

#95: Becoming Friends with Your Anxiety



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Marissa McKool, MPH

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Hey you all, I'm Marissa McKool, and you're listening to the *Redefining Rest Podcast for Public Health Professionals*. Here we believe rest is your right. You don't have to earn it, you just have to learn how to take it and I'm going to teach you. Ready? Come along.

Well, hello there. Fancy seeing you here. What's going on? What's happening in your life? I'm so glad you're here. I have to tell you, I had the strangest dream last night about this podcast. I am someone who remembers my dreams. They are very vivid. They're often elaborate and all over the place. And last night I had a dream that this podcast on Apple had all these horrible reviews. People saying the meanest stuff and I was reading it and just so confused of what they were saying because it was so mean and so out there.

And I got up, I checked the podcast, of course those reviews aren't there. My dream just made this up but pleasant surprise, there is a new review that just touched me so much I want to share it all with you. And I won't share who it is but if you go look you can kind of see their handle if you want. But it says, "Marissa's podcast regularly has me rewinding to take in her powerful perspective and messages. I am often shaking my head in agreement even though it requires me to change my thoughts and actions. But hey, I am the one who has directly benefited from the changes I have made.

Her words speak to my values and my commitment to embrace my imperfect self who is always deserving of rest. While I think the content is beneficial for folks in public health I often think the lessons and tips would be great for anyone who is a human. Thank you for your time and energy, Marissa."

Thank you so much to that listener for writing that very, very thoughtful review. It means so much to me because I get to hear directly from you of how this is helping you. And it helps so many other people who come

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across the podcast and want to know how this could help before they commit their time to listening. And reading a review like that I know helps so many people. So thank you so much. I am so glad this is helping you. And I agree, this can help anyone, not just folks in public health.

So if you have been a listener for a while and you've gotten a lot out of the podcast it would mean so much if you went ahead and rated and reviewed. It helps me hear from you directly so this isn't just a one way communication. I love hearing from all of you of how this is helping, of how this is resonating, of the topics that you have really appreciated. There are folks who have left in the reviews their favorite episode. And that really helps me so I can create more teachings and tools around that and it just takes a few minutes.

And of course it helps other people and other folks who really do deserve rest and just struggle taking it. So I want to start off by saying thank you. That was a random way to discover that review through my crazy dream but it really made my morning.

So with that I just want to get right into this episode because this has been an episode that's been a long time coming. I have kept thinking I need to do an episode on anxiety probably since the beginning of starting this podcast. And here I am finally doing it. I'm so excited. I do want to start with a disclaimer, a very important disclaimer. I am not a doctor. I am not a therapist. This episode is in no way intended or supposed to help you diagnose any sort of anxiety disorder. I'm not giving treatment advice. I want to be very, very clear about that.

If you have a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder this episode definitely can help you but in no way am I giving medical advice here. The goal of today's episode is to really help you understand how resisting your experience of anxiety actually makes the anxiety worse and that to get more rest you don't have to eliminate your anxiety, you just have to learn how to accept it.

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And I'm going to be sharing a lot of my experiences and journey with this and how this learning has helped me really befriend my anxiety and accept myself and love myself unconditionally.

So I have had anxiety nearly my whole life. My recollection probably started really experiencing it in middle school but maybe before. I wasn't able to put a name to it until much later in life, until college or after college looking back and being like, "Oh, I was experiencing so much anxiety." Partially because I didn't have the awareness, I didn't have the understanding. I also didn't have any support. No one helped me figure that out when I was younger. And I do want to say there were plenty of opportunities.

I remember in high school going to the doctor for my excessive sleep. And this might have been both anxiety and potentially depressive experience. But I was a teenager and I remember the doctor, my mom was concerned, I was concerned and all the doctors just said, "You're just a teenager, this is totally normal." And looking back now I think that was a completely missed opportunity to have my mental health and emotional health assessed and get support.

As I look back through the years, the ways I coped with my anxiety even though I didn't know it was anxiety, I was just trying to cope with life. There were definitely points in which I could have gotten support or been told what was really going on. In middle school and high school one of the ways I coped with my anxiety was disordered eating. And I am not saying this is healthy or an appropriate coping mechanism at all, just saying to show I didn't have the support. I didn't know how to name it. I didn't know how to deal with it. I was just doing the best I could.

