



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

Journaling as a tool for anxiety

Guest: Amber Benziger

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[00:00:10] Jaia Bristow

Hello, and welcome to this event all about anxiety. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am delighted to be welcoming Amber Benziger.

Welcome, Amber.

Amber Benziger

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Jaia Bristow

I'm excited to have you on board.

So, Amber is a psychotherapist, an anxiety coach and the creator of The Anxiety Lab, which specializes in helping women who suffer from anxiety.

So I'm curious, Amber, do you want to start by telling us a little bit about why you chose to specialize in working with women?

Amber Benziger

Yeah. So I have struggled with anxiety for a large portion of my life, which is kind of what catapulted me into becoming a therapist and starting my coaching business.

I felt like there's a lot of times where I felt alone or I felt like maybe if I spoke about this, people would think I was dramatic or didn't understand me, so it kind of made me feel hesitant. And there's so much stigma about being too much or being dramatic that I think keeps people from sharing that they're feeling anxious because I feel like these words have become buzzwords, so we're afraid to talk about that.

So I wanted to create a space in a community for women to feel safe, to share about their anxiety and how they manage it and what's going on with them and those feelings that are coming up without feeling like somebody is labeling them or putting them in a box or calling them dramatic or that they're overreacting.

[00:01:41] Jaia Bristow

I think that's so important because, as you say, there is a lot of stigma around that. And I think being a woman in this world can be hard and so sometimes, well, I think there's a stigma for all genders, to be honest. I think anxiety and mental health in general brings about a lot of stigma.

So do you want to just speak a little bit more about that stigma and why it's important to undo it and how we can go about undoing it a little bit?

Amber Benziger

I think we spend a lot of time trying to appear like we have it all together, so when somebody is saying that something is going on with them or they're feeling a certain way, that can cause discomfort for other people, so we kind of keep it closed.

And I think without having those conversations and talking about what's coming up for us, it perpetuates that stigma. People are afraid to be labeled or thought as crazy, which is a term that I don't like, when they're sharing openly about their feelings, when they're being vulnerable.

I feel like in the last couple of years, we've talked more about that and there's been this shift for mental wellness and mental health and mental health education, which I think is great, but I think there's still so much that we have to say and have to share.

So I think by having these type of things, by having these conferences, by starting these conversations, by having these communities showing up on social media and sharing things that have worked for you or tips or tricks or whatever it is, that really helps start the conversation so that we can start looking at mental health as health, just like we would talk about if we had headaches or broken bones. I think we need to start looking at mental health the same way.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. I think it's so important, as you say, to have these conversations. Because not only are we often not socialized to speak about mental health in a way that feels safe and non taboo, like you say, there's a lot of taboo, a lot of stigma around it, but we're also not taught how to hold other people's well being and how to hold those conversations for other people.

And that kind of reinforces this vicious cycle where people feel unsafe or uncomfortable sharing. And if and when they do gather the courage to share, then it's not always received or held so well because people feel uncomfortable, because it's part of that stigma and that idea of people don't know what to do with it because we're not trained.

And so again, like you say, having these events, having social media where people share about their own experiences. And I've seen a trend where people post advice that they've received from therapists for people who either can't afford therapy or just sharing nuggets that they've received that they think might be helpful for others.

And so I love that. I love that there's a shift happening where people are being more open about it, I think.

And so what would you say are some of the key things that you hear in your practice from women struggling with anxiety and mental health?

[00:04:46] Amber Benziger

Yeah, absolutely. I feel like there's a lot of like, am I being dramatic or feeling like I'm stuck in my own mind? I'm stuck in my own racing thoughts. I can't turn it off. I feel like that's one of the main things I'm hearing, I feel overwhelmed all the time. There's constant racing thoughts. I don't know what to do to make it stop, but I just want it to stop.

We get overwhelmed, and like you said, there's a lot of fear to share and be vulnerable that we're feeling this way, that we're feeling out of control or we're feeling like we are trapped by our own thoughts. So then we keep it inside. Or when we do share, are we dismissed? And are people saying things like, oh, just calm down or just relax, and spreading that toxic positivity?

So I feel like I hear a lot of that in my practice. I'm feeling really overwhelmed, but I just don't know what to do. I don't know where to turn.

Jaia Bristow

And I think talking about that toxic positivity is really important as well, because sometimes that's overlooked. People talk about toxic negativity, I guess, but sometimes people forget as well how damaging that toxic positivity can be because it's often dismissing people's feelings. So could you speak a little bit more to that?

