



Conscious Life presents

Your Anxiety Is Here To Help You

Guest: Katherine Ripley

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[00:00:10] Jaï Bristow

Hello, welcome back to this conference. My name is Jaï Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. Today, I am very pleased to be welcoming back the wonderful somatic therapist and educator, Katherine Ripley. Welcome, Katherine.

Katherine Ripley

Thank you for having me.

Jaï Bristow

Thanks for joining us. Let's just dive right in, we're talking about anxiety today. For you, what is the thing you most want people to understand about anxiety?

Katherine Ripley

What I want everybody to understand about anxiety is that it's there to help you. People will sometimes balk at this idea because anxiety is an unpleasant experience. We don't like to have it. A lot of times, we can get into an adversarial relationship with our anxiety, just wanting it to go away, not wanting to deal with it anymore.

But I want people to understand that your anxiety is there to help you in some way, even if it doesn't necessarily feel like that at first. When we can shift away from that adversarial relationship with the anxiety, and shift into an understanding that it's there to help you, even start to form more of a cooperative relationship with it, understanding that it has a good intention for us.

Then that opens up the opportunity that we can learn from our anxiety about the internal stuff that's going on, that might be buried under the surface that we are not necessarily aware of. I think that knowing that your anxiety is there to help you in some way creates all of this opportunity for you to get to know yourself better, and to know the things that you need to work on.

Jaï Bristow

Amazing, I'm so glad to hear you say that, I think it's such an incredible reframe for so many people. Because we're taught often that these uncomfortable feelings... To reject them. And so the

idea that anxiety is here to help you can be quite jarring for people. And yet, as you say, it's a crucial reframe.

[00:02:30] Jaï Bristow

Within that context, do you want to expand on that a bit more, and say both what you mean by that, and therefore how you can work with it in a cooperative manner?

Katherine Ripley

It's going to look a little different for everybody, of course. But I think what it usually boils down to is that the anxiety is there to distract you away from core emotions that may be too painful for you to go into, or to distract your attention away from some core negative beliefs about yourself that may be coming up.

I'll use myself as an example, I have this core negative belief that I don't deserve to be happy. So my anxiety comes in oftentimes to distract my attention away from that belief, and to focus my thoughts on all of these different minutiae about my life, how can I micromanage my money, my finances, my day-to-day routine, my sleep, my relationship? How can I worry about all of those things, so that my attention is distracted away from this core negative belief that is more uncomfortable to deal with directly than the anxiety is?

When we understand it like that, the anxiety may be unpleasant, but it's actually, in a lot of cases, a better alternative to whatever those yucky things are underneath the surface that are poking at us, but we don't want to deal with, then it starts to become clear. What's the whole picture of what's going on with you?

Jaï Bristow

That makes a lot of sense. How do we manage that? How do you work with that anxiety when it arises?

Katherine Ripley

I think that the first step is always taking a deep breath and reminding yourself that the anxiety is there to help you in some way. Once you recognize that, there's a softening that tends to happen. I noticed this with myself and the work that I do with my clients. When you can remind yourself, Okay, my anxiety is here to help me, it is my ally, not my enemy. There's a little bit of relaxation and relief that comes over you.

Once you can soften a little bit and you can recognize, Okay, my anxiety is here to help me, maybe let's say thank you to it. Let's say thank you to the anxiety for trying to help you deal with whatever this thing is. This comes from the Internal Family Systems model, by the way, which you don't have to remember, but just to give credit where credit is due.

You say thank you to this part of you for trying to help you, the way it's helping you. Then you start to talk to it. What are you here to help me with? What are you afraid might happen if you don't jump in here to do all of this stuff right now?

If you can get that dialog going with your anxiety, it may tell you, Well, I'm afraid that X, Y, Z is going to happen. I'm afraid that you're going to be in pain. I'm afraid that you're going to feel embarrassed or feel ashamed. I'm afraid that people are going to abandon you, whatever the fear

is. Then you can start to turn your attention to working with those parts that feel very vulnerable. If you can give some love and compassion to those vulnerable parts of you that are coming up, then you don't necessarily really need the anxiety to be doing all of the work that it's doing.

[00:06:34] Jaï Bristow

I like that idea of, thinking of the anxiety as an ally rather than an enemy, thanking it, and then seeing it as it's doing quite a lot of labor. As you say, it's helping you, it's trying to distract you and support you, and all of that. Once you realize it, then you can take over the load and then it's no longer needed.

Katherine Ripley

Exactly.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. You were talking earlier about having this core belief that you don't deserve happiness, and that the anxiety can come in to distract you from some of those feelings. I'm curious if it can also come in to distract you if you are feeling happy and to distract you from... If that's your core belief I've noticed that sometimes anxiety can come in when things seem to be going well, as opposed to just when things are hard. I'm wondering if you could say more about that and how it can distract you from those core beliefs.

Katherine Ripley

Absolutely, thank you for bringing that up, that does happen a lot for a lot of people. The anxiety may feel the need to jump in when we start to experience joy and happiness, because the anxiety doesn't trust the happiness, or it doesn't trust that the happiness can be sustainable for us.

One thing that comes up quite often is there's a fear within us that the happiness will get taken away at some point. Anticipating that the happiness is going to get taken away, and that we're going to have this crash when that happens, that we won't be able to survive if the happiness goes away, that's when the anxiety comes in to try to deal with that problem. To deal with that fear of, Oh, no, my happiness is going to get taken away from me.

That's rooted in a lot of early material in your life, usually. People who have trauma histories tend to have difficulty sustaining positive affect, which is how we usually refer to it. Difficulty accessing and sustaining joy, and happiness, and hope, and optimism, and all of those things. The anxiety can be a way of protecting you from the good things. Even if the good things are good for you, there are parts of you that think, Oh, no, I can't possibly relax into this. I can't possibly accept this because something bad will happen, and I have to be ready for whatever the bad thing is.

Jaï Bristow

That's very relatable. If we're sharing personal stories, my core belief is that I'm unlovable, for me, I can experience joy, and happiness is fine, but as soon as I experience love, that's when all of those patterns come in that you were just sharing.

You offered some wonderful advice, and tools for when the anxiety is coming in, when it's protecting us from the very scary, uncomfortable feelings. How about when it's protecting us and anticipating that in that way? When it comes in, when things are going well, when we're experiencing joy, or happiness, or love, or whatever anyone else's core beliefs are.

[00:10:08] Katherine Ripley

I think it starts off the same way, recognizing that the anxiety is there to help you, treating it as an ally, saying, Thank you. Thank you for helping me to deal with this fear that my happiness is going to get taken away, or that the love is going to get taken away, or that I'm going to be abandoned, or whatever it is.

Then you can learn what you can from the anxiety, learn about what it's there to do, what it's afraid will happen. If you have that strong relationship with it, then it will lead to that very vulnerable part of you, that believes that you're unlovable, or that you don't deserve to be happy, or whatever it is. Then it becomes inner child work, which is what it is really.

Because that part of you, that young part that's holding that core belief, really needs a lot of love, a lot of empathy, a lot of compassion. When we, as the adult version of yourself, can provide those things to the child version of yourself, then you start to heal that wound that's in there. And over time, you start to open yourself up to the idea that maybe I do deserve to be happy. Maybe I do deserve love. Maybe just maybe I can start to let that in a little bit more.

Jaï Bristow

Beautiful. We can't talk about this inner child work without talking about trauma. Do you want to say a little bit more about the relationship between anxiety and trauma?

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, for sure. One question that I love to ask my clients is, How old does your anxiety think you are?

Jaï Bristow

Brilliant.

Katherine Ripley

When I ask that question, the number is typically pretty low. The anxiety thinks that you're four, five, six years old. What we learn from that is that anxiety developed when you were young, as a way of dealing with whatever was going on with you at that time. Not getting sufficient nurturing protection, maybe you were dealing with some violence or chaos in the household that you were growing up in. You didn't have a supportive adult that you could turn to. Anxiety oftentimes becomes like the supportive adult to protect you as a child because you really just don't have any other protection.

