



Conscious Life presents

# ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

## How to get unstuck

Guest: Britt Frank

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### **[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson**

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Anxiety Super Conference. Today I'm speaking with Britt Frank, a trauma specialist who is a somatic experiencing practitioner and is trained in the Internal Family Systems level three.

She's also an award winning adjunct professor at the University of Kansas and has taught classes on ethics, addiction, and social work practice. Her first book, *The Science of Stuck: Breaking Through Inertia to Find Your Path Forward*, is out now.

One of my favorite people. Thank you for joining me, Britt.

### **Britt Frank**

Hi, it's so good to see you again.

### **Meagen Gibson**

So here it is. I love this book. I devoured it and cannot wait to talk to you about it.

So first, I want to just start with the wording choice in the title of your book that says so much about your understanding of the experience of anxiety. I'd love it if you could start by explaining why anxiety can feel like we're stuck.

### **Britt Frank**

My disclaimer is I've had anxiety issues my entire life. I was an anxious infant, I was an anxious toddler, teenager. I hate feeling anxious. I hate it more than almost anything in the world.

And if you don't know what it is, how it works, and why we need it, you're going to think it's your enemy and it's going to be the thing that you think keeps you stuck. I hear this every day, my anxiety keeps me from doing things, my anxiety is keeping me locked down, my anxiety is the reason I can't... fill in the blank. And none of that is actually true.

So as awful and as uncomfortable and as unpleasant as anxiety is, once you know the function of it, it's like taming the dragon and then you get to ride the dragon and then you get to fly and then you get to do your life.

**[00:01:36]**

So anxiety is awful and we need it. And it's not the thing keeping you stuck, even though you think it's the thing that's keeping you stuck.

**Meagen Gibson**

I love that. And I love that you validated, it's not keeping you stuck, but it does feel awful and it does feel all these ways, but it's not the thing keeping you stuck.

So what is the thing keeping you stuck then, if it's not the anxiety? And what is the purpose of anxiety? As you said, it has a purpose. It has a job. What is it?

**Britt Frank**

Again, I will continue to validate how awful and debilitating and sometimes paralyzing the feeling of anxiety is. Anxiety is not what keeps you stuck. Not understanding anxiety is what keeps you stuck. Or if you want to get super technical, your nervous system going into freeze is what keeps you stuck.

Anxiety is like the smoke alarm of our brains. It's the check engine light. When the check engine light comes on in your car, that's not the problem, it's a signal that tells you there's a problem. When your smoke alarm goes off, the smoke alarm isn't attacking your house. You wouldn't sit there and be like, I have such a problem with my smoke alarm because it's going off. The smoke alarm is a signal.

So anxiety is the check engine light of our brain. The beeping of our amygdala, which is what we call anxiety, it means that there's a problem somewhere. And if we don't know there's a problem, there's going to be a fire or our car is not going to work. So without the check engine lights of our brain, we actually will stay stuck.

But the misunderstanding of the physiology of anxiety, that's what keeps us stuck. It's misinformation. It's not laziness, it's not lack of motivation, it's not the things that we think are wrong with us. It's a fundamental lack of information. When we notice a little bit about the brain and anxiety, we realize, oh, that's what this is. This is how this works. It's awful, but it's useful, and here's how I can drive.

**Meagen Gibson**

And some people get really good at ignoring the lights on the dash lighting up. And then there's consequences to that.

And it's easy, cumulatively, to ignore our own personal signals. And I've heard you say many times that mental health is not a mental process, it's a physical process. And so those are those alarms that are going off in our bodies, that we're systematically just breadcrumb ignoring for a long time. And that's how it leads up to this feeling where we're feeling incapacitated and stuck.

**Britt Frank**

And I'll use the dentist, too, because I think that's a universal experience. When you have a toothache, no one would say, I'm having a tooth attack. My tooth is attacking me. It's no, you're ignoring an infection. And if you ignore it long enough, you're going to be getting a very painful, very expensive, very time consuming root canal.

**[00:04:30]**

And anxiety is that nudge of pain that's pointing us towards either an injury that needs attention or an actual threat in the environment or some piece of pain that we've never addressed or whatever. Or say a global pandemic or uncertainty in the environment. There are a lot of reasons.

**Meagen Gibson**

Or all of those things at once.

**Britt Frank**

Yes. And if you have children, now you're a homeschooler and all of the things.

So it makes sense why our brains do the things our brains do, but it makes no sense and we're all going to feel crazy and out of control if we don't understand these basic biological functions.