Amber Benziger

Yeah, absolutely. So I think a lot of times people will say things with the best intentions because they'll say things like, oh, just calm down, or it could be worse. And they're trying to say that as a way of being like, don't worry about it. But what that does is, if you are worried about it, if you are feeling bad, it is your feelings. So, yeah, maybe somebody is going through something worse, but this is bad for you and that's valid.

So it invalidates people's feelings and it keeps them quiet and keeps them from opening up and sharing about what's going on. So it perpetuates that stigma because then it makes people fearful of sharing.

So I think it's allowing people to have that space, like, hey, what can I do for you? How can I support you? Are better options to say than like, oh, just get over it or everybody goes through something tough. Well, yes, but is that helpful? Is that validating that person, allowing that person to feel whatever it is that they're feeling?

Jaia Bristow

100%. And that's the advice I've heard from a lot of experts on this event and that I know for myself, is that how helpful it is to just be able to allow one's feelings and have space to feel them without acting them out in a harmful way to oneself or to others, but also without suppressing them. And so that's what I'm hearing you say again.

And there's so many different tools these days and coping mechanisms around anxiety, around other things. And there's a million practices, and we offer quite a lot of those on this event. And so sometimes, especially if someone has anxiety anyway, and making decisions is hard and we have lots of racing thoughts and not much time and things like that, it can be really hard to know which

strategy and which coping method is the best for oneself. So do you have any advice on how to choose the right strategy?

[00:07:58] Amber Benziger

So there are different subsets of coping skills. I think that we don't really realize that or talk about that enough. There's the self-soothing things, like when we do the five senses, like what can we see? What can we hear? What can we touch?

There's distraction, like if we do puzzles or something on our phone. A lot of times we'll go to scrolling Instagram or something like that because we're anxious, we want to distract.

Then there's the opposite action: if I'm feeling like I'm not good enough, can we use an affirmation that says, actually, I'm doing the best that I can. Putting that opposite.

There's that emotional awareness, which is like journaling or writing or drawing or getting it out and expressing your feelings. Mindfulness, meditation, grounding exercises.

And then obviously there's support and crisis things like being a therapist or going to the hospital.

So I think it's really allowing yourself to feel what's going on and what's coming up for you so you can better equip yourself with what you need.

If you are really angry and upset, is distraction helpful in that moment so that you can get out of that anger and bring yourself into the presence so you can figure out what was making you anxious? Maybe that caused you to be angry. So maybe that's a better tool than sitting in your anger right there and being able to do medication, maybe you wouldn't be able to.

So knowing what's coming up for you and how you're feeling, so you're able to pick that tool. I think our first instinct usually when something is coming up, a feeling that we don't like, is to avoid it. So it's important to be careful about, are we constantly pushing down? Are we constantly using distraction and then never doing anything about it? Because when that feeling is still there and we just keep pushing it down until it bubbles up.

So really allowing yourself to feel, which I know can be a little intimidating or scary because we don't like to feel something that doesn't feel comfortable all the time. But at the same time, how are we going to move through it if we don't allow ourselves to feel it and then pick the right coping strategy?

Jaia Bristow

I love the way that you talk about the different categories of coping skills and coping strategies because it's a really nice way of understanding it, which I've not actually heard yet before.

So the idea of, yes, you have your self-soothing and you have your distracting and you have your emotional regulation or outpouring ones. You have all these different, it's not just a ton of different skills and, oh my God, what do I do in this moment? But first, understanding the category and noticing what's happening automatically.

Like, distraction is both a very useful tool for anxiety and also sometimes gets in the way of actually processing it and being with feelings that might be beneath it.

[00:10:57]

So I love the idea of questioning oneself. What category do I actually need right now? What's happening? What do I most need? What am I leaning towards? And questioning, is that actually what's most helpful for me in this moment, or is there something else that might be more supportive that I'm avoiding or ignoring? And we can only make those choices if we're aware of the different tools at our disposal.

Amber Benziger

100%. And I think it's also looking at, what is going to work for me? There's so much advice and there's so many things out there, but traditional meditation, I can't sit still in the quiet for 5 to 10 minutes. That doesn't work for me. So if somebody said that to do that when I'm feeling anxious, that would cause me more anxiety.

Sometimes affirmations, we talk a lot about them and how they can be positive. Sure, but for a lot of people, they don't work if we're not in that mindset already, do we actually believe that? And then does that cause shame?

So I think it's really important to take a look at that we're all different and what really is going to work for you and what fits your lifestyle and what's something that you actually feel like you can do. So you'll do it right.

