



Conscious Life presents

Transforming Anxiety Through Connection

Guest - Matthias Barker

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone to this interview, where I'm super-excited to be talking with my good friend, Matthias Barker, where we're going to be exploring anxiety, particularly in the context of relationships, co-regulation, and ultimately, how we can better understand our anxiety, but also find effective paths to healing and transformation.

To give a little bit of Matthias' background, Matthias Barker is a licensed mental health counselor specializing in the treatment of complex trauma, childhood abuse, and marital issues. He holds a master's degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from Northwest University and is currently located in Nashville, Tennessee.

Matthias is widely recognized for his unique approach to making mental health knowledge and skills accessible to the wider public. Matthias delivers psychoeducational content to a following of over 5 million people. His innovative blend of engaging content and relevant mental health advice has fostered a vibrant online community centered on healing, personal growth, and moving toward meaning in the midst of hardship. So firstly, welcome, Matthias.

Matthias Barker

Yeah, so glad to be here. It's great to see you again, Alex. How are you doing?

Alex Howard

Yeah, good. I always enjoy our conversations. So why don't we start with just giving some definitions of what we're talking about here. So we've got anxiety, we've got fear, we've got trauma in this mix. So how would you differentiate and distinguish and define, particularly anxiety.

Matthias Barker

Yeah. So anxiety is specifically about something I don't have certainty about. Something that's either coming in the future or something that's happening in someone else's brain. I think that's really how I couch it.

So fear would be, I'm getting chased by a bear right now, so I'm terrified, or someone threw something at me and I'm ducking and I'm scared because I don't know what's going to happen in

the present moment. But fear has a lot to do with what's happening in this space that I don't have access to, where I don't have information.

[00:02:16]

That, of course, would be the future. I'm scared that... Is my boss mad at me? Is he going to fire me tomorrow? Is he going to put this huge project on my shoulders? Am I going to get any support? Is it going to end up great or is it actually going to fail? Then that's going to hurt my reputation. You have all these predictions about how the future might unfold.

But then there's also what's going on in my boss's brain. Does he like me or not? Does he think I'm capable or not? Does he think I'm going to fail or not? Does he care about everything else that's on my plate? Is he considering me at all? We don't have access to what's going on in someone else's brain or what's going on in the future. That's really the domain of anxiety.

The thing that makes it tricky has a lot to do with our past experiences and the kinds of predictions that we make about what's going on in the world and then how I might respond in the world. That is where it has even a little bit of overlap in the conversation around something like trauma.

There's a Venn diagram there where they hang out thematically because the experiences that we've been through all the way up from childhood into our early adult experiences, into our professional experiences, our educational experiences, our relationship experiences, the breakups you've been through, whatever, they all inform what we think is going to come next.

If anxiety really is, let's say, what's going on in someone's head or what's going on in the future, then when I am on a first date and I'm feeling anxious, I'm importing all these past experiences that I've had on first dates and projecting it out into the future.

Then the dysfunction of anxiety is I start to react to what I think is coming next before we get there. I love this line by a mutual friend of ours, David Kessler. He calls it "Living in the wreckage of your future."

Alex Howard

That's great.

Matthias Barker

It's so poetic and beautiful.

Alex Howard

That's a classic David. I love it.

Matthias Barker

Yeah, that's so his style. So it's like, "Oh, they probably think I'm weird. They probably think I'm being awkward." That's the social anxiety element.

"Oh, man, if this doesn't go poorly, I'm going to have to sign up for another date. I don't really want to go on those apps. Again, this is such a nightmare. I'm going to spend all this money on this date and it's not even going to go..."

[00:04:23]

So you're already depressed or already experiencing rejection before it gets there. That, ironically, changes how you interact on the date. You start to become a little bit more withdrawn, you're a bit more guarded. You're not as relaxed. You're not as, I don't know, witty and funny and charming as you normally are because you're guarded and you're not wanting to say something wrong, which then affects how the date's going.

Then the big dysfunction in anxiety is you often get these what's called a false positive, which means that you read the situation wrong, which makes the whole problem worse. For example, on this date, you are reserved, you are held back, and then the other person doesn't text you back, and they don't want to set up a second date.