That anxiety then stays with you throughout your life, even when you become an adult yourself and you have more ability to protect yourself, more resources, and more options at your disposal to deal with your problems in life. That anxiety still believes that you're that little kid, and that it needs to be there to protect you because you don't have any other protection.

A lot of the work is helping your anxiety to realize that you are now an adult, and that it doesn't have to protect you in the same way that it needed to back when you were a kid.

[00:13:29] Jaï Bristow

That makes so much sense when we're reframing anxiety as there to help you, and now we understand why, it makes sense if your anxiety is still stuck in time. Just like with trauma, thinks that you're a kid, that it's trying to protect you from all these big, scary things in the world.

Now that we have that so clear, you talked about recognizing and thanking it. What are some practical coping skills and strategies that you recommend for people who are dealing with anxiety and how to cope with it?

Katherine Ripley

I always recommend some breathwork practice, that could be as simple as doing some diaphragmatic breathing, breathing into the belly. That activates what we call the dorsal vagal nerve, which enables you to be calm in moments when you're feeling very wound up. Practicing some diaphragmatic breathing so that you can calm down the body. When you can bring down that level of activation, then you can start to engage in the conversation with the anxiety that I talked about earlier.

Remembering some key questions that you can ask ask to your anxiety. How old do you think I am? Is one of them. If the anxiety says, Well, I think you're five years old, then you can remind your anxiety, Well, actually, I'm an adult.

Another core question is, What are you afraid will happen if you don't come in to do your job right now? And depending on what the anxiety answers, you validate. Then you can also say, Well, is that something that happened a long time ago? Is that something that happened in the past? Is that something that happened before? Then your anxiety can recognize, Oh, yes, that is something that happened in the past, it's not something that's happening right now, but I'm afraid of history repeating itself. When you can locate it as something that happened in the past that you're afraid is going to repeat, then there can be a little bit more relaxation that happens. Okay, it's not that time anymore, I am not that person anymore.

Then another really good thing that you can do is to give yourself a hug, or imagine that you're giving your anxiety a hug. I like to do this one because sometimes when you invite that affection, you realize that the anxiety itself feels very vulnerable, and sometimes the anxiety itself is very young.

When you can offer that, then you step into the role of being the adult, and you are capable of offering support to the parts of you that are very young and feel very vulnerable. This serves two purposes. One, it allows the part to feel comforted. And two, it allows you to feel capable of giving yourself what you need and solving your own problems.

Because that's another thing, anxiety assumes that the problems are too big to be solved, but when you can step into a role where you feel more capable of solving your own problems, then the anxiety doesn't feel as necessary anymore.

Jaï Bristow

I love that, that piece about giving yourself a hug, your anxiety a hug, especially. It's really important what you were sharing about how it supports you coming into the adult role. Because as we've just discussed this is a lot of inner child work. Do you have any advice on making sure that

we don't... It can be very easy when this material comes up to get very identified with the young parts, and then to start moving through the world from that young space, which can be a very traumatized part, a very anxious part.

[00:17:52] Jaï Bristow

Do you have any recommendations on how to... You offered that one about the hug, but are there any others you'd like to add around how to make sure we come into the adult self as opposed to the child self?

One thing that you can do is you can do some drawing. Drawing a picture of the child you is helpful to separate that part from the adult you. You can do this with a lot of different forms of creative expression, you can draw, you can write, you can play music or sing, you can dance. There are different ways that you can create some representation of that child part, or allow that child part to speak. Then there is a separate creation that's outside of yourself that represents that child part so that you can start to get some space there.

Katherine Ripley

Another thing that you can also do, is you can even keep a picture of yourself, a picture of yourself from when you were a kid, and looking at that can be helpful to remind yourself, Okay, that's me from back then, and that version of me is different from who I am now.