**Meagen Gibson**

And I've also heard, in speaking of validation, I've heard you say and explain that coping skills sometimes don't work and the purpose of a dysregulated nervous system. So I'd love it if you could talk about that now. What is the purpose of a dysregulated nervous system, and when coping skills are failing you in that state?

**Britt Frank**

And I hear the shame from my clients who come in, and they're like, Britt, I did all of the workbook, and I did everything on the Calm app and I went to yoga, and I'm doing all the things, and my nervous system is dysregulated, so the work is not working. I am broken. What's wrong with me?

I hear that every day. And the immediate story is, it's my fault. And if my coping skills aren't working, there's something fundamentally broken about me and therefore shame.

So let's look a little bit closer. I'm going to make something up. Let's say you've got three kids at home, and you have a mother who has COVID and she's in an assisted living facility, and you have a son who's in the military who's deployed overseas and we have a lot of things going on over there that are uncertain. None of those coping skills are going to calm you down because you're not supposed to be calm when your environment is that overwhelming.

That doesn't mean you have to stay dysregulated. It doesn't mean you need to stay in a state of panic. But to try to coping skill your way around an actual emergency or an actual threat is basically gaslighting your own system.

So if coping skills are not working, it's because your brain is doing what a brain under threat is supposed to do, which is to sound the alarm.

And again, that doesn't mean we have to stay there, but it does mean let's start with validating. A deep breath is not going to work if you're in a violent relationship. A yoga class is not going to work if you have a sick child in the hospital. We need different interventions.

**[00:06:53]**

And again, there's nothing wrong with those coping skills. Yoga is great. Breathing is great. But if your coping skills are not working, first look at the environment before assuming the problem is you, because I promise you, it's not you.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yes. And I can speak personally to this. I literally had that experience where I went to a doctor's office, this is how I came to terms with the fact that I had an anxiety problem that I needed to deal with, and there had been an inciting incident of public violence that almost harmed one of my children.

And I ended up in the doctor's office a week later and was saying, I do yoga, I meditate, I have a gratitude journal. I was doing all of the things. And he was like, it sounds like you're working really hard, and the way you feel is an appropriate response to what happened. Let's work that out.

There are situations, and I think we just need to validate people that there are things that you can do and tools at your disposal. And also the way you feel is an appropriate reaction to a lot of situations.

### **Britt Frank**

Yes. And that validating is sometimes the best coping skill and is also the most unutilized one. If you can start, forget the breaths, forget the 4, 6, 9 breathing, forget yoga for a second. Let's just start with my feelings make sense.

If you do nothing other than tell yourself, my feelings make sense. I don't have to stay here. I'm not going to stay stuck here. I don't have to live with this, but it makes sense. Sometimes the phrase "that makes sense" is more regulating for anxiety than any coping skill that you can try in your toolbox.

There is something very powerful about validating your own self experience and having someone you trust look at you and go, that makes sense. The three words "that makes sense" are some of the most regulating words in our language and underutilized. So start using them. Put that phrase, "this makes sense" in your toolbox.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I've heard that from you before, and I will tell you that I used to be an instructor at a University. And one of the things that I found was that kids had varying levels of ability and accessibility to therapy, whether it was financial or language barriers or culture barriers or not feeling safe, lots of barriers.

And so what I kept telling them was, I need you to find one adult in your life who, a mature peer, who when you explain what your worries are, what your concerns are, what your anxieties are, says, that makes sense.

Because I just feel like most of us pay for therapy just so we can have another functionally emotionally mature adult look us in the eye and go, that makes sense, because we just don't get it enough in our lives. And so if that's not accessible to you, then just find people in your life that can say that to you. It's such a grounding validating thing.

**[00:09:52] Britt Frank**

And teach your partner to say it. My husband is not a super therapy guy, but I said to him, if you see me in an anxiety swirl, don't try to problem solve. Don't try to strike up... He's a very smart guy and he's very logical. I'm like, first, before we do anything, here's your phrase that will help reregulate me. Just look at me and be like, okay, you know what? You're making sense. That makes a lot of sense. And immediately that will dial it down, at least from a 10 to a 7.

And so you can't really access any of our wonderful cognitive thinking, anxiety regulating skills if your brain is on fire. So tell your friends, tell your partner to tell you, that makes sense, you're making sense right now. Even if they don't get it. You can say, that makes sense without really understanding why or how.

**Meagen Gibson**

This is a white lie that is acceptable. That makes sense even if you don't understand at all.

**Britt Frank**

It will soon, and it does in some cases. All of our stuff makes sense even if we don't understand the how's and the whys.

So just start with the assumption that it makes sense and then we can go from there. But it's such a powerful phrase that we don't use anymore.

**Meagen Gibson**

And I think that's something that partners or friends and family get so confused so often is that, that makes sense, they feel like it has to make sense. What the other person is saying and they're trying to relate to, they have to understand it. You don't have to understand it at all. Not even a little bit.

**Britt Frank**

Or agree with it.

**Meagen Gibson**

You don't have to agree at all. Exactly.

Somebody could be like, I'm trying to make something up that's not weird or offensive on the fly but, "panda bears are ugly", and you're just like, okay, say more. Alright, help me understand.

I want to move on because there's so much I want to cover with you, and I want to get past the panda bears.

**Britt Frank**

I love the panda bear thing.

## **[00:11:54] Meagen Gibson**

I will validate you and tell you that you gave the first simple explanation between the parasympathetic and the sympathetic symptomology regarding procrastination. You explain the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system in a way that... It's one of those things, like the words affect and effect. I have to always Google to understand the difference between them. Which one do I use here?

And so you gave me an analogy that helps me remember. I was like, oh, that makes perfect sense. So I would love it if you could share that now that I've put you on the spot and you're like, I don't remember what that is.

## **Britt Frank**

Fortunately, I do. Because the academic world is so fond of using big, elaborate, extravagant language. When you're overwhelmed, when you're anxious, you don't want to be thinking about the parasympathetic, dorsal vagal, like what?

So if you can think of your system like a seesaw, let's go to elementary school analogies here. If you're on the seesaw and you're up, you're in sympathetic activation. If your seesaw is up, you're going to feel anxious, you're going to feel edgy, you're going to be irritable and restless and sort of like ahh. That's seesaw up. Seesaw up is sympathetic activation.

If your seesaw is down, that's parasympathetic, or if you think para, parachute coming down. Parasympathetic is the seesaw on the ground, and that's what we call inertia or laziness or procrastination or lack of motivation.

But if you can think of it like a seesaw first, and then I have swing sets in the book, too, but that gets into the polyvagal theory. But if you're talking about anxiety, you can have sympathetic anxiety where it's like the super buzzy, go, go, go. But you can also have parasympathetic anxiety where you're feeling locked on your couch and you're immobilized and you don't feel good and you don't feel safe. But there's parasympathetic anxiety and there's sympathetic anxiety.

And just ask, is my seesaw up or is my seesaw down? Because your interventions are going to be different. You don't put a down intervention for an up nervous system and so on. So start with just, I'm a seesaw. Am I up or am I down? And then we can go from there.

## **Meagen Gibson**

And it's such a thing that I don't think people have talked about too much. I know my experience or my understanding at the beginning of anxiety was very up, up, up. And that was why I think it took so long for me to come to terms with it and get a diagnosis, is because it was also really high functioning. I used the heck out of it. I accomplished a lot of things with high functioning, real revved up anxiety.

But nobody really talks about the other side of that when your seesaw is down. And that's also an anxiety response. And I think that's more of what you're speaking of in that stuck mentality of the title of the book that the *Science is Stuck* is just the other side of that seesaw when we're talking about anxiety.

### **[00:14:49] Britt Frank**

The word procrastination is such a terrible word. One, because it's a big mushy word that actually... Okay so you're not doing the thing that you want to do. Check. The word procrastination is just a shamey multisyllabic word that in no way is descriptive or is helpful.

Procrastination is a parasympathetic anxiety response, so let's call it that. It's a fear response where your system is locked down in freeze and your seesaw has 12 tons of bricks on it and you're not going anywhere. But if you don't know that procrastination is an anxiety response, you're going to think I'm lazy and I'm unmotivated. And that's not biologically accurate.

Someone got really frustrated with me yesterday, and they're like, well, this is just an excuse. If you're saying that this parasympathetic, that's just an excuse. I'm like, where did an explanation become a synonym for an excuse? When your car runs out of gas, you're not excusing it. It's just like, oh well, guess I can't do anything about it. It's just the explanation. We explain things so we can change things.

So explaining the down function of the nervous system isn't like, well, that's your excuse, that's your out. No, that's your explanation so now you know what to do so we can get out. Nobody likes feeling stuck. No one likes feeling inert. I shouldn't say no one, some people do, but that's another conversation. Most of us don't. If you're watching this, you don't.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And we've assigned these character traits and judgments to a state, just a biological state of being that once we understand it better, we can move it, get out of it, or allow it kindly, compassionately, be like, oh okay, if I surrender the energy required to try to fight against this and just surrender to it and give myself a time. Whatever seems appropriate. I'm going to give myself the next 12 hours to literally be this and then I'll start intervening with the tools and tactics that I know. You move through it faster sometimes I feel like.

### **Britt Frank**

The way through is always the fastest way. But most of us, and myself included until I knew some of this, I want to do every single thing around this because going through it feels really scary. And I'm scared that if I give myself 12 hours to do nothing, I'm going to forever do nothing and I'll never shower again and nothing will ever get done and the children will starve. It makes sense that we would fear that because we're not taught how to trust ourselves.

But like you just said, I promise you a faster way out of inertia is to come alongside it and partner with it and be curious about it and ask yourself, what accommodations can I actually make? Can I take 2 hours here? No, I can't. Okay, for some people that's true. For others it's not, assuming that you have choices and relative safety. I push back on anybody that says there's nothing I can do here to give myself a pass. That's almost never true if you're in a safe enough situation with relative access to resources.

So let's pair with it. Let's partner with it. Not excuse it, not justify it, but let's accommodate it so we can get through it as fast as humanly possible because it's super unpleasant.

### **[00:17:52] Meagen Gibson**

It's almost like self validation. If you're not validating yourself first and foremost, how can you move through anything if you're not saying, I see the need and I'm going to do what I can, even if I don't change anything in my environment except I put earplugs in so that it's quieter.

If I'm an emergency worker, I can't leave what I'm doing if I'm on a 12 hour shift and I'm really feeling... What can I do?

I know I used to work long shifts. We were both in television at one point. If I was having a hard day I would change my socks, which sounds so ridiculous, but I would just take care of my feet. And then I was like, oh, okay, I've got a little perk. I can get through the rest of this. But like you said, not everybody can abandon ship and go lie in a dark room for 12 hours and give their bodies what they need all the time.

### **Britt Frank**

But even with the compassionate self-talk, and some people are afraid of that because they think it'll turn them soft and now they're going to be cosigning on lazy, there's actually a science basis for why compassionate self-talk is a faster path forward.

If we're talking anxiety, if you're yelling at yourself, "You're so lazy, what's wrong with you? Get up, get up, get up". Well, doing that is actually going to trigger a fear response. So you're already locked in a fear response that yelling at yourself will either amplify it if you're in the up seesaw fear response, or it'll smush it down faster if you're in the down.

So forget about this being like a woo woo saccharine. It's not that. Scientifically you're going to move faster if you're nicer to yourself, because being nice to yourself is regulating. So if you're anxious, compassionate self talk will bring you down a few degrees, then you can get going.

But if beating ourselves up works to stop anxiety, I wouldn't have a job and this conference wouldn't need to exist. We're experts at it. It doesn't work so let's try something else.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I want to move on to what was a surprising part for me that caught me unexpectedly but made so much sense, which is how beautifully you talk about grief and the process of becoming an emotional adult in the book. It was so great.

And my favorite quote was when you said, "The role of grieving is to find your way home to yourself". That really resonated with me.

So can you tell us why grief is so important in emotional adulthood and what you outlined as the tasks of grieving?

### **Britt Frank**

So the grief problem is such a huge problem. And I'm convinced from my humaning and personal recovery and clinical work that our refusal and inability and being ill-equipped to manage grief is the number one contributor to all of the things. To anxiety, to depression, to addiction, to relational



dysfunction, insert toxic habit or trait or behavior of choice. And I promise you if you drill down far enough, you're going to discover a pool of grief that has been sitting there patiently waiting.

**[00:20:56]**

So we are not taught how to grieve. The only time grief is even mentioned is if someone is dead. And even then you get a very finite period before people will say, get over it, move on, pick yourself up, everything happens for a reason, all that stuff that people say. But anytime anything ends, there has to be a degree of grief. Any time anything changes, there has to be a degree of grief.

Even something like, let's say you're getting fit and healthy and strong, you still need to grieve that the body that you were in up until then provided you with safety and comfort and security. And so not being taught how to grieve or why it's important to grieve is really the number one contributor.

Because I promise you, if you're anxious, if I burrow down far enough under that anxiety, I'm going to find some place where there's a sad part of you that didn't get what they needed, that was never validated or ever seen.

And we can't really emotionally adult, which means I know what I want to do and if I have the power to do it, I choose to do it. I do the things I know to do. I do the things I want to do. I make my own choices without fear of what other people will say, think or do, generally. No one does that all the time, but generally that's what being an emotional adult means.

If we don't grieve that the parents we hope we had are never coming. And as a 42 year old, I can beat my head on the wall trying to make my mother happy but it's not going to happen. It didn't happen then. It's not going to happen now. We need to grieve that we got some things, we didn't get others. We need to grieve that we had some resources, but we were ill-equipped in other areas.

And if we refuse to grieve our losses, and if we refuse to acknowledge that all change, even positive change requires grief, we're going to get stuck, and we're going to stay stuck. I'm so sorry about that. The grief thing really sucks. It's awful.

And grief is so terrifying to us because it's so final. There is absolutely no ifs ands or buts. There's no way forward. You have no choices. It's awful to feel that powerless. That's why we hate grieving. But if we don't do it, we're going to be in serious trouble in a variety of areas.

And the five stages of grieving that we were all taught, that was written for people who were dying of cancer. It wasn't written for people who are grieving.

So there's a Harvard model from J.W. Worden that I love, and he talks about tasks. One, admit the thing happened. That one's tough. Two, feel the feelings of the thing that happened. Also tough. Three, figure out what needs to adjust now that this thing has happened and what boundaries need to be implemented, what relationships need to change. And then task four is, what do you want to do with what you have now? Now that we've done all of this stuff, what are your choices? What are you going to do?

It's a beautiful model, but grief is awful.

Thank you for naming it. Everyone, when I talk to them about the book, skips over the grief section, but it's so important.

## **[00:23:46] Meagen Gibson**

It is. I completely agree with everything that you said, that it is the thing under the thing. And I think exactly what you said is exactly right, which is that we only make space for grief when people have just died. And there's so much grief that needs to be processed with living relationships, people who are very much still alive.

Because even if nothing has happened, relationships just change. And people change. One person grows and one person stays where they are and doesn't feel the need to grow. So they grow apart. There's grief there. There's grieving the relationships that you'll never have, those family core imprint relationships that will never be what you always, in the first 20 years of your life were hoping they would be.

Even just in parenthood grieving, I can feel right now. I'm literally having anticipatory grief because my kids are in such a great window. They like us, they want to be with us, they're cool humans, we really like being together, and I'm already grieving when they go out and be out there. I know it's part of it. They're going to have to be independent. It's a natural process. They're going to detach. They're going to get sassy. They're going to go off on their own.

Grief is all around us. The grief that we genuinely feel at the things that we see in the world and how it tears our heartstrings and what makes the world both smaller and feel so far away at the same time. There's no limit to the kinds of grief that you can have access to if you pay attention to it.

And I think part of the reason, and maybe you can speak to this, that we avoid it is because we can't come to terms with the after, of how the world will be irreparably different afterwards.

And I know from experience in grieving family relationships in particular, that it completely upends what your sense of home is. What is home if home isn't this figurative place of relationship that I always thought of as home?

## **Britt Frank**

Yay, grief. This has turned into such a fun conversation.

So there's good news here. So just to put some levity back into it, as much as these opportunities, and I love how you phrased it, opportunities for grief are all around us if we pay attention. That's so beautiful. So that sounds like a doomsday sentence, like, guess what? All around you are grief. But to the degree that you're willing to grieve, that's the degree that you can heal and experience joy.

It takes so much energy to suppress grief. A lot of our anxieties function is to keep the grief away from us. So as awful as grief is, the fastest way to a joyful life where you're feeling in charge of your choices and ownership over your body and autonomy and your relationships, that makes the work well worth doing.

And again, as much as the work of grieving is awful, it's actually worse, it takes longer and takes more resources to avoid the grief than to go through the grief.

New parents are a great example of this. I work with a lot of new moms who beat themselves mercilessly because there's a part of them that's going, what have I done? This is a mistake. I want to go back. We can work through the grief that you're no longer in charge of your own life with no one else depending on you. We can work through that grief so much faster if you honor it, name it.

**[00:27:13]**

Grief is not something to get over. It's something to work through. But you can't get through anything if you won't name it.

So my invitation to everyone is, as awful and gross and scary as this grief thing is, it is in fact the fastest way home.

So the definition of home is where I feel safe, where I feel loved, where I feel nurtured. Once you're an adult the only place you can really call home consistently and permanently, is inside. