



Conscious Life presents

The Brain Science of Anxiety

Guest - Dr Kate Truitt

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[00:00:07] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host. Today I'm speaking with Dr Kate Truitt, a clinical psychologist, applied neuroscientist, keynote speaker, and international best-selling author, renowned for her groundbreaking work in the fields of trauma, stress, and resilience.

Dr Truitt is the founder of the Truitt Institute, an innovative educational platform dedicated to advancing access to mental health support for all. She's the author of her just-released memoir, *Keep Breathing*, and the international bestseller, *Healing in Your Hands*. Dr Kate Truitt, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr Kate Truitt

Thank you for having me. I'm excited for this conversation.

Meagen Gibson

I'm really excited to have this conversation with you because I love brain science. I'd love it if you could start by helping us understand how brain science helps us understand anxiety better.

Dr Kate Truitt

Well, we all have a brain, and our brains do brainy things. One of the things that I've learned throughout the course of my career, as well as my own personal journey with anxiety, is the better able I am to understand what's happening inside this noggin of ours, the better able I am to partner with my mind and my system to create empowered change and even lean into self-compassion.

Because anxiety is a full mind and body experience, but our brain plays a critical role in manifesting it as well as maintaining it as a key way to ultimately keep us alive, which is our brain's number one job. A lot of people don't think about that when they think about anxiety, that there's actually an adaptive reason why it's there, and it's about the partnership so that we can give the anxiety a different job.

[00:01:52] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I've related to so much of what you said, and it always reminds me of Dr Ron Siegel. I can just imagine his face. He's got this little mustache, and he says, "Our brains did not evolve to make us happy, Meagen." And so I love talking about the brain and reminding people of that.

And I think our... I love self-help, obviously. I've made a whole career out of it. We've developed this sense that we are very empowered and that so much is in our control that we, I think, sometimes forget and lose track of how much is happening in the background that we aren't in direct control over, right?

Dr Kate Truitt

Exactly. And our brain loves to feel like we're in control because then it's being adaptive and helping us out. Our brain is terrible at uncertainty. There's a whole slew of literature out there that's fascinating that highlights that our brain really, really, really is bad at not knowing what's coming next. In many critical ways, that's the core of anxiety. It's our brain trying to figure out the next steps in the great ambiguity of the natural uncertainty that is our life.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. The one thing that's guaranteed is that our life will be full of uncertainty, right?

Dr Kate Truitt

Yes.

Meagen Gibson

And predictability and change despite all of our efforts. In your books, you emphasize the role of the amygdala in anxiety, speaking of the brain. Can you explain what you call the three core values of the amygdala and how they contribute to the development and maintenance of anxiety.

Dr Kate Truitt

Yeah. I'm going to pull back just a little bit. In all of my work, I talk a lot about Amy, the amygdala. Personifying this brain part because that does allow us to then start to reflect on how this part of ourselves works for or against us.

A lot of the research that I started out doing many, many millennia ago was in rat labs because I had really severe debilitating social anxiety. Humans were terrifying to me, which is ironic now what I do for a living. But through that work in those rat labs and studying fear and learning and resilience, I started to see a core through-line of three core values that then, when I went to the literature, really stood out.

There's really three things that our brain needs to help us stay alive. The first is pretty obvious. Safety. We need to feel... We need to be, not just feel. We need to be safe. We need to know that there is not a tiger sitting in our room that's going to eat us. That's very important.

[00:04:26]

A secondary piece that a lot of people don't think too deeply about because it feels like a given frequently is the idea of belonging and lovability. As humans, we are predisposed to depend on our caregivers. We have to. We're one of the weakest creatures when we're born.

I was at my friend's house the other day, and she has a five-day-old infant, and that little one would not survive in the wild. We need our people to survive. Our amygdala, over the course of 300 million years that it's been walking around this planet of ours. Now, that predates the dinosaurs, so our amygdala is really good at its job. It's been around a long time.