It was just trying to figure out how the hell do I feel better. In college I coped mostly with smoking weed and a lot of it. And in college I had more awareness that I was experiencing anxiety. So at least I was able to name it but I still didn't have real tools to deal with it. I hadn't been to therapy at that

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point. I had never really talked about it with a professional. And so smoking weed I found really helped. And I know there are a lot of people out there who use weed to manage their anxiety especially now that in lots of states it's medically or recreationally legal now.

And for me I don't do that anymore. I stopped that after college. I realized there was a point where it stopped serving me. I definitely think at college when I look back I didn't have other tools. I didn't know what else to do so I don't judge myself for that. And I think in some ways it helped, in some ways it didn't. After college I realized it wasn't really helping me and I was able to learn how to deal with my anxiety in different ways but it did take many, many years. And really the main thing that helped me was coaching.

And I suspect that I probably have more anxiety than the average person does but the truth is we'll never know. We really don't have a measure that we can measure everyone's experience of anxiety on for various reasons. People experience different intensities of anxiety or frequencies and how do you compare those? And it doesn't really matter at the end of the day. I have anxiety about things that many people do. I had dating anxiety for many, many.

A lot of people socialized as women have this anxiety because of the patriarchy, because of the way we're socialized around believing our worth and value is dependent on finding a partner. I also have other types of experiences where anxiety comes up, whether they're random or ongoing or they make sense or they 'don't'. I experience a lot of anxiety watching a new TV show. I end up rewatching TV shows I already like because it's more calming. I don't experience that anxiety. I experienced social anxiety and I have very specific rules in my head of where I don't experience it and where I do that don't really make sense to anyone but me.

And I have anxiety around my family. I have a lot of anxiety when it comes to my dog, my dog meeting other dogs which makes sense because I have

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had a traumatic experience with that. So I experience anxiety in a lot of different ways. It shows up in different ways in my life. And for years I wanted to figure out the why. Why do I experience so much anxiety? And learning some of the why or hypothesizing has helped me to a degree.

But what I have found both with me and with people I coach is that sometimes you can get in the rabbit hole of why and you want that clearer evidence and sometimes it's not there and you don't really need it. Because what has helped me more than anything and pretty much everyone I've worked with is accepting the anxiety. That's what really has helped more than the why. Some why helps, again, realizing nothing's wrong with me for having dating anxiety. Lots of women are socialized to believe something's wrong with them if they don't have a partner.

That was helpful to feel it's not just me, of course. But then there are some areas where I have more anxiety and there might not be a why I can find and going and finding that and using all the energy might not serve me. What serves me more is just accepting the anxiety, especially if you have chronic or ongoing anxiety like me, you may never know the exact why for some of it. Maybe it's genetics. Maybe it's modeling you got from family or anxiety. Maybe it's your socialization. Maybe it's various big T or little t trauma you might have had or a mix of other things.

I really used to think something was wrong with me for having anxiety. And I used to label myself as an 'anxious person'. I thought I was broken because of it and all I wanted to do was get rid of it, to prove I was healed or fixed. And what I realized through deep coaching and for me this took a couple of years is that my anxiety is not a problem. There is nothing wrong with me for experiencing anxiety. It is not a label. It is not a measure of my worth or value as a person.

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And accepting and embracing my anxiety not only reduced it but helped me see the benefits, the gifts of my anxiety and be friends with it and embrace it.

So let's start with what is anxiety. There are whole fields of study and practice that examine anxiety. There are whole podcasts that talk about anxiety. So I'm just going to do a very, very brief overview in relation to today's episode. Anxiety is really a feeling. Remember a feeling is just a physical sensation in your body. So your brain has a thought, it triggers your body to have physical sensations and then we name that with an emotion.

So if you're going to go give a public speech you might feel butterflies in your stomach or sweatiness in your hands or a fast beating heart. Those are physical sensations that you might name as anxiety, as feeling anxious about giving a speech. When those physical sensations happen, when you feel that emotion it's because your brain had a thought that prompted you to feel that emotion.

Now, anxiety is also often used to describe the experience of your nervous system getting activated, what many call and what I prefer to refer to as your physiological stress cycle. Or what some of you might be more familiar with, which is the fight, flight or freeze, or fun as well is another response. When your brain thinks you're in danger, physical danger, danger of not surviving it activates your nervous system. This is the part of our brain that has evolved to keep humans alive forever. It's important, it keeps us safe.

And when this happens not only is our nervous system activated but we also have physical sensations with that. And often we name those physical sensations usually as fear or anxiety. Those are the typical ones with the nervous system activation. But when you think about it, the nervous system really gets triggered the same way any other emotion does. It's a thought, whether you're conscious of it or not.

