Conscious Life presents

Managing Up: Anxiety at Work

Guest: Melody Wilding

[00:00:07] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview, I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host. Today, I'm speaking with Melody Wilding, an award-winning psychology at work expert and best-selling author of two books, *Trust Yourself: Stop Overthinking and Channel Your Emotions for Success at Work*, and *Managing Up*.

Named one of Business Insider's most innovative coaches, her clients include CEOs, C-level execs, and managers at top Fortune 500 companies. Melody is a licensed social worker with a Master's from Columbia and a Professor of Human Behavior at Hunter College. Melody Wilding, thank you so much for being with us today.

Melody Wilding

I'm excited to be here. Thank you.

Meagen Gibson

The only thing that more than 30 years of working has taught me is that everybody has a boss, everyone works for someone, and managing that relationship doesn't necessarily come naturally to us, and no one teaches us how to do it. In your new book, am I right that you call this Managing Up?

Melody Wilding

That's correct, yes. Influencing your boss's behavior, or the behavior of other people above you on the hierarchy.

Meagen Gibson

I think you and I have talked about this phenomenon where sometimes people do a great job at a particular occupation, like sales, marketing, or whatever, and they get promoted to be in charge of other people who do a great job with that. It doesn't necessarily make them great managers.

Meagen Gibson

That's the top-down, but we're talking more about the bottom-up. How do you protect your agency, your time, and your ambition, things like that? How do you manage up to the people that are in power above you, managing you or making decisions on behalf of you? This can often give people a fair amount of anxiety, which is completely understandable. Why does that make us anxious? And why doesn't anyone teach us how to do this?

Melody Wilding

First, I want to back up because I love what you said about the purpose of managing up. At the end of the day, it's not so much about your boss, it's about your own level of satisfaction, confidence, feeling of control, and having freedom over your work. I think that's a shift I want people to embrace right off the bat, that managing up is for you something you want to do for yourself. It's not something you only do when you have a toxic or a bad manager.

This is good practice even if you have a good relationship with your boss, it can always be better. I want to put that out there. That said, yes, it is very anxiety-provoking because, as you said, no one teaches us to do this. We focus a lot on technically being good at our jobs, going to school, getting the degree and the experience that we need, but we're never taught how do we navigate the relationships around us.

Much of that comes down to understanding human behavior, and relationship dynamics, which is also where much of the anxiety comes in. Because when we're talking about managing up to superiors, there's power dynamics that come into play. For many of us, our upbringing can affect how we perceive those dynamics, how we look at authority figures, are they know-all-be-all type people? Are they not to be trusted? Are people in authority, people you can't challenge?

Your upbringing, how you related to your parents, or other authority figures in your life, teachers, coaches. Also, your cultural background can come into play. Some cultures, it's very ingrained, and it's just part of the culture that you don't challenge the hierarchy, you're deferential.

And when you bring all of that into the workplace, you put that on top of maybe past negative experiences that you've had with a manager or an overbearing boss, then the anxiety about, I don't want to overstep, I don't want to upset someone, I don't want to offend my boss and that jeopardizes my job. All of that goes into the anxiety mix around managing up.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, well said, all of those factors, as you were talking I was thinking of all the ones that I have, and I'm sure other people were ticking off those boxes of like, Oh, this is how I've built my professional relationship arsenal, or Rolodex, or whatever. These are the skills that I've learned and how I apply them.

[00:04:51] Meagen Gibson

It's interesting, do you find that you can be really good?... My big joke about maternity leave, which I didn't have, it was just unemployment with a baby. But once I went back to work, I was like, everyone here listens to me and does what I ask. I had this power trip. I was like, no one's yelling at me while I'm trying to eat my lunch.

You can have these roles, too, where I'm great at managing a household and people respect my opinion. Then I go into a workplace and everybody treats me like I'm an idiot, or worthless, or don't understand the basics of time management, or organization, or I'm being micromanaged. I think it's such a great point that you make that this isn't about the people that we're speaking to, who are in charge of us, or the hierarchies that we can't necessarily do anything to change.

This is about us and making sure that we're clear on what our boundaries need to be advocating for what we need in order to be not only the most valued, but the most seen, and the most rewarded for our talents and our value. Obviously, all of us have value inherently, but in this capitalistic society that we all live in, we also have to pay our bills. So making sure that that value is also seen at work.

Now that we know the contributing factors, what does it look like? What might people feel? What might people say? How might they behave when they're experiencing this type of anxiety?