You're like, "I knew I was awkward. I knew that I was being weird. I knew that I'm just a hopeless case, whatever." That's a false positive because the thing you were doing to try to protect yourself from the fear of getting rejected on this date, being withdrawn, being held back, was actually the thing that contributed to the date not going well. It was like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The thing you were doing to try to stave off the fear made the fear expand and grow. That is just the conundrum of anxiety is often, the coping mechanisms, the way that we try to stave off the anxiety that we try to account for, what we predict is going to happen, makes it more likely that the negative prediction will come to be.

Alex Howard

Yeah, what you're saying is so true. There's like a confirmation bias, right? I keep collecting evidence that tells me that that's how it is. But also it's like there's a confirmation bias that in a way we run anxiety and the other thing happens... It goes okay, and we think, "Well, it went okay because I did all that worrying about it." So we have to live in this state to try and to find that place of safety.

Matthias Barker

Yeah, so common. I think about germs for folks who maybe have OCD about germs, which falls into this anxiety camp. "I don't touch any door knobs, and I wash my hands several dozen times a day." And then you don't get sick, and you think, "Good, it's working."

Well, hey, if you just wash your hands after you go to the bathroom, before you eat, you're probably good. You really wouldn't get sick at the same success rate. But you take a false positive. You think because I've been dousing my hands in hand sanitizer every few seconds, that's what's keeping me safe. And you get stuck in this cycle like you're talking about.

Alex Howard

One of the things that I think is also important here is that there's a positive intent within the anxiety. There's a reason why we're doing it. I think part of that reason is that we're trying to get something. We're trying to get, for example, a feeling of safety.

We try to think our way to a feeling of safety. That if I run all these scenarios. If this happens, that happens, I'll do this, I'll do that. As long as I've thought about it, then I'll be okay. We're trying to get something but of course, it actually takes us further away from the very feeling that we're actually trying to reach.

[00:07:37] Matthias Barker

Yeah. Well, I think when we really put our strategies under a test, even just for a moment, it starts to reveal that's the case. Take what you were just talking about, preparing, let's say, for an argument ahead of time. I don't know if you do this. I do this constantly.

Or I am anticipating a stressful conversation, and I start to imagine how the conversation could go wrong or things they might say. Then I try to prepare for what I'd say back and make sure I have a comeback, and then I'm ready. Then if they ask this question, then I'd say this. You're playing out all these scenarios.

But then when you actually start to think about the statistics of the likelihood that they actually would say anything that you're preparing for in the first place. Let's say that you have a statement and they have anything from five different responses that they could say in response to what you said.

Then you prepare for those five scenarios. But then there could be five different ways they respond to each of those five different scenarios. Then five after that. Then before... you're three exchanges into the conversation, you're well over a hundred different conversations that you're simulating in your mind.

Then you get there and they say the one thing you didn't expect them to say. You're like, "Argh!". There's three hours of ruminating staying up late at night trying to think about this conversation that went to waste. It's just not even mathematically possible to really anticipate and run all these simulations. But it is under the guise of, "If I can feel prepared, then I can calm down."

That really is the illusion: "If I can be in control, then I'll be safe." We run these simulations, this rumination, to try to run after that feeling of safety, like you're saying. It's a good intent, but it actually makes us more tired in the conversation, which, strangely enough, makes the whole problem worse because we're not as sharp-minded because we stayed up all night thinking about it.

And we are already pretty agitated, vigilant because we're responding to "the wreckage of our future" before we get there. We're already in a yelling match with them in our minds before we even start the conversation, which brings us into a more intense place when we get in there, which likely makes the conversation worse. It's this whole cycle again. It makes...

Alex Howard

As you're talking, it also struck me that in a way, there's also an addictive element to this. What I mean by that is adrenaline is a drug. It's like we worry and it activates our system, and then we get used to being in that activated state.

And then in a way, our nervous system normalizes to being in a state of anxiety. That becomes our new normal. I'm curious as to some of the ways that one recognizes and identifies. Maybe someone's watching this interview and they're having that painfully uncomfortable moment where... That realization is like, "That is what I do." What are some of the things that open up, starting to move and starting to shift what's happening?

[00:10:31] Matthias Barker

Yeah. Well, I think in the case of something like generalized anxiety disorder or OCD, which does have this pervasive, always on in the background texture to it, there's a few things we could say there.

I think it's a little different for phobias. For example, if you have a phobia of spiders or if you have a phobia of public speaking, a lot of those folks just avoid the situation entirely, and they can live fairly contented lives, but just, I'm staying away from anywhere I can see a spider.