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If you were a hunter gatherer and you see a boar running at you, you had some sort of thought, conscious or not, that you're in danger that triggered your nervous system to be activated to respond to keep you safe. Now, in modern day a lot of times we have far thoughts that trigger our nervous system that are not about things that are actual dangers or threats. We might see a text from a date or an email from a boss or the lack thereof and our brain thinks we're in danger and our nervous system is triggered and we feel anxiety or fear.

Every human on the planet experiences the emotion of anxiety. This is really, really important. Every human experiences the feeling of anxiety. Now, anxiety disorders are health diagnoses that indicate your fear or anxiety or even nervous system response is either chronic and/or intense to the point of interfering with your daily life or your ability to participate in daily activities. Not every person who experiences the feeling of anxiety has an anxiety disorder. But every human on the planet does experience the emotion of anxiety.

Now, here's the thing, anxiety is not a problem. This is what's been happening for so many of you. You notice you feel anxious, maybe you can even name it, maybe not. But then you resist it. You think it's a problem, it needs to go away. You panic or get frustrated or you shame and blame yourself. That resistance, that's what the problem is, not the emotion, not the anxiety itself, your resistance to it, your reaction to it. Anxiety is just a physical sensation and your body, a tight stomach, a tense throat, sweaty hands.

You can allow those sensations to be there. They are not a problem. When that happens your brain thinks it's a problem and your brain's reactions and your thoughts to it is what creates the problem which is your resistance, your reaction. The thoughts that are creating the anxiety in the first place are also not a problem. This is the other way we resist our anxiety

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especially if you understand thought work, if you have a coach, if you understand how thoughts cause your feelings.

You notice anxiety coming up. You know a thought's creating that, maybe you know exactly what the thought is, you can see it and you make that thought a problem. You tell yourself it shouldn't be there, you shouldn't be thinking this, you know better. Maybe you're in a meeting and you start to feel anxiety and you notice it's because you're thinking I don't belong here. Then you start resisting that thought, telling yourself you shouldn't be thinking that, you know better, trying to force yourself to think something different. That's still resisting your anxiety.

And finally, you are not a problem for experiencing anxiety. All anxiety is, is a physical sensation or a set of physical sensations in your body that you experience as a result of a thought. This is something every human experiences. This is how the mind and body works, that's it. You experiencing that even if it's 'more than others' which again there is no way to know that objectively, doesn't make you a problem.

Even if you experience anxiety in circumstances that other people don't, it doesn't make you a problem. It doesn't mean anything about you. It doesn't mean something's wrong with you or you are broken. It means you are a human with a human brain, that's it. When you truly see and accept that anxiety is not a problem and that you are not a problem for experiencing anxiety then you get to love the parts of you that does experience anxiety. They don't need to go anywhere. You don't need to go anywhere.

You are a person who experiences anxiety. You are not an anxious person. It is not a label, it does not define you, it does not mean anything about you. You are just a human who experiences anxiety like every other human. Anxiety is an emotion you feel, not your identity. This relational shift will release so much shame and angst and resistance and guilt and

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resentment you have built up about your anxiety and about yourself. It will allow you to accept yourself and love yourself unconditionally.

Your anxiety doesn't have to go anywhere. All that has to change is your resistance and your self-judgment of the anxiety and of yourself. When you resist and shame and judge yourself for experiencing anxiety, life passes you by and you don't get to be present for it. You're in your head, you're feeling bad about yourself. When you accept your anxiety it can come along for the ride. You can be present for that beautiful hike even though you feel anxious about the dogs off leash.

You can give your conference presentation even though you have a knot in your stomach. You can go on that date even though you have sweaty hands and are worrying what they think of you. I love my anxiety. I appreciate it. I value it. I see the gifts of it. I see nothing wrong with it. It's my friend, I truly feel that way. But six years ago I would have never said any of that. I hated it. I hated myself for having it. Here we are years later I still experience anxiety, that hasn't changed but I don't make it a problem. I don't make it mean anything about me.

So if we took a one to 10 scale, one being I experience no anxiety, 10 being I experience anxiety at the worst possible level. Before I did this work in coaching I would often live at a score of seven. So again one to 10, one being not at all, 10 being the worst. I would live at seven and I would often peak to a nine or 10 in certain circumstances and rarely, rarely drop below five. That consumed my life.

And what I realized is that most of that experience was not the anxiety itself, it was the result of me resisting the anxiety, of thinking it was a problem and thinking I was a problem, of freaking out when it would happen. So I intensified it. I turned up the noise on it and I made it worse for myself. When I finally accepted my anxiety, I still experienced it, I still

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had that emotion. I still had some more thoughts creating that feeling. But when I accepted it, so much of my experience of it changed.