Melody Wilding

It breaks down to your actions, your mindset, and your physical state. In terms of actions, you may hold back your opinions because you don't want them to be dismissed or criticized. You may avoid communicating directly, so you may share tough feedback or tough information in an email because you want to avoid the confrontation.

I also see a lot of people get into checking communication frequently, they're constantly refreshing, did my boss respond? Or they may excessively need validation. They don't want to take ownership or step out of line, they're always waiting for approval, or a blessing from their manager to do something. That's actions.

We get into mindset. You may catastrophize outcomes. You may think that if you have to give your boss tough news, that it's going to be the worst possible outcome. They're going to scream at you and fire you right on the spot. You may overthink your interactions as well. Should I say X or should I say Y? Which one are they going to respond to?

Of course, being strategic and thoughtful is good, but when all of these behaviors go to an extreme, that's where it becomes anxiety, where it becomes debilitating, or it holds you back from you showing up confidently and fully.

The last is the physicality, because, as both of us know, anxiety manifests in your physical body. That's why so many somatic practices are great for anxiety. You may start sweating when you have a one-on-one with your boss.

[00:08:26] Melody Wilding

Your heart may start racing when you feel you have to present an idea to them, or you go blank. You go into a freeze state where your frontal cortex is shutting down. You're reacting from more of the lower, the emotional, and reactive parts of your brain, and you literally can't concentrate, you don't have access to some of that good thinking that comes from that frontal part of your brain.

Meagen Gibson

That's perfect because everybody can identify one of those three areas that might be where they tend to go to the most, or maybe they go to that the most in different situations, if you have to physically be in somebody's presence that might cue more... Or if you're on camera, like we both are now, that might cue more physical symptoms. The mindset, the actions like, Oh, my God, I can relate to all of these. And have changed and modified a lot of these things for myself as well.

When you're speaking with somebody, do you find that they tend to fall into one of these three categories or that all people have some in each one of them?

Melody Wilding

It depends, I would say more often is some of the mental struggles. Then when things get a little bit more extreme, that's where I start to see some of the physical manifestations as well. Because now it's come to a point where you've run through this pattern so many times that your body is actually having a physical reaction to it.

But you said something important that I want to underscore, which is that you were able to change some of these reactions for yourself. That gets at an important message I want everyone to hear, which is that you teach people how to treat you.

You teach people how to treat you, it's so important. If you are approaching your boss with meekness because you're insecure, you set a boundary, but then you immediately go back on it and say, "Oh, no, but don't worry. It's okay. I can work extra. It's no problem." Then you are teaching people that your words, your communication, and your time, is not to be respected.

Yet when you come to the table with clear preferences and a clear idea, not in an arrogant, aggressive way, but just in a grounded, objective, matter-of-fact way, you can meet your boss almost more like a peer, and people respond. People respond to that groundedness that you have.

I say that because with these types of relationships, it can feel like I just have to take what I'm given. And people don't realize that they have more power than they might assume to shape the dynamics around them.

I want to get into some of the specific tactics around how to heal or change some of these behaviors in a minute. I also want to talk about, how you can have these, or at least in my experience, you can have these manifest in either cycles of your life, or in cycles of your employment.

[00:11:44] Meagen Gibson

I remember when I was in my 20s, and something you said cued this for me, which is like, I feel like I just have to take it. That was the decade of my 20s. It was like, whatever was happening, I was just going to have to take it because I was in my 20s, and that's just what people in their 20s do. I don't think people in their 20s have that attitude anymore, and I applaud them for that.

I felt like I was collecting experiences in order to give myself this false sense of control over like, Okay, now I've learned from that situation. I'll never make that exact mistake again. I can future-proof myself against difficulty or discomfort, which, wow, what a fantasy world we live in in our 20s. There is no way out of having uncomfortable situations arise in the workplace because you can only control yourself.

Melody Wilding

Very true, unfortunately, very true. But as you said, you learn a little bit more through each of those experiences. You learn more, and we'll talk about this in a moment, but you learn more about what your boss responds to and what their needs are. You learn more about the type of person you do want to work for or don't want to work for.

Each of those experiences, yes, they're tough, and many times, things actually become more complex as you rise through the ranks because your boss is different. Demands, you may...

Now, many people are in an environment where they're reporting to multiple leaders, not just one person, but multiple because they're in a matrix environment, for example, or the organization is more flat.

I think telling ourselves, getting into that fallacy of, once I do this, I'll be over that, and I never have to face it again, also sets up us, or rather, sets us up for more anxiety. Because then we struggle, and then we judge ourselves more, rather than realizing this is a normal part of growing in your career. That your relationships are going to evolve, the stakes are going to change, and with that are going to come new challenges. I think that's a great point about adjusting your own, and calibrating your own expectations.

