



Conscious Life presents

Understanding High Performing Anxiety

Guest: Dr Lalitaa Suglani

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.

[00:00:09] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone to this interview, where I'm super excited to welcome my friend Dr Lalitaa Suglani. We're going to be talking about high-performing anxiety. This is where we get used to being high-performing in our life, but underneath it, and part of what's driving it, is this unhealthy and unhelpful state of anxiety.

To give a little bit of Lalitaa's background. Dr Lalitaa Suglani is a world-leading psychologist, leadership coach, international speaker, and author of the book, *High Functioning Anxiety*, published with Hay House.

Lalitaa has over 17 years of experience working across various clinical areas within the public and the private sectors. Her mission is to empower high-functioning individuals with anxiety to step into their inner strength and resilience, guiding them toward emotional and psychological well-being.

Lalitaa's mission is to help transform lives by understanding and accepting emotions, attachments, and relationships we hold to awaken people to their inner power. Lalitaa, welcome, and thank you for joining me.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

Thank you for asking me to be here today.

Alex Howard

A good starting point is to contextualize what we're talking about when we're talking about high functioning anxiety. How would you define it?

[00:01:35] Dr Lalitaa Suglani

So many people get confused with this because when I speak to people and I talk about high functioning anxiety, they're like, Yeah, that's not me. And then when you break it down, they're like, Oh, my goodness, that's exactly what I've got.

The way that I describe it is a bit like a swan. We see the swan and the swan gliding on the water, you see the top half of the swan, which looks graceful, like it's got it together, and underneath it's paddling away.

On the back of my book, I have the two sides to high functioning anxiety. One side when we see the swan, it's the one that's organized, appears calm, the one that seems relaxed, that's got it together, is very sociable, is a high achiever, proactive.

But on the other side, we have the side where you're a perfectionist, an excessive worrier, you're catastrophizing, and you're often feeling quite lonely and disconnected. You're feeling over-responsible, and inadequate, and often will procrastinate away from what your bigger goals are because you're so focused on giving people what they want.

There are two different sides, and one side you think people want to see, versus the other side you suppress away, and you hide away. But it doesn't mean that you're not feeling into these things.

Alex Howard

I guess that's often the case, and you touched on it when you're saying people don't necessarily identify it in themselves. I imagine a lot of people that you talk to, they're so normalized to being in that state and to constantly being on. They've maybe even forgotten what it means to not be in that state.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

Yeah, it's quite hidden as well, Alex. When you think of high functioning anxiety, you get used to showing up as being the caretaker, the nurturer, the one who's trying to look after everyone else. But there's a reason why you do that, and that's often to avoid yourself.

It may be because once upon a time, you weren't able to understand what your needs were, and you had to focus on the needs of everyone else. That became a pattern in your life that you continued to live by, where you don't know how to look after yourself, or what your needs are, so it's easier to focus on everyone else. But that then leads to burnout, it leads to anxiety, it leads to loneliness, and all of these things physically impact us.

Alex Howard

What's the root cause of what's going on here? It sounds like what we're describing is a habit or a behavior that has something underneath it.

[00:03:52] Dr Lalitaa Suglani

It all goes back to our inner child, and the beliefs that we would have developed as a child, of how we see ourselves in the world. Often it's, I'm not good enough.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

People will say to me, I don't believe that, I know that I'm good enough. I'm like, Okay. But when we sit down and understand and go back through your journey, where did you learn that you weren't enough, and that you had to focus on everyone else's needs?

That's why in my book, I split it between unlearning and learning, because we have to go back to the root to understand why is it that I show up as I do now as an adult? Why is it that I present in this way?

If you're overgiving, you're hyper-independent, you're so focused on making everyone else's life better, but you don't do that for yourself. Is it that you don't feel deserving, that you don't feel lovable?

You don't give yourself permission to take up space because you don't want to be a burden, you don't want to upset others. Where did you learn that? We have to go back into the past and understand where is it that you learned that you weren't enough and you had to focus on everyone else around you.