Instead of constantly being at a seven on a one to 10 scale, 10 being the worst, one being not feeling it at all, I now hang out around a three. I've dropped about four points because a lot of my anxiety, discomfort, experience was my resistance to it, not the anxiety itself. Now, I may peak up to about a six, meaning my peak is now what my constant used to be. I am still rarely ever at a one. It happens but not often. And I may never be someone who experiences anxiety at a one consistently. I'm okay with that, I don't need to be. I don't need my anxiety to go anywhere.

Here are some of the gifts of my anxiety that I could only really see and appreciate and embrace and truly use once I accepted my anxiety and stopped making it a problem. Because for every 'challenge' of anxiety and I'm putting that in quotes, that same thing is also a gift. So here's an example. I am the person you want around when there is a true crisis. Now, listen, as someone who experiences a lot of anxiety, often what's happening is my brain thinks there is a crisis, thinks I'm in danger, thinks something is wrong when literally nothing is wrong.

So that's part of the 'challenge' of experiencing anxiety is my brain thinks there is a problem happening, I'm in danger when I'm not a lot of the time and then I feel anxiety. But on the flipside when there is a true crisis, when there is true danger, a true threat I am the best person you want there. I go into hyper problem solving and decision-making mode. I see things clearly. I can make quick decisions. I don't panic.

When my mom went into the ICU, when my family had to evacuate because of a fire threat, when Jared and I got impacted by the 2022 Southwest Airline Christmas debacle I was the best person in those situations to respond, to plan, to make decisions, the best. Everyone else is freaking out panicking, I'm good. I am made for this. I'm prepared. This is

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when my anxiety is a gift. And my ability to accept my anxiety and manage it when it comes up, when there's no real crisis or threat allows me to engage that gift when there is a crisis.

Another example, I think through things a million times over. Some people call this overthinking. There are times where this absolutely doesn't serve me and I have to coach myself on it and manage my mind because it's taking away time and energy I could be using to something else. But there are times this really does serve me. I think through scenarios and discover ideas, different options, decisions to make, considerations to talk through.

When I go to a new restaurant I spend probably an hour if not more, researching the new restaurant, probably more. I go to Google Maps, I put that little person in where you can see the street level and I go through all the streets to get familiar with what the surroundings look like. I learn where all the parking options are. I run the Google Maps directions to see the different ways you can go and what traffic will look like. I review the menu over and over and over again. I go through your Yelp photos. I go through the Yelp reviews probably five different times.

Now, does this always serve me? No, it's not always necessary. I could be using that time and energy for something else but sometimes it does because guess what, if we're on the way to a new restaurant especially on vacation or something, hit a closed road or a full parking lot, I know where to go. I know the options. If the GPS sends us in the wrong direction I can notice by the streets because I've already looked at it through Google Maps, this is not the right area, we're not on the right track.

But you can't really see and embrace these gifts of your anxiety until you stop resisting it and you start to accept it. And you learn how to manage it and process it when your anxiety is happening, when there's no true threat or a problem happening, when your brain is misfiring for signals of safety or

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alert anxiety happening. Before I accepted my anxiety I felt shame about having anxiety, about myself, about the anxiety itself. Now I don't have to.

I can decide not to go hang out with a group of friends just because I don't want to experience the social anxiety that comes up. And I don't have any shame about that. I can also decide to go hang out with those friends, let the social anxiety come up and not feel shame. I can decide to let my dog meet another dog, feel the anxiety in my body and not believe something's wrong with me. Or I can decide, hey, I'm not going to allow this to happen. I don't want to feel anxiety today and not feel bad or guilty.

So I want to leave you with this. What would be different in your life if you accepted your anxiety, if you learned how to really love it, appreciate it, not make it mean something's wrong with, not make it mean a problem. If you really saw your anxiety as a friend, as a part of you but not your whole identity, as a piece of you but not the defining aspect of you. What would be different if you befriended, became friends with your anxiety? Truly think about it. What would be different in how you spent your time or how you felt or what you did or how you saw yourself or how you treated yourself?

I'm going to leave you with that this week. Thanks all for tuning in, I will see you next week.

If you found this episode helpful then you have to check out my coaching program where I provide you individualized support to create a life centered around rest. Head on over to mckoolcoaching.com, that's M-C-K-O-O-L coaching.com to learn more.