Meagen Gibson

I want to reemphasize that, in what you said, because I think that surprised me, in that, I've pivoted my career a lot, at each pivot it felt like I was starting from scratch, and learning this about myself, and reassuring myself.

I've finally now gotten to the point where with every new experience, I'm like, Wow, it makes sense that you are a little bit nervous and that you've fallen back into comfortable patterns, behaviors, thoughts, and actions because this situation is new and the stakes feel higher.

Or it feels less comfortable and less familiar, it will go away, and we're going to practice what we've done before. This will get more familiar, and with the familiarity comes the comfort.

[00:14:38] Meagen Gibson

I think people get, especially when they get into managerial positions or maybe executive positions, they're like, "Why am I feeling like this? I've been in this career for 20 or 30 years. This is ridiculous, why am I now displaying all these patterns I would have when I was insecure and young?"

Melody Wilding

There's a phrase, new level, new devil. Which is a new level, new challenges. But many times I find it's new level, same devil, just in different clothes that are...

Many times, especially for those of us who struggle with anxiety, or have had big T or little T trauma, we find these patterns come up again, and the same insecurities surface. And that doesn't mean you're never over them, but it means you're uncovering new layers and new nuances to how you heal, and how you grow from them.

Meagen Gibson

I'm sure it can be frustrating for people because you're like, I've done all this work and I got into this place, was this a mistake? Then you're second-guessing yourself. Maybe I wasn't ready for this.

I think, like you said, people with trauma and anxiety, that self-questioning starts to happen. But, I think you would agree with me, and I want people to hear that it makes a lot of sense that you would have these feelings, or behaviors, or thoughts again. And that you get quicker and quicker with the tools, that we're going to discuss in a second, with coping with those and getting yourself out of those patterns. Would you say that's true?

Melody Wilding

100 % I am always saying to my clients, the goal is not to never experience struggle. That's unrealistic, you're going to set yourself up for disappointment if you do that. But to your point, the goal is around decreasing your response and your recovery time. Can we decrease the delta, the % of change between the time it takes you to fall down that spiral and the time when you are able to feel back in control, for example.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. What are the techniques that you recommend for preparing mentally and emotionally before engaging in conversations about managing up?

Melody Wilding

A lot of people think managing up is about asserting yourself, is about telling your boss what you want and dictating the relationship. Really, it's much, much more about listening, observing, and paying attention. Because in order to manage up effectively, you have to have a better understanding of your manager.

[00:17:16] Melody Wilding

Really spending time asking them, learning about their communication style, their preferences for receiving updates, the best time to have discussions with them, how they like to give and receive feedback, and what their goals, priorities, and vision for the team or your projects are.

And this isn't about kissing up, I think a lot of people automatically equate managing up with kissing up. But this is about uncovering unspoken expectations, rules, needs, and motivations that your boss has so that, number 1, you have a baseline to better understand their behavior.

And when my clients do this, it almost instantly erases 85% of the things they're overthinking, that they're anxious about. Because if you understand that your boss is a very concise, brief communicator who wants things right to the point, who would prefer bullet points rather than a full-length report, well, that takes away a lot of the questioning when they send you a really curt email.

You know that, I didn't do something wrong, this is their style, you can put it in perspective and not blame yourself and worry about that. When you understand what their goals, priorities, what their vision is, and how their success is measured by their own boss, then you're also able to pitch your ideas, to frame your proposals to them in a way that speaks to how what you're proposing helps accomplish those goals.

Again, it's about finding more of a symbiotic relationship of how can I help my boss be more successful, and in turn, make myself more successful, make my life more stress-free and easier, and have there be less conflict. Rather than how do I please them and respond to their every need.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, gosh. And it goes both ways, too. You can advocate to your boss about how you want to be communicated with. I'll give a small example of this that always makes Alex Howard laugh, the founder of our company.

The founder of our company, Conscious Life, is a big fan of the voice memo. I am not a big fan of the voice memo.

Melody Wilding

You and I have talked about this.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, on platforms where it will transcribe the voice memo, I'm like, great, I can read it. But on platforms where I have to listen and take notes, I was like, "No, if you send me a voicemail, I'm not listening to it anymore. Whatever that important thing was, it won't get done."

[00:20:21] Meagen Gibson

Now, if you want to call and brainstorm some things open-ended, great, let's do that back and forth. I'll know it's not urgent, but if it's something that's urgent, or important, or is going to require me to take notes. That's not how I'm best communicated, and I don't feel like my time is respected. I'll tell you what, he totally understands and never sends them to me unless it's absolutely impossible to do it any other way. You can also advocate for yourself.