Or germs can start to be that way, too. People build these insulated worlds around them that satisfy all the, I don't know, compulsions and rules that they have in their heads for what will stay safe. Then they just avoid it. That's the common way we cope is we avoid running into the thing that we're scared of.

Or we try to control and we try to fix the conversation, like we were talking about with the rumination. I think agoraphobia is really similar, too. That's a version of avoidance. But in the general sense, for the folks who are just high-strung, and anxious, there's two things that pop up as far as, "Wait, what do we do about this?"

One is to acknowledge that much of our anxiety likely has something to do epigenetically with how we were born in our temperament. This is something I don't think it's talked about super-often in the therapy world or in conferences like these. We come into the world with a whole set of triggers and predispositions of things to be scared of.

When I learned that and that actually clicked for me, I'm like, "Oh, my goodness, what a relief." Because that can change. Let me tell you how that changes. It actually started to click for me watching Planet Earth.

I was watching this little lizard thing crack out of an egg, and then there was a big pile of snakes that were all surrounding these eggs ready to munch on these little lizards. The lizard popped up and looked around and just took off running. And just knew that I'm surrounded by predators. I just had this thought. I'm like, "Who told that lizard that snakes were dangerous? Who told that lizard to run away, go to high ground?"

It was almost like the lizard just leaped into action. I also dove deeper into this and found there's tons of studies around, for example, taking little mice or rats and exposing them to the smell of cats and noticing that even though a mouse or a rat had never seen a cat before, it went into threat and was just on high alert.

Then it's like, "Well, why did that happen?" It's because the genetics passed down from generations of mice and rats said, "Hey, you need this software, essentially, to flip on if you smell cat. And cats are dangerous."

And even though you've never exposed those mice to a cat before, it knows, be on high alert. Humans work the same way. We all know people who are way more scared of spiders than other people. There's always someone in the house who's in charge of killing the spider, at least in my house.

[00:13:15] Alex Howard

In my house, it's me. I don't know about you in your house.

That's you? Okay, that's me too. For whatever reason, I guess my wife's ancestors were much more prone to spider attacks than I was. But it's like, there are people who just have predispositions. We know this on a personality level. There's people who have higher traits of neuroticism. We use that as an insult now. If you're neurotic, no one likes being called that.

But on the academic side of things that people just have, let's say, their smoke alarms for things that are dangerous, just set at a more sensitive level. They're more vigilant. They're just more on alert. That's not even a negative trait, so to speak.

You need some of those people who are high alert around you because you'll be safer. They're the one to notice when things are going wrong first. That's good. To go in and just have a little bit of grace for yourself and be like, okay, this isn't just your choice to be this high-strung. This isn't an aspect of your character, like you're a coward or something, or you're just high maintenance, or you're just anxious. I mean, you have millions of ancestors that have contributed to the genetic makeup you have, and the smoke alarms can be recalibrated.

Matthias Barker

There's tons of studies that show that if you give a mouse that cat pheromone over and over and over, and you have it in a safe environment, it's not getting chewed up, then the pheromone has a lesser effect. We call that habituation, we call that extinction. There's lots of psych terms for it. Over and over, those cats calm down.

Alex Howard

I want to come back to that in a minute in terms of how we dial down that smoke alarm. But I actually just want to dive into something a bit more that you just said, because what you said just struck me that there can be a lot of shame around anxiety.

And many of the issues one can have in life are visible to the outside world. But particularly if someone has high-functioning anxiety, they can look totally fine to everyone else. But on the inside, there's significant distress that's happening. And if there's shame about that, it makes it much harder to seek help and to talk to other people. I'd love you just to speak a little bit, just perhaps partly normalizing that people have that experience, but also how that shame can be so unhelpful in this situation.

Matthias Barker

Oh, gosh, yeah. I mean, you avoid it when you're shameful. You avoid things that remind you of that shame. Like I was just saying, the thing that actually rewires the smoke alarms is exposure to the thing that you're scared about, and then you realize you're okay. So the mouse is like, "Oh, I smell the cat, but I'm not getting attacked."

That's the way you untangle fear, if you go into scenarios that you predict are going to be really awful, and then you experience safety. If you don't expose yourself to those kinds of situations, if you don't press on into the fear, the anxiety, but you try to mask it, you try to put it away, you try to bottle it up, it turns into all sorts of pretty terrible things pretty quick.

[00:16:17]

I mean, that can turn into body pain and somatic stuff like fibromyalgia and autoimmune. Not that it creates those things, but it can certainly antagonize it. People theorize that it actually impacts the way that those genes can express. That can get really tricky quickly. It can turn into depression. I mean, that's why tons of people have combos of anxiety and depression, because what are you depressing?

You are pressing down the fear and probably a lot of the grief and loss because you're avoiding so many different things. It's like, if I'm anxious around friendships, then I'm lonely. If I'm anxious around people, then I don't have meaningful relationships in my life, or at least not a lot of them. Of course, you'd feel depressed.

We're social mammals that need people in our lives. Then it's just you and your dog. Dogs are great. Don't get me wrong. Thank God for dogs. But you were meant to live with vulnerable, deeply interconnected relationships as a core fiber of the fabric of your life.

So many anxious people feel deep loneliness, which just calcifies into a depressed, low mood that just feels like you can't get rid of it. And that's because you're avoiding the terrifying stuff. And we feel tons of shame, but then we also feel shame about our shame, which pushes the shame even deeper. That's the thing about anxiety. It's the same cycle that we were talking about, self-reinforcing.

Alex Howard

Yeah, and just to amplify that a bit further, right? It's like someone can have their anxiety, and then they have that shame around it, then they have an anxiety of what people would think if they saw the shame, right? So it just keeps on feeding itself.

Matthias Barker

Yeah, you need to go face the cats.

Alex Howard

Talking of facing the cats. We've got a couple of metaphors here. We've got our cat smell. We've also got our smoke detectors. How do we... You touched on it, but let's open up a little bit more in terms of how we can work to dial down the smoke detector. You mentioned one of the things is exposure to the thing because in a way... The story that we have gets challenged in a way there.

But sometimes people have... It's like there's so much fear about being exposed to the thing that they become avoidant. How do we start to either build the courage or change the narrative or do it gently? But what are the ways that can help us start to move towards rather than keep moving away from and reinforcing that narrative?

Matthias Barker

Well, there's two extremes that don't work, and one is avoiding the thing we're scared of, and the other is jumping in the deep end and getting overwhelmed again. That actually makes it worse. You don't tell a mouse, "Go hang out with cats", cos cats do bite.

Alex Howard

And they do eat mice.

[00:18:59] Matthias Barker

Yeah. So watch out. There is almost this middle ground of having these bite-sized pieces of the thing that you're afraid of within a context of safety. That's the same thing that heals trauma, by the way. That's why there's this overlap in the trauma and anxiety world.

It's not simply realizing that there was nothing to be scared of. There probably was something to be scared of. Rejection does hurt. Germs do cause illness. But you need to update your understanding.

Often these beliefs, these predictions are formed early on in our lives, very, very young. So stepping away from the epigenetic thing onto just our life experiences, we come up with these conclusions when we're three, four, five, six years old, and it's like they never get updated.

So think about a phone. I have my iPhone. If you have ever had the outdated software and you're trying to get onto your app or something, and then it keeps crashing, and then what's the first thing you do? You look and see, is my software updated? Because it's like all the apps that I use on my phone that I use to navigate my life are all working off of current day software.

And if I have old, outdated software, nothing in my life is going to work too well because it wasn't made for that. I think a lot of us find that "the app is crashing." We don't feel like our relationships are clicking. We're not advancing in our career. We don't feel connected to our kids, whatever.

The question I ask is, "are you working off of outdated software?" What that could look like practically is something like being bullied in school and then realizing I can't tell jokes because I'll get made fun of. So I'm just going to take my sense of humor and my charm and just close it up. I'm just going to be in the background and try not to draw attention to myself.

Then you're like, "I feel really lonely." It's like, "Well, you're working off of fifth-grade software." This is an old idea. This isn't new. Freud called this a fixation. This has been at the very beginning, we've had theories around why we do this. It's like a part of how we interact with the world gets stunted. It stopped developing. There's this idea because it gets stuck in this self-reinforcing cycle like we were just talking about.

And if it's working, why update it? I don't tell jokes. I don't get made fun of. It's working. Then we just don't really push it any further. But then it's like, "Oh, man, why am I lonely? Why don't I have good relationships?"

You need to update that. That includes risking telling a joke. But then I don't tell someone to go do stand-up and then bomb on stage and then get socially rejected. It's these small little moments, these little windows of opening up to the thing you're afraid of, but then realizing that I'm accepted and brought in warmly.

It's like, what would it look like to have just these small little gestures, just a little bit of wit with some of your close friends, and then just see what happens, and to open up layer by layer, moment by moment.

The classic example of this, something we call exposure therapy. I remember a colleague told me about a kid he was working with who was afraid of dogs. What they did is they went to the animal

shelter and they held this little puppy. Just a newborn, tiny little pudgy potato-looking thing. The kid would hold that and then come back the next week and the dog was just a little bit bigger and then come back the next week and just a little bigger.

[00:21:35]

It's like you have these safe experiences with that dog, and it slowly, edge by edge, starts to bring you into, "Wait a minute, I'm playing with a full-grown animal when before I wouldn't even get near one."

It's not just that you got used to it. You had enough experiences that rewired that threat response that sometimes just even in the back of your brain, it's not even a decision you make up here. It's just your innate, we call it, implicit reactions. It rewires some of these lessons and updates how you interact with the world. It brings the software update back to the current day.

The mature response for a dog is something like, you should be a little bit watchful. If it's an unknown dog, if you're walking on the sidewalk and you see its owner. If the owner is anxiously pulling the leash back, worried as you approach, you probably shouldn't get too close to that dog.

If it's an old guy and the dog's not even on a leash and he's like, "Oh, yeah, that's Squiggles and she's fine", then it's like, "Okay, maybe there's..." But then you just put your hand out, let him smell, see what happens. If the dog is yapping and barking, you pull back.

There is this mature understanding of something like attuned trust. I'm paying attention, and I'm using my adult brain to maneuver the situation instead of relying on a fifth-grade brain. And the fifth-grade brain just says, "Avoid it entirely." So that's a little bit of the process. That can look different in all sorts of different circumstances, though.

Alex Howard

One of the things that can get in the way of taking those initial steps is fear, right? We're talking about anxiety. You mentioned that fear is like the thing's actually happening. And if there's that learned history that it starts to feel like, "Okay, I have fear in my body right now."

What helps navigate that initial step? So if one can see that they need to have that exposure and they need to challenge those stories. But in that moment of taking that step, that first step forward rather than pulling away, what helps us make that move?

Matthias Barker

Yeah, I think it's finding ways to calm your body down after exposing yourself to the scary thing. People have a lot of different words for this. Maybe it's grounding, maybe it's self-care, maybe it's whatever.

The thing I always point people to is the most grounding thing you can do is find yourself in a safe relationship. I think co-regulation with other nervous systems is how we're biologically wired. There's some things that are just scary, especially the old stuff, that we need someone else's nervous system to help us out.

[00:25:00]

At the very least, that can be an animal. I think that... Oh, my gosh. I was saying, thank God for dogs. Having your dog on your lap, going for a walk. If you have a romantic partner, like holding their hand, having them rub your back. If you have a friend, just being in their presence, physically.

Something like a warm hug really does bring the body down in ways that I just think are some of the mindfulness techniques... You just need a lot more gas behind the mindfulness techniques than you do the relationship. That's been my personal experience. Even for people who aren't super-touchy, what do you think about that?

Alex Howard

I was just thinking, so if our kids are upset or distressed in some way, our dogs literally go and sit on them and snuggle into... They even lick their tears away. It's very, very cute. But it's like there's a... It's like meeting that place inside of us that just needs to be seen and needs to be loved and held as we are.

And then, as you say, there's also the physical piece of actually feeling our body and coming into our body because there's that co-regulation and there's that contact. Of course, one of the challenges can be that if someone has had a lifelong struggle with anxiety, then actually that can lead to them becoming more avoidant in relationships.

That it's like the trigger for the anxiety is emotional connection and intimacy. And so the thing that one most needs is also the thing that one is pushing away.

Matthias Barker

Yeah. I think this is deeply intuitive when you really start to think about it. It's how humans have always dealt with anxiety. Something that I got really curious about a couple of years ago was I've been reading a lot of psychology textbooks, but I wonder if there's ways that humans have always done it.

What were people a thousand years ago doing about anxiety? What were people 2,000 years ago doing about anxiety? There's a killer book by a guy named Henri Ellenberger who just does a history of psychiatry. It's a long, big, thick book, but his first chapter is all these anthropologists exploring all these native cultures and folks, what were essentially their ways of trying to help mental health.

When you go into old-world cultures, a lot of it is wrapped up in their mythology. It's wrapped up in rituals and the gods and spirits and stuff like that. But what's super-common is things like dance. If there was someone who was anxious, and let's say the tribe attributed that to an evil spirit or something, how did they fix it? They had the whole tribe dance around them. There was massage. There were rituals where people would gather around and they put their hands on them.

Of course, that would help someone who's feeling anxious. That makes complete sense. Or there would be ways of making them sweat and giving them a hot bath, and they would be bathed by different elders in the community. Oh, yeah, that would totally help someone who's really nervous and fearful.

[00:27:59]

It just seemed like all of us as humans, no matter the culture, wherever we grew up, whatever our beliefs are, all have this deep human intuition that the thing that calms down the fear is being connected and being in a safe relationship and submitting yourself to the care of other people.

I think that's what we do in our culture is therapy. In our Western worlds, we have therapists and we have maybe if you go to church or if you have a coach, there are people in our lives that we put in these positions of leadership. We have family and we have loved ones, but we need to lend ourselves to the care of other people to bring us into that place of safety.

It's this mixture of facing the thing that we're scared of in small bits. That's everything from having a hard conversation with our spouse that we're avoiding because we're scared they're going to react, or something down to a spider phobia, or just the general sense of high strungness that I have in whatever area.

I pick something. I don't just do it in a diffuse way. I don't just do anxiety. Pick something specific. I was nervous about driving to work, Thursday, when that red Jeep cut me off, and then I was agitated for the rest of the day. It's like, "How do I deal with that anxiety of driving?"

It's something like bringing other people into those experiences and having lots of safe driving experiences again and feeling safe and calm while doing the thing that's scary. Whatever version of that, whatever steps you want to put into that, that's the general thrust that I see.

Alex Howard

As you were talking, I was remembering a time in my own life, 17, 18 years ago, where I was someone who particularly back then, was very much like, "I do it on my own." So I was living by myself and working for myself and having quite a lot of difficult inner processing stuff that was going on.

And what I needed was to be around people. But I had all of these narratives around, "I don't want to be dependent. I'm fine by myself. They won't understand what's going on. I won't have enough space."

There's all this stuff that's in the way. And then I ended up moving into a shared house with people I didn't particularly know. And within days, my whole system just settled. It wasn't having big, deep, meaningful conversations.

It was just having living bodies around that just gave that sense of co-regulation, that sense of community, that sense of connection. I just really wanted to amplify part of what you're pointing to here, which is that we try to solve anxiety from the perspective of anxiety. We see the world through the lens of our anxiety.

Then it's from that place we try to fix it with all of the caveats and rules and limitations that are created. Then somehow to really get what we need, we have to drop that story in the first place.

Matthias Barker

Yeah, 100%. The way I'd summarize that is we try to either avoid it or control it. Those are the two solutions the anxiety loves. Let's avoid it or control it. The actual thing that untangles the web is

something like connection and holding it without control, but in small pieces that don't completely overwhelm us. That progressively does lead you into something like...

[00:31:23] Alex Howard

Yeah. Of course, one of the dynamics that can also happen here as well is that we can set our life up in such a way that we're always the one that takes care of everyone else. If we've got a people-pleaser, helper pattern. We have lots of people in our lives, but actually, there's no reciprocity in those relationships.

We'll say what it will feel like is the love, the support holding that we need isn't really there. We feel like the victims of that. But we often fail to see that we've actually been the architect of attracting those kinds of people into our lives, resonating with that dynamic, and actually, in a way, promoting more of that.

Matthias Barker

People-pleasing is just, "I'll connect if I feel in control." That's it. It's through appeasement, so it's not maybe... The narcissistic path is to try to get everyone on my narrative. The people-pleasing path is to get on everyone else's narrative and to appease someone else. That's another control strategy.

I also hear a potential person saying, "Well, I'm introverted, so I don't actually think the social stuff makes me more anxious. What should I do?" I would say, "Really, the only social connection that makes anyone anxious, extroverted or introverted, is unsafe." You know, a social connection.

There's a lot of anxiety around what they're thinking, because that's another domain of anxieties. What are they thinking? Am I coming off too much? Am I burdening them? Are they thinking that I'm just being, I don't know, a little bit of a wimp, someone who's making too big of a deal out of this, being too dramatic?