I always like to remind people that it's very normal to have moments where it feels impossible to separate the adult you from the little you. That's okay, and sometimes we just ride it out. We take deep breaths, regulate ourselves as best as we possibly can, use all of the coping tools that you have, go for a walk, listen to music, it will pass. If you use all of those coping tools that you have in your toolbox to regulate yourself when you're feeling amped up and dysregulated, it's not going to last forever. It's a process of learning to rely on ourselves to use the tools that we have in our toolbox and trust that everything is temporary.

If you feel stuck in your little kid state, it's not going to last forever. Sometimes our little kid parts need to feel very close to us and completely blended with us. They need that to feel safe in some way. We trust that they're going to get what they need, and it will pass if we can engage in all of the strategies, and use all of the learning that we've collected on our healing journey.

Jaï Bristow

I love that idea of trust. I think that that's such an important piece. That's what anxiety is often lacking, it's often there's a lack of trust, and that that's what brings up a lot of anxiety.

I'm curious because I love the questions you were offering us, you were inviting us to give to the anxiety. How old are you? What's your fear? That kind of thing. I'm also aware that anxiety can be very head-based, as a somatic practitioner yourself, I'm wondering if you have anything you wanted to add about not getting too caught up in very imaginary mental conversations, and how to make sure that we stay grounded and rooted, because sometimes if we go into our heads in that moment, it can amplify or make it worse.

Katherine Ripley

I always recommend, when in doubt, take a deep breath, and then take a second deep breath, and then take a third one. Because if you get too caught up in your head and thinking about all of this

stuff, it can spiral in this seemingly never-ending way. To interrupt that spiral, the best thing that you can do is come back to your body, take a deep breath, and see if you can locate in your body where the anxiety is coming up because usually it's hanging out somewhere.

[00:22:24] Katherine Ripley

Oftentimes, it's in the heart space. If you can locate it in your body, then you can offer it comfort in a somatic way. Even just putting your hand on your heart and saying, I'm here, I see you, I see that you're scared right now. That can interrupt this cycle of arguing with ourselves, which is something that we get into a lot when we're feeling anxious.

If you can let that float away, come back to the body. Okay, where is the anxiety in my body? Can I take a deep breath? Send the breath energy into that space, I'm touching the heart space because that's usually where it comes up.

Then we can invite a different energy that's not arguing back and forth with yourself in your head, all of the energy staying up here. If you can drop down a little bit, Okay, where am I feeling this anxiety? Can I take a deep breath into that space? Can I take a second deep breath? And a third deep breath.

Even spending 10 seconds not engaging in the thoughts can be so transformative for the energy that you're experiencing. Then what I like to do is invite people to imagine that the anxiety is stepping out in front of them, stepping outside of the body so that you can look at the anxiety. What form does it take? Does it look like a version of you, or does it look like somebody else?

That could be information if it looks like another person in your life, or sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it's a little bit more random what it looks like. But if you can have it step out and you can look at it, then you can engage in that conversation in a way that is so much more intentional and slow-paced, as opposed to if you're just arguing back and forth in your own head.

Jaï Bristow

I love that you can engage and have a conversation with your anxiety, which may not be fully tangible, but you can while staying connected to your body. Things you were saying earlier about giving yourself a hug, touching your heart, breathing into your body as you have the conversation, like seeing, visualizing your anxiety in front of you while sensing your body and having the conversation, drawing, writing. All these things are both tactile and sensorial, as well as thought-based. I appreciate how you're bringing in both.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah.

Jaï Bristow

I'm curious, you've touched up on this a little bit already, but if you have more you want to add around tools to do with thought replacement and positive self-talk as ways of managing.

Katherine Ripley

Thought replacement and positive self-taught can be helpful for a lot of people. The more Cognitive Behavioral Therapy approach would be to identify, Okay, what's the thought that is

causing you to feel anxious? And can we replace it with something else that is more positive or more accurate? That can be helpful. I don't use that a ton in my practice.

[00:26:01] Katherine Ripley

The reason that I wanted to talk about this is that I want people to know that if that doesn't work for you, it doesn't mean that there's something wrong with you. It doesn't work for a lot of people, because trying to logic your way out of the anxiety is missing a lot of the core stuff that's going on underneath the surface, the core wounds from childhood that may be coming up, the young parts that feel very afraid and insecure about what's happening.