Because if it's something that you are like, this isn't me. Like meditation, like I said, I'm not going to do it, so then it's not going to be helpful. So it wouldn't be imperative for me to put it in my toolkit. Maybe there's something else that I could do, like grounding exercises or yoga or breathing. That works for me better than that.

So taking a look at the different categories and then seeing what the options are underneath them and what's actually something that works for me and fits my lifestyle. So I think that's really important.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. I think it's so important for people listening to not feel overwhelmed like they have to do everything. When people struggle with mental health often it's like, okay, well have you done meditation and yoga and changed your diet and gone for a run and gone for a swim and then done this, and then done that, and then done your diary? And it's just like, oh my God, it suddenly feels like I get more anxious by all the different methods there are to regulate my anxiety at times.

So being like, it's okay, you don't have to do everything. Some things are going to work better for you and some things are going to work better for other people. So, adapting to yourself and also adapting to the moment. Anxiety can come up in different ways and at different times. And sometimes I have different needs.

So sometimes I need something to just get me through that moment if I'm traveling or something or with a big group of people and it's like I'm feeling really anxious but I know that this period of time is short and this is what's causing me anxiety, and I just need to get through this and then I'll be okay.

Or sometimes it's like, oh, I can't sleep, and then there's different things, or sometimes it's like I've got time to process. And so again, I think it's so important to find the right tools and the right skills for each individual but also for each moment.

[00:14:02] Amber Benziger

Yeah, absolutely. And that's why we need to have that, like I say, that toolkit for ourselves, what works for me in this moment? So, you know that there's that couple of go to things so that you can be like, okay, like you said, I can't sleep, what can I do? Can I grab my journal and do a brain dump and that's what works for me?

So you kind of know and you have an arsenal ready of knowing these are the tools that work for me. Instead of, like you said, going to that laundry list of, should I do all the things? Should I take a shower, go for a run? You know what I mean?

So being really clear with yourself about what comes up for you, how does anxiety feel for you and look for you? Because it looks different and feels different for everybody. And then what tools actually work for you and then keeping them somewhere.

Because when we're in those heightened states, I'm not like, okay, maybe I should do that breathing exercise. No. My mind is roaming around and I feel really stressed out and overwhelmed. So sometimes it's nice to know, oh, I can go to that note section in my phone, and I wrote down that last time I felt anxious I did this. I did this breathing exercise, or I did this journal prompt, and I know it's there. So it's like a safety measure until I can adopt those things on my own.

Especially when you're starting out, it can feel really overwhelming to even try to practice these new coping strategies. So being really gentle with yourself and showing yourself compassion and try to implement things slowly and do them on a more consistent basis, not just when we're feeling that overwhelming sense of anxiety.

Jaia Bristow

I think that's so important. I think both having that list so that you're not having to have to think through everything in that moment and feel overwhelmed, but having a list of these are things that have helped me or that support me, or sometimes it's just the first thing that comes to mind.

Earlier today I interviewed someone who was talking about restorative, yoga and how you can just adapt where you're at. And so then I was having a nap in the middle of my day, and I was in bed and I was feeling agitated and so I just I had in my bedside drawer, I happened to have an eye mask, and then I had some pillows and blankets and quilts already on my bed.

So I was able to just adapt without even having to get up and put myself... And then just remember as well that I didn't have to worry too much about the timing and things like that.

So having all these tools, for me doing all these interviews is fantastic because I get to hear it directly from the horse's mouth, as it were. And so I know one of the tools that you really use and find beneficial is journaling. So do you want to tell us a little bit more about that?

Amber Benziger

Yeah. I think journaling can be so helpful and hit a lot of those coping types that I was talking about. So obviously emotional awareness, you can write just whatever comes to mind. It could be gibberish and whatever all those racing thoughts are, you can put them out on paper just to get them out because sometimes it feels so overwhelming inside.

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It also can be a distraction. So it can hit that, too. If there's a lot of noise going on and that I'm like sensory overload, I can get out of my head, and I can start writing in my journal about how I'm feeling, how I'm feeling overwhelmed.

If there's no one to talk to, if it's in between therapy sessions or maybe your partner is away or there's no friends around, or no one picks up the phone, you can use your journal as that thing to communicate with. It's not that live person, but you can still get those thoughts out and share those thoughts in a way.

So I think journaling can be really helpful in so many of those coping strategies. We can use it differently. We can just free write. We can use journal prompts like people use gratitude lists, like what's one or three things that I'm grateful for today? Or what's something that I want to forgive myself for? I think that's really helpful to help build self-compassion.

So we can utilize these prompts to get us to where we're trying to go. Are we trying to gain more self-compassion? Are we trying to cope with something? Are we trying to identify how we're feeling? Journaling can be a really powerful tool to get us in a mindset shift, to elevate our mood and to get out of our own head in our own way.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. I know for myself, journaling really helped me, especially during my teenage years where I felt very isolated and I couldn't really talk to people, and I didn't feel supported by my immediate surroundings.

And so I think it's typical of teenage angst as well to feel like we're the only ones going through it, and there's no one that can relate to our situation. So to be able to journal really helped me. And I'd speak to my journal as if it was a person or a friend or someone. So it would be like, hey, I'd tell my journal what had been going on for me and what was upsetting me and things like that.

Amber Benziger

I love that. And I think for me, I started at a really young age as well. I feel like I've been journaling consistently since I was 10. And as I grew older, obviously my style changed because I became more mature, but I think it was really cool to still have that. Because not only was it something that had that sense of nostalgia for me, of, oh, this was always my comfort tool, but I knew that it worked.

I think sometimes as adults were like, oh, can we still do that? Should we keep a diary? But maybe you're not writing 'Dear Diary' like I was in middle school, but I'm able to get out what I need. Sometimes do I read it back? Yeah. Sometimes I don't. Sometimes it's just getting something out there.

And sometimes it's just getting my feelings out so that I can sleep because I know for me I have trouble sleeping and so that becomes part of my nighttime routine. I do my skin care, maybe do my journal, read some of my book, whatever, no screen time. And then that kind of routine has helped me to relax.

[00:20:15]

And like I said, it's a way for me to have that emotional awareness and also that bit of nostalgia, so that comfort tool. So I think, especially if you journal or you like to write, it's a really great way for you to find comfort and stability within yourself.

Jaia Bristow

I think that's fantastic. And I love that you talk about using journaling throughout all different stages of your life and that your journaling style adapted. But ultimately, having journaling as a tool has really, really helped you.

And I love what you were talking about earlier, about the prompts. I've always used journaling more as a brain dump but I love the idea that you can use prompts as well. And I love the ones you suggested.

And I think it's interesting to think, like some of the other tools that we talk about in this conference, how journaling can be adapted.

So when I first started journaling, I used to keep a regular diary to some degree, but then I felt pressure to do that, so then I stopped and would just write occasionally when I needed to.

Then I noticed throughout a lot of my teenage years, I was often on a computer a lot of the time. So then I started having notes on the computer where I would just write what was going on for me and brain dump there.

And then these days, one of the things I find really helpful is voice messages. Sometimes I just leave voice messages on my phone. Sometimes it helps to send them to people. So I have a few very close friends where we do it for each other. And so it feels like the space is being held right because you're sending it to someone.

But then sometimes I'll send a 10-15 minutes voice message, or I'll receive them from my friends, and then it's followed by a text being like, by the way, this was just me venting or this was just me releasing. You don't actually have to listen to it. And then the person can choose whether they want you to listen to it or not, but having that is really helpful.

And then in the same way that you talk about the different styles of journaling or the different prompts and things, I know for myself that I often have a journal in my bedside drawer. So again, when I can't sleep or I have an amazing idea just as I'm falling asleep, and then that keeps me wired because I'm like, I don't want to forget this, then I can just jot it down somewhere. It's also useful if I have strong dreams, the next morning to write those down.

And then someone once suggested I do an anger journal. So that's like just the piece where I just go crazy and sometimes I start writing and then I just start spamming the journal and scribbling and things like that. And then I have one where it's more ideas, although often I use my phone for that as well. I think phone notes, things like that.

When we feel all those thoughts and we want to get something out or we're feeling down and all the reasons you've spoken and gratitude lists and stuff like that, if we have a regular journal, that's great, but for people where that doesn't work, then there's all these different ways of adapting, which I think can still come under the category of journaling.

[00:23:13] Amber Benziger

Yeah, I think people don't realize. I love that you gave all those examples because I think people think of that traditional, like 'Dear Diary', but it doesn't have to be like that.

Especially for people with anxiety, there's a lot of times that underlying like, am I doing it right? That perfectionism. And journaling can be so helpful to get you out of that, because there is no right way to do it. There is nobody looking at it. There is no grade that you're going to get. It's just doing whatever feels right to get it out for you.

So if it is scribbling, if it's coloring, if it's jotting some notes in the margin, if it is a prompt and you like it to look perfect in a certain way, I feel like from page to page in my journal, it's all of them. It's different. It's whatever I needed in that moment, and it's always there. It's like this reliable source. And that's what I like about it. It's mine. It can be whatever I need in that moment, and it's always there. And I don't have to share it with anybody unless I want to.