Are they going to want to overstay their welcome? Because another part is, I think a lot of introverts, they do need social connection just as much as anyone, but just in smaller doses. Come over for an hour, not the whole evening. Come over for an evening just once a week, not four times a week.

It's like there is a dosage thing there, but there's no one alive, I think, that just doesn't want any social connection. Even the hermits. That's trauma, guys. It is that whatever dose your personality needs, a safe connection that is going to bring about what you're talking about.

Alex Howard

Yeah. What I just think as you're speaking there is actually, it's knowing that you can say when it's time for someone to leave. It's like saying no or saying enough. Like effectively being able to place a boundary and to know that you can do that. It's much easier to let someone in if you know you can ask them when it's time to leave.

Matthias Barker

Yeah, that's right. And that takes a certain amount of courage. And then to watch them warmly receive you and be okay with that is that corrective experience that we're talking about. I put

myself out there to say, "Hey, I think I'm good. I'm going to go to bed early tonight." They're like, "Great. I loved spending time with you." That changes the way you predict it'd happen.

[00:34:00]

One other nuance I'll throw in here for panic disorders... Because this is a little different from panic. Jaak Panksepp. He's a neuroscientist that really started to map out the emotional pathways of the brain.

He theorized that grief and panic share the same neural networks. Much of the same neural roads in the brain are shared and theorized that panic is mostly related to something like separation-anxiety, and fear of disconnection.

So maybe you could think something like loss and shame, whatever blend of those two that is unique to your situation. I think that the same thing is actually what untangles panic, even though it doesn't feel self-evident, because you're like, "How can me being scared of airplanes be connected to some need for social whatever?"

It's often symbolic. I mean, and this gets into how you see these things. The way I see it, is something like fear of driving, fear of airplanes, panic that's related to even needles. It has a lot more to do with what it looks like to be contained?

On a plane, what does it look like to feel trapped and you have no options? Have you ever had an experience in your life where you felt trapped, isolated, like you had no options, and you were separated from the person who was going to make you feel safe? Whether that's a parent, whether that's an experience in your adult life.

Needles. What does it look like to have something intruding into your body? To have a foreign agent pressed in in a way that's vulnerable and scary. What does that look like? Germs, same thing. I hold that OCD can be based in trauma. I think the same thing there. What does that tell you about how your childhood experiences prepared you for connection, vulnerability, and just your own mortality? What does it look like to fear death and to fear sickness and to be feeble?

All that stuff is really rich therapeutic content. I can't cover all my bases in a 40-minute talk. I'll put that in the same camp.

Alex Howard

Yeah, I hear you. Matthias, for someone that's watching this that's thinking, "Okay, I'm hearing you. More social connection, less extremes of avoidance and forcing and so on." Where do people start? What's a few practical steps that folks can start with to start to reverse the experience or to move away from anxiety and into a new place?

Matthias Barker

That's a great question. I'll give you an exercise that you can do now, and then I'll put the caveat that I have an anxiety workshop where I put tons of different exercises and stuff like that on matthiasbarker.com. That's my shameless plug. Okay...

Alex Howard

I'm going to invite you for an even more shameless one in a few minutes.

[00:36:36] Matthias Barker

That's fine. Okay, that's there. I guess I think this is important to actually have grounded exercises. Something I'll just tell you to do right now is write down verbatim some of the things that you're really nervous about.

So much of anxiety is getting close enough to the scenarios where the catastrophes or worries will happen, but just getting far enough away. It's like, how can I get close enough to controlling it to where I start to feel calm without going all the way there?

I think that journaling, being forced to put things into a timeline, writing the script down that you're worried that it's going to happen, it just starts to tax you. It's just a little bit challenging.

Then you can see it from a different perspective. It's like in the acceptance and commitment therapy world, they call this diffusion. If you can start to pull back and get out from the anxiety itself. In the IFS world, they call it blended. If you can get unblended from this experience and start to look at it from the outside, then it starts to sober you up emotionally. I like that metaphor for it.

It's like if you're on alcohol and you're drunk, you don't know what's going on, you're all wobbling around. But the moment you sober up, you can see your actions more clearly. I think there are ways that we can do that in a self-guided way such as journaling, to be able to write down. "Here's what I'm anxious about. Here's what I'm worried is going to happen. Here's verbatim the thing that I think is going to happen and go wrong."

Then rereading through that, sometimes with a different-colored pen, different-colored marker, and just making comments on that like you were reading the story of someone else. If you happened upon your son's journal, your spouse's journal. Someone that you care about, your brother's journal, and you were reading this, what would occur to you to be grounded in reality?

Then what would occur to you to be, let's say, exaggerated or there's an extra 10, 20% on top that perhaps is a bit more inflated? That's not just to criticize yourself. That's to then bring you back down into a sober place. That's updating the software, so to speak, in your thinking. A lot of people criticize some of the CBT, more cognitive-oriented therapies when it comes to anxiety.

But when you're doing interventions that are trying to change what you believe about something, you are interacting with core memories and core learning. This gets a little bit nerdy, but our beliefs are built upon our experiences.

Some people like to go right for the experiences through something like EMDR or some trauma therapy to heal the old childhood memories. Some people go straight for the beliefs, which you could think of as the result of the memories. It's the thing on top and changes the beliefs and goes through it through the front door, not the back door.

All those are fine in my book, I just think that something self-guided to do would be get that safe connection, journal it down, maybe with two different colored pens, just start to evaluate it, maybe read it with a friend. I think that watching the facial expressions of somebody that is reading that piece of paper and starting to get even a social reference for what is grounded and what is not...

[00:39:36]

As vulnerable as that is, as anxiety-provoking as that can be, is so helpful. I think so much of the way that I call my own anxiety, personally, it's just conversations with my wife where I run her through the catastrophes ongoing in my head, and then I'm watching her as she's like, "Oh, well, er..."

And we have enough trust, we have enough safety to where I can take that in. I don't get defensive. I'm just like, "What is normal? And what parts are right over the top?" And then she says, "Well, I mean, this part, yeah, that makes sense. That is a little bit nerve-wracking. And it's probably not going to end in this way, or you would probably recover even if it did go wrong. There's probably some choices that you have, even if things did go wrong, that you end up being okay."

Again, we regulate with other people and by diffusing, from getting outside of that whirlwind. I don't think we can solve it from within it. I don't know anyone who solved it from within it. We have to get outside of it.

Alex Howard

Yeah. It's funny. I'm sure my wife wouldn't mind me sharing. Just reminded me of a funny one where... She's someone that can definitely get in her head, and she got herself into a massive anxiety. It was something like this that she was going to have a heart attack, and she was having pain in her chest, and it meant this and meant that. She had to go to the hospital right away.

It went on, and we were talking about it, and I was like, "So where is it?" She's like, "It's right here." I was like, "Darling, your heart's on the other side of your chest. It's not your heart." In that moment, it's all this relief.

But we can do this. We can get caught up in this whole story and narrative, and "it means this". And sometimes it's just that reality testing. Someone's like, "No, hey..." I'm not saying we don't get it checked out at some point, but what you've made it in your head is not actually the reality of what's going on here.

Matthias Barker

Yeah, that's right. Sometimes we need other eyeballs on our problems to sober up. It's a huge problem.

Alex Howard

So, Matthias, you mentioned, and very quickly... I'm going to take a bit more space. So on the website, you mentioned that you've got an anxiety course. Tell people about that.

Matthias Barker

Yeah, sure. So matthiasjbarker.com, you can get the anxiety course there. I really dive into understanding those cycles, those self-reinforcing loops. And that course is very much focused on relational conflict as well. So it's focused on the anxiety that we feel in confronting someone and having hard conversations.

[00:41:56]

And I noticed that folks with anxiety also have a hard time with relationships most of the time because folks who have great, safe, good relationships, just by proxy, do better with their anxiety. It's just two things that... We call it comorbidity in the psyche world.

But just going together is often anxiety and not feeling safe in your close relationships. I try to tackle both of those in the same course. And yeah, there's exercises, a workbook that's really dynamic in there for understanding that cycle. If you can identify that cycle, then you can step outside of it. That's been my goal in that workshop. So yeah, that's what I'd say.

Alex Howard

Awesome. And also people should check out Matthias on social media as well. Instagram, all the usual places. He has the following that we all wish to have in terms of success there. So he has amazing short form videos that really unpack this stuff. So I just want to make sure people check that out as well. So, Matthias, thank you so much. I really appreciate you and I appreciate your time.

Matthias Barker

Yes. Thanks for having me.