For humans, it's developed this very deep realization that we need connection. And internally, our system develops a way of experiencing the world such as, "Do I belong and am I lovable?"

Then finally, we need to know we can get our core needs met. I call this success. How do we have a roof over our house, shoes on our feet, food on the table? Which, of course, for that five-day-old infant, circles back to lovability and belonging, and then fundamentally, safety, because if we don't feel safe, we don't eat, we don't sleep, and our entire system goes haywire.

All of that is at this very deep, primal, 300 million-year-old level in our brain.

Meagen Gibson

There's that old part of our brain, and you mentioned belonging, safety, core needs, and they're so connected, right? This core part of our brain, when we think about belonging.... An infant is easy for us to imagine. Five-day-old infant won't survive without caretakers and belonging.

It gets harder when we get older. I'm thinking about myself. If you're lucky in your adult life, you keep getting the opportunity to try new things that might make you a little bit uncomfortable. Sometimes those uncomfortable things make you feel like a baby that's been left in the forest when you're actually completely and totally safe.

But when we think about those elements that you're talking about of belonging and core needs and safety. If we fail, even as adults... Even if our life isn't in danger, it will feel like... Our perception of our life is in danger because our livelihood might be in danger or our social connections might be in danger or things like that, right?

Dr Kate Truitt

Yeah. Well, and that's how all that plays out in anxiety, especially as we're developing across the course of our lives. So we enter the world going, "How do I stay safe? How do I belong, be lovable? And how do I get my core needs met?"

And then as we develop, we learn from our village, from our caregivers, from the experiences in the world, what it means to be okay within those core values. It's not adaptive, though, Meagen. It's not adaptive all the time. Sometimes it is. Sometimes it's like, "Oh, if I do this, I'll get a cookie." And then I learn. "I like cookies, so I'm going to do more of that."

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But for many of us, life is way more complex than that. To the idea of failure, we can learn that, "Hey, if I fail, if I'm not perfect, if I'm not X, Y, Z, I will be kicked out of my village, which means death." To that very, very primal brain.

The anxiety starts to come in and play a continual role. An exhausting role for those of us who struggle with anxiety, in trying to say, "Don't do the thing that's going to get you kicked out. Don't do the thing that will make you unsafe. Don't do the thing that's going to take away your core needs."

Our brain casts a very wide net. Generalized anxiety. That word generalized, matters because our brain... I call it a filter, which starts to filter everything through this lens of threat, which then takes over everything because our amygdala is one of the most powerful parts of our brain.

It's great at keeping us alive. That's its top job. If it's nervous or wary or scared about something, you can bet it's guiding the way our brain is processing data all the time. It's exhausting, but loving, oddly enough.

Meagen Gibson

It's funny that you're talking about personifying the amygdala, and I knew a very famous rock star who I will not name because it's irrelevant, but what I'm going to talk about is his bodyguard. His name started with an A. So we'll call him Andy for the purposes of this conversation.

Andy was just hired because he was this big, giant person that made the rockstar feel safe and made other people feel like it was unsafe to approach the rockstar. Then when I got to know Andy better, I was like, "What are your dreams and aspirations one day?" He was like, "You know what I really want to do? I really want to draw."

So it just reminds me so much of the amygdala. It wants another job. It doesn't necessarily want to be on high alert and making everybody its enemy all the time, does it?

Dr Kate Truitt

Yeah, Absolutely. That's the opportunity. And so much of the work that I specifically do is partnering with the brain. That's why I personify Amy going, "Hey, Amy, high five for keeping me alive. You've done a great job. And the tools you're using, the thought patterns that you're anchoring me into over and over again, they belong to old ways. What's the new opportunity? How does Amy want to draw?"

I talk a lot about sending Amy to the beach, and maybe she wants a virgin Mai Tai and just wants to hang out and watch the waves. What would that be like? It's pretty foreign for people who are really living in the world of anxiety and that vigilance.