Alex Howard

It's almost like what you're describing is a response to, put it in one set of words, childhood trauma. We didn't get what we needed, or we weren't quite sure how to navigate, so we developed this strategy to try to navigate and survive those experiences.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

Yeah, if we come back to safety and security, we want to feel safe as a child. To feel safe as a child, you want to feel like you're feeling like you're loved, you're cared for. To do that, you might end up being... For example, in my experience, it's like being the good girl, making sure that you're following all the rules, you're giving people what they need, making sure that everyone else is okay around you, and being over-responsible.

That becomes then a trauma response because you're doing that everywhere. You're doing that as an adult in your romantic relationships, with your colleagues, with your friends. You might be the one that's organizing everything all the time, the one that feels like you're the one that's keeping everyone together, but no one else asks you, "How are you doing? How are things for you?"

That's because you've created that way of being because it's safe, to make sure that you're invisible. But you don't want to be invisible, you want to be visible, but you don't know how to be seen in that way. That's where the real learning comes from in, how do I show up, being visible and start communicating what my needs are?

[00:06:12] Alex Howard

Of course, if we've learned that when we're visible we get rejected, or we don't get seen in the ways that we hope we're going to, then I guess it can take quite a bit of courage to start to see those patterns, but also to start to break those patterns.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

It's easy isn't it to live in avoidance, and to live being a workaholic, live with using other substances like alcohol, drugs to avoid sitting or making space for us. Because if you're in your own thoughts, if you're in your own space, that's difficult.

What we're avoiding ultimately is for someone else to say that you are not good enough, because once upon a time, we felt rejection, we may have felt abandonment. That wasn't safe to feel, that was a very big emotion. We are now going to do everything that we can to try and avoid it.

It's very similar to if we touch the hot radiator and the radiator burns us, our brain learns that the radiator is danger. It's dangerous, we don't want to touch it because it hurts, and it's a threat to our existence. That becomes the same with rejection and abandonment, we don't want to feel into rejection, we don't want to feel abandonment because that teaches us, I'm a bad person, and we want to avoid that at any cost.

We will do what we can to try and tune in to the little changes in someone's tone, in their energy. And when you start noticing the small, small changes, you start adapting yourself and trying to adapt, fix, and make it all better. But that's our nervous system, and how we have learned to relate to other people to keep ourselves safe so we're not then in a threatful situation.

Alex Howard

You've touched on this, but can you say a bit more about the price that we can end up paying for living in those states?

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

The key, key things, and the number one thing that I keep seeing more and more in clients is loneliness. When we look into the stats and the research into loneliness, the research shows that it's like having 15 cigarettes in a day, if you're a non-smoker.

But you're feeling alone, which is very similar to high functioning anxiety. You will feel alone because you're showing up being something, but you're not just that, there's another part of you, but you're so afraid of showing that, but that then leaves you feeling lonely because people don't really see the true you.

They don't see the intergrated version, they only see the version that you're showing and thinking that that's the version that's acceptable. So you feel the loneliness, but it's also burnout.

You may struggle to say no to people. You may struggle to let people down, let people feel disappointed with you. You're always giving, giving, giving, giving, giving. But again, it's not about other people, this is about your boundaries with yourself.

If someone's feeling, for example, your friends are calling you out on a Friday night and you know you've had a really busy day and all you want to do is chill out, pause and stop. But then your friends are like, Oh, that's really sad. You hear their tone change and it's like, No, don't worry, I'll come out for a bit. But that's not what you want to do.

[00:09:10] Dr Lalitaa Suglani

Now you've given something, you're now going to feel even more tired and exhausted, you're going to have to put on a mask of, I'm okay, I'm sociable, I'm here. But then that's going to leave you exhausted for the weekend, which will interrupt more of how you self-care, and what you give for yourself. All of these have a knock-on effect, and it has a toll on your mind-body energy and how you're showing up day-to-day.