Melody Wilding

Absolutely, that was going to be my next tip, is that this goes both ways. Just as you want to understand your boss's preferences, there's a little bit of homework we all have to do here for ourselves is, how can someone best work with me? How do I learn best? If someone has feedback they want to give me, what do I want to hear?

Some people will say, "Tell me what's working well up front." And I have other clients who will say, "I want to know immediately what needs to be fixed, don't dance around it, just tell me immediately, get right into it."

And what you were saying, it comes from the framing of, Alex, I want you to be able to get the best out of me, and I want our relationship to be successful. Here's what would help us do that. How can we meet in the middle? That's the approach you want to be coming from, coming from that place of strength, not just cowering to whatever your boss wants.

I'll give everybody a little bit of... Because I kept Melody in mind when this situation came up. I'll give everybody a little behind-the-scenes in a much higher stakes situation, also inside baseball for Conscious Life.

I was the CEO of this organization for two full years, and it became very, very clear to me about a calendar year ago that I no longer wanted to serve in that role. It was very, very much for the betterment of the company, not because I was doing a poor job necessarily, but because we have a worldwide company in several different time zones, mine of which is the last time zone.

In full transparency, I don't really like being a CEO, I like doing interviews, I like being creative. It's not my wheelhouse of genius and also enjoyment. But I will tell you, even though there's a ton of respect between Alex and I, and I had a lot of confidence in my value at the company, that conversation was terrifying.

Terrifying, and not because he's scary. It was just to come to the conclusion of what I needed and wanted, what was going to be best and serve the company long term.

Meagen Gibson

I was really, really confident in that. Then to communicate it and ask for it, knowing full well that there was a possibility that I would end up without a job at the end of the conversation, wasn't easy.

[00:23:07] Meagen Gibson

I don't want people to get the idea that this is like, Just understand the bullet points your boss needs to make. I don't think that that's what you're saying at all. But we understand that people's employment is important to them for their livelihood, for their everyday comfort, for the needs of the people that they care for in their family. It's not an easy thing to do, to advocate for yourself in a way that retains respect between both parties.

Melody Wilding

Not at all, and unfortunately, in many workplaces, it's not always safe. I have some situations with a few clients right now where their manager may not be that supportive, and they're having to find other people that have a position of power, whether it's a boss's peer, their skip level, a leader or manager in another department who can be that source of support for them, who can open up opportunities, doors, endorse their work.

Another phrase I'm always saying to my clients is, don't go to the hardware store looking for milk, which means in the case of a manager, that you may not have a manager who's able to give you the coaching, mentoring, feedback that you want, or it may not be safe to get it from that person.

You may have to find other routes to get that, whether it's other people in your organization, or even externally through an accountability group, or a membership organization. So no, it's not simple, it's not easy, and it also takes time. Look for low-stakes situations first.

The first time you try to set a boundary or speak up to your boss should not be when it's a really high profile project that's due in the next 24 hours. That is not the right time to do some of the things we're talking about. You want to find little small opportunities so that you're building your own confidence, but you're also getting your manager used to interacting with you in a different way.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, great tips. It brings up, too, how do you manage the boundaries and hierarchy? It's such a delicate dance, especially when you were talking about horizontal support, or maybe managers in other departments who can advocate for you, or mentor you. People can get very touchy about their power and hierarchy structures in small and large organizations. How do you advise people to assess those situations and make those moves carefully?

Melody Wilding

You also have to recognize what is your own power base. You may have more leverage the longer you've been in an organization, if you are working on projects that are mission-critical, or very close to the bottom line, those types of things give you more pushback power. They give you more clout and social capital, as do having allies, having a background, or an expertise that no one else in the organization has. You also have to consider some of those intangibles.

[00:26:33] Melody Wilding

When it actually comes to starting to push back, this is where, again, understanding your boss's priorities comes into play, because if you're having those conversations regularly, let's say that your boss comes to you and says, "I want you to take on this piece of extra work," and you are thinking to yourself, I have no idea how I'm going to fit this in. Many people I work with with anxiety will internalize that and say, I'll figure it out, a regular person should be able to do this, so I should be able to do this. Let me figure it out. And then they try to buckle down, they burn themselves out doing so.

What's much better to do is to ask clarifying questions before you accept, not to be insubordinate, but to push back gently on the urgency, and the relevance of the request. You might ask, "Can I understand the timeline behind this and what's driving the urgency?" You can ask, "Can you tell me how you see this fitting in with my other priorities?" Or, "Do you see this being a one-off exception or becoming a regular part of my work?"