Meagen Gibson

There's that constant chatter. I've battled it myself, and maybe you can relate to it, too. Even at the very, very, very beginning, asking yourself, "What do you want? What would make you happy?" is

such a foreign concept to someone who's been living in preventative danger land, of threat assessment land, and has called that home for so long.

[00:10:36]

Even the question itself can be scary because then it's like you have this self-identity crisis of, "What if I don't have needs? What if I have no idea what would make me happy? What if I don't know what I want?" It creates a different sense of panic and a different source of panic.

Dr Kate Truitt

Yeah, absolutely. Tied into that is, even asking the question can shine the light on even greater uncertainty, which our brain doesn't like.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely.

Dr Kate Truitt

There's a different opportunity where I start with a lot of my clients, and even in my own journey, is moving first into curiosity and openness, being in a state of inquiry. "What if?" Because we have the "what if" stories of doom, right? "What if all the bad things happen?" Chicken Little and the sky is going to fall. And that's our amygdala trying to keep us safe.

So we can give those "what ifs" a different job because Amy is also involved in all of our positive emotional experiences. She's tied into our ability to feel loved and connected, to belong. "What if we didn't have to be operating in the fear mode of 'I'm going to be kicked out of my village?'" And instead, we could get curious about, "What if I did have people who supported me? Just what if?"

And it's like a gentle step into a possibility. It's actually one of my training protocols and healing protocols that I teach. It's called the Creating Possibilities Protocol. It's just that really soft, curious question and turning those "what ifs" of doom on their head because our brain is going to do it anyway. So let's give it a different job. Let's give it the gold star job rather than the, "I'm going to go hide in a bunker" job.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I have a teenager, and so I've had to start shifting the way that I dole out wisdom because he started to notice when I would get into that mode. He was like, "Oh, here comes mom's therapy voice". And I'm not a therapist. He would be like "Oh, here comes mom's therapy voice."

I was teaching them about the amygdala at one point and anxiety, and was saying, "Anxiety is just imagination in need of a career counselor. It just needs somebody to be like, 'Great. I see all your interests and what you're really great at, and we just need to give you a different direction.'"

[00:12:59] Dr Kate Truitt

Yeah. A different job.

Meagen Gibson

And that's where I assume neuroplasticity comes into play because we can take all of these advantageous things that our brains are capable of and redirect them and give them a different purpose, as I understand it.

Dr Kate Truitt

Yeah. Well, and a big talking point, that I lean into in my books and in all the work that I do is that, we have a very specific type of neuroplasticity called stress-induced structural plasticity, that is informed by stress in order to keep us alive. The hub of this very specific type of neuroplasticity is, of course, in the amygdala.

Our brain literally is building freeways to say, "How do I keep you alive all the time?" Which is great, right? Wouldn't you want Andy, the bodyguard, if his job is to keep us alive, to be protecting us? Well, Amy is our internal Andy. When we look at the way we can give the amygdala a different job, having a new doorway to walk through that anchors in compassion first, is critical.

That idea, I really highlight it so often. It's like, high five your amygdala first. Celebrate. And it sounds so counterintuitive, but celebrating the survival tactic. Celebrating that stress-induced structural plasticity of how the brain learned to keep us alive, creates space for us to then give the neuroplasticity of a different way of being, a job. It's opening up the door. Sometimes it may just be a tiny little crack in a window, sure, but it's opening up a different opportunity.

That's where the healing starts. But if we push against our anxiety, and I have struggled significantly with anxiety... If we push against it, it just gets stronger. Because then we're lying to our amygdala. We can't lie to the part of our brain that is literally designed and has been very successful in keeping us alive our whole lives. We cannot not lie to Amy. We have to partner with her.

Meagen Gibson

I have so much compassion for people, because I've been through this as well, and I know you have, where you're trying to acknowledge all of the signals that you're getting while your social systems, family systems have been telling you otherwise since you were a little kid.

Ways to ignore the sensations in your body. Ways to ignore the instincts about the people around you. Ways to ignore... Because it's more convenient or comfortable for them or avoids discomfort for them.