Alex Howard

One of the other things that is also a tricky barrier, I imagine, to people working with this, and we'll talk in a minute about how we start to change it, but often we can like the outputs that people see us as being self-sufficient, we're always the person that's strong, got the answers, got stuff together. We quite like the fact that that's how people see us. I think that's why describing the price that we pay is also important, because we can live in a story, that even though it might not be perfect, my life is better if I'm always on in this way.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

Yeah, I wonder if that's also part of the labeling theory that we have of ourselves. If we keep showing up as the caregiver, the nurturer, that's the role that we then take on. We may not know any other role to take. But we know that we're good at being the caregiver, even though underneath we may feel resentful, we may feel anger, we may feel frustration because we're the one that's always organizing everything.

We're the one that's always asking everyone else how they are. We may notice the small things in other people, but no one notices it in you because you're very good at masking, you've learned the art of masking. No one sees that there's other things going on there for you.

When we think of how does that impact on you day to day, it's that you're not seen for who you are. You're seen for what you keep presenting because that's what you think you have to be, because that's how people see you.

If you're then, for example, struggling at work to do all the things that you're meant to be doing, it's like, but if people see me that I'm struggling, they might see that I'm a failure, they might see that I can't keep it together, they might then see that I'm not good enough.

That's the thing that you're trying to avoid, a judgment from someone else. If you're avoiding that judgment from someone else, it means that you're not showing up authentically, you're showing up more for how other people see you, as opposed to how you feel about yourself.

[00:11:32] Alex Howard

It's almost like if they're giving us positive reinforcement and feedback, and they're being genuine, You did so well, but we don't feel it, because we believe that they're giving it to the façade, not to who we actually are.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

They get used to it as well. If you are the person at work who is the yes person, people get used to you being the yes person, so they'll always give you the work. You then can feel like you're not appreciated, and then you can start to feel annoyed because you're like, Why am I doing all of this?

But you'll never voice how you're feeling. It's so disconnected and so hidden because although you're presenting as like, Yeah, I'll do this, underneath that's not how you're feeling. You might be feeling angry, you might be feeling resentful, and that takes a toll on the body.

Alex Howard

Can you talk a bit about the role of self-awareness? Someone starts to recognize and see, maybe they're listening to this interview and going, Well, this is a bit awkward, it sounds like exactly what I'm doing. What's the value of seeing this and having the awareness of it?

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

For me, having self-awareness is important, but it's also having the understanding of why is it that we show up in this way. Then also the third thing is conscious change.

When we talk about self-awareness, it's starting to notice, be honest with yourself, how are you really feeling? Why is it that you show up in this way? You're not living in denial, you're showing up and you're starting to notice things that are going on.

If I'm always a yes person, if I then feel guilty, why do I feel guilty to say to someone how I really feel? What's that really about? You'll become self-aware that you notice you feel guilt. Then you want to understand, you want to dive deeper into, why do I feel this guilt? Do I feel that if I say no to this person, I'm then a bad person? And is that realistic?

And then we can make the conscious change to be like, Okay, how would I prefer to be? Would I prefer to continue the cycle of saying yes and just doing it for others? Or do I actually want to sit with the guilt, learn to regulate this guilt, and make sense of it to then be able to action out?

It's not that easy because you're teaching your nervous system to sit in a big emotion that you've always avoided because you've never had the tools or techniques to sit in guilt. When people often say to me, Well, how do I do that? How do I sit in guilt? It's listening.

If you watch Inside Out, you can see all the little parts, the little characters. The little characters all have their own little thing that they're doing. Guilt is always on the look out for, I'm a bad person. Any chance you get for being a bad person, that part of you is just like, Ohh. But that's the part we need to nurture. That's the part that we need to offer compassion to.

Because if we keep allowing that guilt in the driving seat of your life, everything and anything can be bad, that you're a bad person in any situation. We want to learn to regulate and listen to that part, but also to offer feedback from a compassion perspective, to let guilt know that you're not bad for learning to put your needs first.

[00:14:35] Alex Howard

It also takes a lot of courage, doesn't it? To start to see and to own these things about ourselves. I'm interested when you're sat with clients, you're having this conversation and you can see that they're leaning in, they're ready to have this conversation, what do you think helps people get to that place, that willingness to see this?

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

You've used the word courage quite a few times, and for me, I think it is real courage. When we talk about courage, it's self-trust that you can do these things. Because, again, if we grow up in a situation you learn to disconnect from your intuition. You learn to disconnect from your wisdom and the place that you can do this, this affirmation of, I am enough, I know I can do this.