I would say if positive affirmations or positive self-talk are helpful for you, then absolutely use them. But there are a lot of times when it feels like you're giving yourself the affirmation, but it's just not penetrating through the surface. If that happens, it's okay, that's normal.

I think that what's going on there is that either the anxiety or the young part that's underneath the anxiety is saying, Well, that doesn't make sense, you're telling me that I'm lovable, but I don't believe that because I have had this experience in my life that has told me otherwise.

That's why we need to attend to those core wounds and work with those young parts in a way that validates their experience. Yes, you have been through this life where you learned that you are unlovable because of X, Y, and Z things that happened to you, or didn't happen to you. It's unfair that you went through that. And it's okay for you to be angry about it. It's okay for you to be sad about it. Let's just take a moment to feel those feelings rather than trying to push them away. That is so much more therapeutic a lot of the time, I think.

Jaï Bristow

I think it's such an important piece to bring in, partially because you're pointing to the fact that there's a lot of different tools, and there's a lot of different people, and different things will help different people. That's why at conferences like these, we offer so many different tools so that people can find things that resonate with them. Knowing that not every conversation and every tool is going to resonate with every person.

So positive affirmations are life-changing for some people, and then for others, like you were saying, it can feel like we're being gaslit sometimes by ourselves. You are lovable, but I don't feel lovable, but you are lovable, whatever it is.

I think it's really important, as you say, to A, find what works for you as an individual on your own journey, and B, take time to look at the core and not just go at it... Putting a plaster on a deep wound isn't always going to work. For some people, they've either done enough healing, or the wound is different, or the plaster does work, or it doesn't feel like a plaster. I think people get the gist of what I'm saying.

I appreciate you bringing that piece in around core wounds, and how often anxiety has to do with core wounding, and that that's what needs addressing.

Katherine Ripley

Of course.

[00:29:36] Jaï Bristow

Before we come to an end, is there anything else that you would like to add to this topic?

Katherine Ripley

I want people to know to be patient with themselves. One thing that comes up in the work a lot is some frustration about not being as far along in the journey as you would like to. I have people say, I can't believe I'm still anxious about this, or I can't believe the anxiety is coming up again, I'm doing all of this work. Why is this still happening?

What I always say is that's understandable that you feel that way, so we validate first, and also, this is a lifelong journey. That part of you that is getting frustrated that you're not farther along is also there to help you because we believe that all parts are there to help us in some way.

The part that's getting frustrated is getting in the way of you being able to form that amiable relationship with the anxiety, that we're going for, gets in the way of you being able to form that partnership with it.

I know that patience can be difficult to access a lot of the time, but it is so important for us to have patience with ourselves when we're on this journey. Because when we can be patient with ourselves, then we can recognize that, Okay, I might do a lot of work, and the anxiety is still going to come up sometimes, and I can know that that's okay because it's still here to help me. Whenever it comes up, it is here to help me, and I can be ready and willing to be open to having a conversation with my anxiety, learning from it, and treating it as a partner rather than getting stuck in this adversarial relationship.

Jaï Bristow

I think that's so important. Again, what you've said many times, and I hope people hear is validate, validate, validate. It's allowing and validating the emotions, and then also seeing which are helpful and which aren't. Your anxiety is often pointing you towards something, and can be helpful, and useful in that way. Sometimes a frustration of how far you're going can distract from the core emotions. It's validating and then seeing what's supportive to go into.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, for sure.

Jaï Bristow

Katherine, thank you so much for your time today. How can people find out more about you and your work?

Katherine Ripley

You can follow me on social media, I'm on Instagram at therapy.with.katherine, and I am also on TikTok at therapywithkatherine, no periods.

If you go to either of my social media accounts, you can find a link to my website. On my website, you can also sign up for my newsletter, if you would like to. In the newsletter, you'll get announcements about upcoming workshops and courses that I'm doing, if you would like to work with me a little bit more.

[00:32:58] Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. Thank you so, much for all of that.

Katherine Ripley

You're welcome.