Most of this is not malicious. Most of it's just around keeping the peace and trying to make everybody happy. But as an individual in our own bodies, that means that we've practiced a lot of disregarding those instincts and signals our whole lives. It's more of a relearning process than many of us give ourselves credit for, isn't it?

[00:16:01] Dr Kate Truitt

Yeah, beautifully stated. In my memoir, *Keep Breathing*, I talk a lot about the narrative through-line of my own family system and the complex impact that that had on me using neuroscience as a sideline to walk through how my brain became so twisted and gray within the complexities of "always be fine"... To your powerful point, Meagen.

"Be fine. Don't make waves. Don't create chaos. Don't feel what's happening in your mind-body system or acknowledge it". Which even those two constructs, "be fine and don't turn your intention inward", is going to generate ambiguity and uncertainty.

Because we're telling our brain, "don't pay attention to you". The thing that you literally are trying to keep alive, don't know anything about it. If you had to go give a presentation on thermonuclear power right now, how would that feel?

Meagen Gibson

That would give me anxiety, which would be the appropriate response to someone asking me to give that presentation. Yeah.

Dr Kate Truitt

Right? Me too. And that's what happens to so many of us. We grow up in a household where we're not taught to be curious about or invited into a space to learn about who we actually are. And so our brain creates a construct.

But anytime we get a data point of authenticity, our brain freaks out because it's like, "I don't know what to do with that. I don't know what to do. It's scary. It's overwhelming." And then the anxiety generalizes because the brain just doesn't know what to do. The exciting thing is we can unwind it and we can take our brain back with intention and help our system heal.

Meagen Gibson

I know that you've got... This seems like a good point or a good turning point to talk about what those techniques are and how we start that process specifically.

Dr Kate Truitt

Yeah. Well, there's a lot of wonderful therapeutic tools out there, you're a coach yourself. I'm sure you use a whole bunch of them for your own healing. There's a newer modality that I'm a co-developer of called the Havening Techniques, which evolved out of something called EMDR, which is Eye Movement De.... Wow, my brain just gave up.

Meagen Gibson

It's good to just acknowledge it, right?

[00:18:22] Dr Kate Truitt

Brainy moments, right? Brain moments. Then tapping, Thought Field Therapy or Emotional Freedom Therapy, where you're using different psychosensory interventions to create electrochemical change. So Havening partners with gentle, soothing touch to shift the way our brain is processing information in the moment.

We're, as humans, wired for touch. If an infant doesn't receive touch, they will not develop in a successful manner. We have a lot of literature around that. It's critical for a healthy mind-body system. We can use touch at any stage across the lifespan now to re-partner with our brains, to amp up the impact and the positive experiences of neuroplasticity.

It's almost as though our brain has its own healing mechanisms built in, which makes sense because if you get a paper cut, your skin has the ability to heal itself. One would think that evolution would build in something similar for our own brain, and in fact, it did.

The founders of the Havening Techniques, Drs Ron and Steven Ruden, really dug deep. A 10-year investigation into trying to understand how EMDR and tapping work. In their process, they accidentally created this thing called Havening. They're so sweet about it. They're like, "We did this thing, and it works, and it's amazing."

Now it's a global experience, and it works. It's pretty profound because we can take the power of healing into our own hands, which is the name of my first book, which is *Healing in Your Hands*. Empowering ourselves to do our own healing journey at a deep neuroplastic level.

Meagen Gibson

How does this work as far as... Because I know tapping, you can get an intro to it when... You can YouTube and find a bunch of things on that. EMDR is more of something somebody helps you through. It's a technique that you do in partnership with a facilitator. With Havening, how does that work and what might somebody expect from a session of that?

Dr Kate Truitt

Yeah. One of the things I love so much about Havening is that there's two different pillars for it. One is more along the lines of the EMDR clinical practitioner experience, where you're working with the facilitator, they are guiding the work. That is the way to go, especially if you're working on really intensive deep trauma.