When you're then having the courage to speak out or share things, of course, you're going to have the fear of like, Oh, my God, you've spoken out for the first time. But it's like when we learn to drive for the first time, we might stall, but it doesn't mean that you're a bad driver, and you're never going to drive again because you've stalled.

It's listening to that part of your brain that keeps telling you that you're bad, because you're not bad, and you're trying to relearn that. This is where the courage, the strength within you is really strong and you're starting to tune in to the strength and the courage, which is perhaps something you've not done before. There's so many ways of doing it.

When we tune into that courage and the strength, for me, it's about self-trust. It's you learning to trust in your intuition, trust in, I feel this, I don't know what this is, and you might not have all the answers, but you're going to make a decision.

And even if the decision you feel was the wrong decision, you're not going to berate yourself, you're not going to tell yourself off, you're going to take the learning from it. You're trusting that, I can make the next decision, I can speak out, I can do this, I can do this. You're trusting that you can do it, and no matter what happens, you can handle it wherever you are at.

Alex Howard

What helps us build that trust? What can we do? I guess part of it is also that trusted therapeutic relationship that gives us that holding.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

When we think of self-trust, for so many years you've learned avoid making a decision, because if you make a decision, you might make the wrong one, and then everyone's going to criticize you

and judge you. I think that one of the biggest things is learning that you're on your journey, and there's no right or wrong, and not comparing yourself to others, not getting caught up with what others are thinking about you.

[00:17:13] Dr Lalitaa Suglani

A huge part of self-trust is whatever happens you know that you've got your own back. But if we're avoiding that through people-pleasing, being a perfectionist, we're avoiding making a mistake. Because if God forbid, we make a mistake, we're afraid of the consequences of that.

But when we tune into this self-trust, we know, you know what we will fall, there's going to be times we do stall. But when we do stall, we don't beat ourselves up. We learn to sit with, Okay, let me restart the car, let me get back on, and let me learn from why did I stall here? Was it because the biting point wasn't right on this hill? Was it because I was doing this? What was I doing? You're taking learning from it. So next time it happens, you're like, Oh, I'm back on that hill again, what can I do in this situation?

Rather than sitting there and thinking, that shouldn't have happened, look, everyone else around you now, they're all looking at you and they're all honking their horns. Look, they think that you're so silly. It's like, No, we're not tuning into that part of your brain. We're starting with, It's okay, people can learn, people are okay, people aren't going to judge me. And even if they do judge me for being a bad driver, I've stalled, but I'm going to learn from this. We need to be okay with that.

Alex Howard

We need to cultivate some awareness of what's happening. We need that courage, and that courage comes from building that trust, being willing to make some mistakes, and being willing to try some different things. What comes next in helping us to overcome high functioning anxiety?

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

Self-compassion, we need to develop self-compassion.

Alex Howard

It's that simple small thing.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

That little thing that we haven't given ourselves because we've been so hard on ourselves, and we feel like we haven't been deserving, we haven't been lovable, we haven't been able to do the things that other people perhaps find easy.

It's like, No, I've learned to live through others. You're now no longer trying to live through others and you're living through yourself. But to do that, we want to develop a relationship with ourselves where we love who we are, essentially. We learn to realize that we are enough as we are. But to do that, we want to develop self-compassion.

Even through my book, in Chapter 5, I have 12 powers. I call them powers because it's different ways that we can show up in the world. Self-compassion is one of the biggest ones because we want to learn to show up in a way where we are compassionate to ourselves, rather than being mean to ourselves, and being the biggest bully in our own heads.

[00:19:40] Dr Lalitaa Suglani

We want to learn to show up and be like, Right, this has happened, what are we going to do with this? Rather than, You're an idiot, and you shouldn't have done that, and you're a bad person now for doing it. It's like, No, how far is that going to take you in life?

Alex Howard

We have self-compassion, and we start to shift that relationship with ourselves. What's possible? I'm curious as to... sometimes people can think, I've been this way for 30 years, 50 years, whatever it is, what is possible when it comes to introducing it?

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

Everything is possible, your life literally changes around you. I'm living proof of that, where in your life everything changes. You'll start noticing that your relationships change, your friendships change, your romantic relationship might change, people in the workplace might change.

What I mean by that is, you've set some standards for yourself. You're learning to understand what you respect about yourself. Because you have that respect for yourself, everything around you you're not just going to allow into your life. You're not going to be the doormat where people come and wipe their feet. You're like, No, I need to check your feet first.

You're learning to use your voice, learning to use versions of you that you've never delved into because you're like, Oh, I'm too afraid to do that because if I say this, or if I do this, they're going to leave me and they're going to reject. It's like, No, I'm so confident to stand in my own power. I think that's what this is about, is you learning to stand back in your power and not give it away to everyone, because you don't trust yourself.

You're coming back in, and tuning back into what's important to you? What are your values? How do you want to show up in life? How do you want people to treat you? How or what do you want in life? Because when you're in the high functioning anxiety, sometimes you don't even take opportunities that are there because you feel like you're not deserving of them. You feel like you're not capable of them. But when you step into your power, you show up very differently because you know you're deserving, you know that you're capable, you know that you're lovable.

Alex Howard

What helps us step into that power?

[00:21:45] Dr Lalitaa Suglani

Self-trust, courage, compassion, but also belief, self-belief, which is also tuned in or connected to the self-trust side. You believe, you believe in yourself. Often a lot of people with high functioning anxiety, they have high functioning side, and people that I've worked with in the past, they'll say to me, But Lalitaa I don't want to change it because I like the fact that it motivates me and it keeps me going.

But the thing is, imagine if you have high functioning intention, not high functioning anxiety. It's not coming from a place of fear, but you've still got the high functioning, you'll always have that, but it's coming from a place of intention. You show up very differently because everything you're doing you're no longer scattered energy, you're more intentional energy.

You'll be able to see, Okay, this is the mountain that I want to get to, the high functioning side can see that, but your intention takes you there rather than the fear of, Oh my God, I need to do this, this, this. And we're scattered with the energy.

Alex Howard

When we start to change in the way that you're describing, one of the things that often can also happen is that we're not just changing what's happening in our inner world, we're changing the dynamics of those relationships.

If the people around us have been used to relating to us when we're in that high functioning anxiety place, we're probably now having to say, No. Put some boundaries in place, not necessarily be people-pleasing in the way that people have been used to. People don't always like that. I'm interested what you find helps people navigate that resetting or reestablishing of those healthy boundaries.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

I really like the word resetting, the resetting of boundaries, because that's what you're doing, you're resetting the way that you're showing up.

Interestingly, when I was doing my research on my doctorate program, I was really drawn, and this is way before I even knew that I was going to write a book on high functioning anxiety, but I was really drawn to the fact that as we develop in self-awareness, how does that change our interpersonal relationships?

Because there was so much research on how does self-awareness impact our romantic, but no one really focused on interpersonal. I was like, I want to understand how does it impact on our family, our friends, the people that we see every day, that see us as being this people-pleaser, the perfectionist, the one that's over-responsible, the caregiver? They don't see you as that, they just see that you're always available.

When you're no longer always available and you're like, No, I'm not the doormat anymore, I'm not this. People will then change the way that they see you, some relationships survive that, some relationships don't. There's a real grief with that as well. Because as you're changing, you're

starting to establish new boundaries and you're like, Actually, it's not okay that you do that, or, I don't feel comfortable with that, or, I feel like I'm the one that's always making an effort here.

[00:24:32] Dr Lalitaa Suglani

But this changes the dynamics in your relationships because not everyone will be able to handle these conversations. You'll soon realize the people that will be able to have these conversations and discuss change, discuss that I'm really glad that you're changing and you're finally putting yourself first.

But there's other people that would have fed off the way that you were because you were always giving. Those are the people that you start to realize, actually, our relationships might fade now because I'm no longer able to give. They will define you as a bad person, like what's wrong with you? And in that moment, we have the ability to fall back into our old patterns and give them what they want because we're so afraid of rejection or failure, or we really stand true to what's important to us, and it no longer connects in that way.

Alex Howard

It comes back to this word we've used a few times of courage. Also that commitment to say that even though this may be challenging and difficult for people that I love, it's almost to say yes to myself I have to be able to say no to some other people.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

I completely agree with that. The image that comes to my head is that you're holding onto 10 strings, and who else is holding onto the other side? You might be there trying to beg someone else, Can you pick up the other side? But your hand is preoccupied holding onto this string, hoping that they... Hoping, I'm emphasizing that word hoping, maybe one day they'll pick it.

But you're busy trying to do that and keep pleasing. But for me, that comes back to a previous pattern of, where is it that you perhaps tried to crave that love from your caregiver once upon a time that keeps showing up in this relationship?

The healing process here is learning to understand, how do I let go of these? Without the fear of, if I let go where will they go? Because actually, did you ever have them? That's the courage to see things in front of you that maybe you're not wanting to see because it brings up feelings of rejection, or abandonment that once upon a time you would have gone through as a child. That's what you will want to sit with and face, and that takes courage, it's not something to do that's an easy thing to do.

Alex Howard

Someone that's watching this, that's going, Okay, I recognize I have this challenge. We'll talk in a minute about where people can go to find out more about you and your work, but what's some good generic starting points people can start to explore.

[00:27:01] Dr Lalitaa Suglani

I would always say start to be more curious day to day. Where do you feel, and I use the word triggered, where do you start to feel uncomfortable emotions? Say if you're in a coffee shop and someone pushes in front of you, or someone's given you the wrong order, do you speak out, or do you just ignore it? If you ignore it, ask yourself, start to be curious, why? Why do I do that? What's that about? Why do I present in this way? Or when this person has said this, and I don't truly believe it, why am I doing that?

Start to become more curious over your feelings, your behaviors, because within that, there's so many answers into understanding your patterns. Start with the curiosity and opening your eyes more to the things around you, because there's so much research day to day to help you develop.

Alex Howard

Curiosity, awareness, starting to see what's happening. What else? What can come next?

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

It's also about self-compassion and reflecting over certain behaviors. Say, for example, if you're journaling, you're writing down, Okay, in this experience, what I noticed was... The situation was I was sitting with my friends and they said, Oh, come out on Friday, but then my feeling was, or my thought pattern was, I don't want to because I've got other things that I need to do, and I've got this work project deadline. But then what was the feeling? The feeling was I may have felt guilt. As a result, I was like, Okay, yeah, I'll do it.

Start reflecting on that because then you've got the reflective column, where it's like, what would I prefer to have done? What you're learning to do is you're reflecting over certain patterns, and why you present the way that you do day to day, because it gives you more insight into, Okay, this is what was going on for me.

This is the situation, these were my feelings, you're breaking down the different parts of you to help you understand why you did what you did. But then you've also got the reflective side, which is next time I'm in this situation, what would I prefer to do? You're giving yourself more rules, and awakening yourself to how else you can show up in the world.

Alex Howard

What's important in what you're saying is that this can change.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

Yeah, definitely.

Alex Howard

Just because we've got normalized to being a certain way for so many years, it doesn't mean that always has to be that way.

[00:29:21] Dr Lalitaa Suglani

No, the powerful thing of what you said is, this can change. There are so many ways that you can break from the cycles of things that aren't serving you, but sometimes you can't see the way. Doing things like this, listening to things like this, can give you insights into things can change.

Alex Howard

Beautiful. Lalitaa, for people that want to find out more about you and your work, where is the best place for them to go? And tell us some of what you have to offer.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

Best place to go and find me... You can go on my website, which is www.drlalitaa.com. You can go on there, it's got all my services, everything that I offer.

You can also get an example from my Instagram of how I am and the work that I do. That's [@dr.lalitaa](https://www.instagram.com/dr.lalitaa) you can get more information there, DM me there. Send me an email through my website if you want anything.

The work that I offer is community programs where people come together as a collective, and we work together to try and understand things. I also offer one-to-one work as well.

Alex Howard

Fantastic. Dr Lalitaa, thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it.

Dr Lalitaa Suglani

Thank you for having me, I appreciate it.