tell yourself the truth. It can come to sort of inhabit all the areas of your life that were once really polluted by this thing we call anxiety.

Alarm, as you put it. The alarms go silent. And when they ring again, you lovingly deal with whatever it is or whoever's in there. Check to make sure you're safe in the present moment and go right back in to the part of you that loves and connects.

I will say after two years, I wrote this book. It had to be published and all that. It took about two years. Ever since I started practicing this, and I still get up every morning and draw and paint, by the way.

I do all kinds of things to activate the right hemisphere of my brain. I have not experienced significant anxiety for the last two years. Do you still get anxious?

I do. I get alarmed. My mother isn't doing well. So like that's, yeah. So, but she's 91, you know, yeah, she's 91 and that kind of thing. So, so I go into that and it's, but, but I, this is going to sound really weird.

I enjoy the pain now. Like I enjoy, I embrace the pain because I think the whole thing about anxiety is resistance. It's like when you resist something, it just, you just hold onto it tighter and you just, you can't, it can't, when you resist it, it can't flow through you.

And I think that's so much of it. It's just learning just the path of non-resistance, which is patience, which is waiting. Yeah, and when two forces oppose each other, the victory goes to the one that knows how to yield.

That's from the doubted Jing. One thing I want to leave with folks, you just made me think of it, and that is whatever part of you that's anxious, the quickest step to calming is to say, you go ahead being anxious.

Keep being afraid. Go ahead. I've got you. Let the fear be as big as it wants to be. I'm not going to fight it. I'm not going to push back on it. And immediately for me, the anxious part breathes a huge sigh of relief.

And then that should process begins and that's healing and that gets to be forever. It really does. It does. And you stay with yourself and you know, all anxiety is separation anxiety.

So the more connection you can create within yourself and within other people, but it starts with you. Yeah. The more you can create that connection with the adult self and the child self and your mind and your body, the more anxiety becomes less a part of your life.

So you asked me if I get anxious. I get alarmed at points, but I don't give the anxious thoughts any credibility anymore. So there's no loop. The anxiety alarm cycle doesn't loop on me anymore.

So I'd say that I'm healed from anxiety because I don't get sucked into the loop anymore. I can see the loop. And when you see it, you don't have to be it.

And I think that's it. So thank you so much. I could talk to you forever. I would love it. We could have another conversation and stuff. And it was just amazing chatting with you.

Thank you so much. You're welcome here anytime. So honored. Thank you, Russ.