And a huge part of why I'm a developer now with Havening is through the Self-Havening courses and programs that I've developed, which is our own healing program. Which is a little bit more along the lines of tapping. It's interesting because I never studied tapping until this past year or two, and I got to become good friends with Robin Bilazarian, who's an amazing tapping trainer.

When she came to a couple of my trainings, she's like, "Oh, wow, this is tapping." I was like, "It is?" And at the end of the day, we're standing on the shoulders of giants, and it's integrating the psychosensory tools, cognitive paradigms to create shifts.

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So the *Healing in Your Hands* programs, my vision with that... And it's unfolding, is how do we safely, in a trauma-informed manner, help people partner with their brains. Partner with their little friend, Amy, the amygdala, without running the risk of retraumatizing themselves because that matters, of course, and creating a new neurobiological through-line.

One of our key terms in my clinic and in my training programs is "we're healing the past, creating the present, and building the future." It's like a V- or a U-turn of healing. We go down the activation, create the present, and then build towards resilience and empowerment through intention, which is what my first book is all about.

But to the point of going on YouTube, I have a YouTube channel where you can go learn how to do your own healing program and walk alongside me through the YouTube channel to do your own work.

Because frankly, I'm curious to hear your thoughts on this, Meagen, but mental health is a human right, and therapy is a privilege. It's beholden on me as a psychologist and a neuroscientist to translate what is unattainable and make it safely accessible to the world at a global level because healthier humans are happier humans.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Couldn't agree more. And one of the things that I always want to make sure that I say at this point.. And please, if you disagree with me, feel free to do so. This is not a statement of fact, but...

One of the things that I wish somebody had told me at the beginning of my anxiety and trauma journey was that I did not have to divulge, share, re-experience the worst things, the most vulnerable things, or the worst things I had done in my life in order to heal any of that. And these kinds of techniques, EMDR, Havening, EFT tapping, ART therapy, are all techniques that don't require you to do that. Am I correct with Havening?

Dr Kate Truitt

Yes. Yeah. And case in point. We are right down the street from NASA JPL. There's a lot of nondisclosures that go on in those spaces. We work a lot with the FBI, the CIA. We've done training with the Department of Defense. You want to guess who's not allowed to divulge anything? These are the people.

So we work completely content-free. Additionally, to that point of not having to disclose, as somebody who experienced a deep retraumatization in therapy... That's one of the first things. I think it's like chapter 5 of my memoir, I talk about this experience. It's been really interesting since the book came out, how many therapists in the world have reached out to me and said, "Thank you for sharing that story."

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Because we don't have to open up Pandora's box to create really powerful and incredible change. And opening it up, especially if we're not trauma-informed, if we don't know how to do trauma work, can be... And I know this firsthand, extremely dangerous. Extremely, extremely dangerous.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. I think the more that we learn and the more of these modalities that we talk about and the more that people come out with free accessible ways to teach and for people to learn, the more that we'll have access to that, because you're absolutely right. It can be very dangerous.

I think people's safety... And not necessarily full and complete absence of discomfort, right? That's not what we're talking about. But when we're talking about trauma and severe anxiety, it can be incredibly dysregulating in an incredibly damaging long-term way if you're not just carefully treading.

Dr Kate Truitt

Yeah. Well, because our brain is trying to keep us alive and safe. And anxiety will cast that wide net and tag a stimulus as unsafe or dangerous, and then expand that at an exponential level. So what happens if we're sitting with a healing practitioner and we become retraumatized or our symptoms become magnified in that session?

But more so to the free resources, and this is something that... I do a lot of work around identifying solid individuals who are providing really good care because there's individuals out there who are saying they're providing healing resources, but there's no empirical validity to the work that they're doing. Furthermore, they're operating outside their scope of practice and teaching tools that are not trauma-informed.