So don't just automatically accept, nudge a little to try to understand where it's coming from, and what's behind it, and then from there, another tactic I love to give my clients is to offer alternatives.

Because of the power dynamics when you're managing up, sometimes you cannot outright say, "No, I'm not doing that. I'm too busy. I'm not doing that." You have to find a way to make it work. But you're also human, so how do you balance those two things? You offer an alternative. You might say, "I'm not able to get everything you asked for by Friday, but I can get you this piece of it."

You're negotiating with the deadline, which again pushes back gently to say the subtext of what you're saying is, "This is not realistic, however, I'm willing to work with you on this, and I can deliver this one piece of work, but not everything else you're asking for."

You can also offer, perhaps there's someone else who is a better fit for the task that you're willing to train up. For example, a member of your team, or even a member of another team.

There may be times when you have to put it back, put the onus on them to make a trade-off. To say, "In our last one-on-one, you mentioned Project A was the top priority, that's what I heard from you. Now I'm also hearing that Project B is important, and I understand that. However, what would you like me to deprioritize or slow down on in order to make room for both of these things? Since tackling both of them in the timeline you're suggesting is not possible." You put the authority back on to them to have to make that trade-off.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. These are really good tips and I want to make sure that people understand, too, that we talked earlier about the small wins and small, low urgency, low importance, where you can find those opportunities to try this and grow your confidence. Do you find with people that their confidence and energy exponentially grow the more that they do this?

[00:30:13] Melody Wilding

Yes, even if it doesn't go exactly as you have expected. Another Melody-ism that I'm always saying to my clients is, that you build confidence with yourself in proportion with the number of promises you keep to yourself.

If you are saying that it's important to me that I advocate for myself. It's important to me that I feel like I can hold my own with people in power. But you're not taking actions that are consistent with that, it's a small form of self-betrayal.

My first book is called *Trust Yourself*. And this is one of the reasons why, you can only control your behavior, you can only control the fact that you spoke up, you pushed back, you asked for clarification, and you cannot control how, and if someone responds in kind.

I do find that even when you take the steps to be courageous, to put yourself out there, it's frustrating when you don't get the response you hoped for back, but it still builds your sense of competence. And every time it's also building your skillset, you're getting better at being able to stay calm and composed on the spot, even when someone may be getting a little worked up with you.

You build your skills of being able to negotiate and have hard conversations. And even that alone, there's wins and there's success to celebrate within that.

Meagen Gibson

You said that so well, and I can remember distinctly at the beginning of my anxiety journey, remembering the wins that I would count as I survived the discomfort of that situation.

I would celebrate, Oh, my God, that was so uncomfortable. And even if it didn't turn out the way I wanted it to, I didn't get what I wanted, or I didn't feel... I was like, I survived asking for that.

Or not immediately jumping in to solve the problem that was presented that everyone assumed I would take responsibility for, or just surviving, Oh, my God, I made it through. I tolerated it. God, I want to hug that girl.

Melody Wilding

Distress tolerance is such an important anxiety management skill. As you were saying, most of us respond to the feelings of internal discomfort by, let me people please, let me overwork, let me find a way I can soothe over this discomfort in a way that ends up being a form of self-sabotage.

But as you were saying, learning to be with it, to surf it, to not react to it in counterproductive ways, that really builds your sense of trust in yourself.

Meagen Gibson

I really want people to hear that it exponentially builds. When you start reclaiming that energy and start building your confidence and trust in yourself, it's like a snowball down a mountain. You start to feel confident and powerful, and you know yourself better.

[00:33:17] Meagen Gibson

I also want to say the circumstances of my life don't look that different. I think about that all the time, how I'm using it is that the circumstances of my life have not changed much in my long healing journey. But the way I feel in my circumstances has changed 180 degrees. How I feel about myself, how I feel about my work, and my value as a human being has dramatically changed. I am wealthy in that regard because of people like you.

Melody Wilding

Well, thank you, that's very kind.

Meagen Gibson

Melody, if people want to hear more about you, your work, and your books, how can they do that?

Melody Wilding

You can find me and all of my work on my website, melodywilding.com. More information about my first book, *Trust Yourself*, and my second book's there as well.

Meagen Gibson

And the second book is called *Managing Up*.

Melody Wilding

That's correct, *Managing Up: How to Get What You Need from the People in Charge*.

Meagen Gibson

Wow, fantastic title. Melody, thank you so much for being with us today.

Melody Wilding

My pleasure.