Sometimes it's nice to have so I can look back in between my therapy sessions and be like, oh hey, that was going on. Maybe I should share that with my therapist. I feel like I use it in so many different ways in one little notebook. Or my phone, I use my phone a lot as well, like you said.

So whatever works for you, you can adapt it to best fit your needs. And I think that's the most important thing that I want people to take away from it, is it can be what you need it to be. So are you better at speaking? So do a voice memo. Are you better at drawing and coloring? And maybe that's what you do. That's how you get it out.

What works for you and what's going to help you and what helps you feel less anxious or less overwhelmed in that moment. How can you use it to adapt to your needs and your lifestyle?

Jaia Bristow

I love that. I love that ownership piece like, this is yours, take ownership of it, make it what you want it to be. And that permission for it to not be perfect. Like, you're not sharing this with anything. This is really for you.

And I love what you were saying that page to page is different. And again, the idea that, I didn't even consider that at the time when I was thinking, though. Of course, I would say it's obvious that being more colorful or drawing or being more creative in that way is also a type of journaling because I myself, that's not, I sometimes try and be artistic, but it doesn't come so naturally to me.

Though that being said, I definitely had a phase again when I was a teenager and journaling a lot where I did sometimes draw or have patterns or doodle. Doodling sometimes keeps me focused as well when I'm feeling anxious.

So I love everything you're saying. And one of the things I've noticed about journaling is, sometimes I look back on, not recent entries, but entries from 10+ years ago or more, and just noticing how far I've come and noticing which patterns are still reoccurring in my life, which things felt the most overwhelming at the time and like they'd never be resolved, and now don't hold so much grasp around me. Which issues I have worked with and through in some ways.

And so it's beautiful to see as well. It helps really notice how far we come in our personal development and inner journey at times.

[00:26:35] Amber Benziger

Yeah, it's nice to look back and see our progress or see like, hey, I overcame in that. Because we don't often give ourselves credit for those small victories, sometimes even those big victories. So it's nice to be able to say, oh, I was struggling with that and I was able to make it through. Or hey, look what worked for me at that moment, or, hey, I tried that and that didn't work. So having that time capsule for yourself that that's something that works for you, that reflection to look back.

Maybe for some people, it's just like, let me get it out there and never look at it again. So I think it's what works for you. And how can you utilize it best to manage your own anxiety? Because I think it's your journey. I know that word is used so much in mental health, but it's true.

I think we have to remember it's one step at a time, and your journey may change and reflect differently through different periods of your life. Sometimes it's cool to look back and reflect from where we came from.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. I think that's great.

So can you tell us a little bit more about The Anxiety Lab, which is something that you created?

Amber Benziger

So I started The Anxiety Lab in March of 2020 during Lockdown when everybody was like, what is happening? And I think we all had a large sense of anxiety.

And for myself, the things that were in my toolbox for my coping skills, I couldn't get to, I couldn't do a lot of them because of Lockdown. So I started to feel really overwhelmed and really out of control.

And I thought as a therapist and obviously we're human therapists, if I can't use my coping skills or if I'm struggling to find how to change or adapt, what are people outside of that, that maybe don't have those skills or don't have access to therapy or access to mental health, what does that feel like? And what would I want or what would they want?

And that's where it came from. I wanted to create this community for women to come and talk and share and be educated and learn how to get new skills that work for them, that are just for them in their own toolkit. And that's what the membership is.

It's a place that is an online community. It has workshops, it has psychoeducation. I give out journals and workbooks every month on a different topic under the umbrella of anxiety to really help people build their own skills so they can learn how to take back the control and not be prisoner to their overwhelming thoughts that they feel like, okay, I can manage these. I know when this comes up for me, this is what I can do because I have these tools.

Jaia Bristow

And that's aimed just at women then, is it?

[00:29:34] Amber Benziger

Yes.

Jaia Bristow

Brilliant. And how can people find out more about The Anxiety Lab and about you and your work? And do you work with clients of all genders or also just with women?

Amber Benziger

So in my private practice, I work with clients of all genders. In my membership, it is for people who identify as women.

And you can find more about The Anxiety Lab at theanxietylab.com.

You can also find out about all my services at ambervsanxiety.com, where you can look at my coaching, my private practice, the lab, and all the other work that I do. So that's a great place to find me.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for your time today, Amber. Thank you for sharing your skills and everything that you've just shared. I really appreciate it.

Amber Benziger

Thank you so much for having me. I enjoyed it and thanks again.