When we're watching a video and guided to do something that our system then becomes activated into a state of severe anxiety or panic, dissociation or trauma, our brain and our body system relearn what might have been taught in childhood. "Don't pay attention to your data here. Don't trust yourself." That's one of the deepest violations is when we're taught we cannot trust ourselves.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. What you were talking about earlier, too, back to the beginning of this idea of self-compassion and agency. Those are two of the things that have a lot of times been taken away from us. We didn't have the choices available to us, especially as kids, to retain our sovereignty, to retain our agency, to retain our choice and our boundaries.

And so when we get into a situation... I'm just going to try to emphasize why this is so important. When we get into situations as adults, when we're with practitioners who are operating in our best interest... Again, I'm not assuming any malicious intent, but if they're operating in a way that's not in our best interest, we don't blame them. We blame ourselves.

[00:27:19] Dr Kate Truitt

We blame ourselves, yes.

Meagen Gibson

We will do the mental gymnastics and emotional gymnastics to say that, "Once again, I'm the problem or I'm wrong." And so much of that goes back to shame, which I know we haven't even talked about yet, but that's...

Dr Kate Truitt

And the core value of how we've been taught to stay alive. And this is the sweet... I hesitate to use the word "crazy", but I know in my own trauma and anxiety moments. My brain feels crazy-making.

This is that counterintuitive nature of our brain, where if we can blame ourselves, we are putting control back into the situation because then our brain is like, "Ha ha! I can now be more vigilant around that and have even more anxiety about that happening again in the future". Which is control, ironically. But not really, as we know.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Yeah, I always say that "control is the counterfeit currency of safety" when it comes to people with anxiety.

Dr Kate Truitt

Oh, I love that.

Meagen Gibson

We're just dealing. We're on the Vegas floor, just dealing out control. Just like, "I got this! Everything's fine."

Dr Kate Truitt

"I'm never leaving my corner again!"

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. Well, the wonderful and positive and amazing news is that there are so many techniques and practices and intelligent, completely awesome people like you that are teaching these tools in the world and that are available to people without having to put themselves in any more danger or disclose things to people that they're not ready to.

I hope for people's sake that they do eventually get to a place of safety, security, self-compassion, where they can have somebody in their lives that can acknowledge and validate experiences and hold them for them. But until then, I think these things are awesome. So thank you for your work.

[00:29:07] Dr Kate Truitt

Yeah, and right back at you. Thank you for your work. I think one of my big dreams, ultimately, is that we have that internal agency. That's one of my favorite words to say, "Wait a minute, I can hold this for myself." There are experiences that take a lot of reparenting, a lot of self-compassion, a lot of giving ourselves the "what should have beens, but wasn't."

Because of neuroplasticity, it's all powerful. Our brain is constantly changing. We can harness that to go back and help our brain find a new way forward. What an incredible gift that neuroscience has given us. Havening is another opportunity to go on that path. There's many modalities. My favorite thing to do is to integrate them. Find what works for each of us as we partner with our brain and body to build the future we want to be living in.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Kate, how can people find out more about you and your work in Havening?

Dr Kate Truitt

Yes. Of course. The books we mentioned. So my memoir, *Keep Breathing*, and then an entire healing program is in the *Healing in Your Hands* book, which you can see *Healing in Your Hands* right there. *Keep Breathing* right there. You can find those on Amazon. They're globally available on Kindle. And hardback, you can obviously order a copy of them anywhere. Barnes & Noble, Walmart, wherever you enjoy buying books.

My YouTube channel, TikTok, and Instagram. They're all very different in terms of the content they provide. And so depending on what individuals choose for their content and what feels comfortable with them. You get all sorts of great information, guided healing tools, practices on all of those. I'm a big shareware person. If you go to drkatetruitt.com, you can download free resources and guides for how to do your own work.

I have a clinic in Los Angeles, if somebody is California-based, and would like to do some deeper work with my team. A training institute, truittinstitute.com. Then at a global level, we have havening.org, where people can find practitioners all over the world who have many, many different areas of expertise and practice.

So I highly recommend looking there if you're not in California or you're looking for a very specific type of practitioner to walk alongside. We have many amazing humans who are doing this really powerful work.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Dr Kate Truitt, thank you so much for being with us today.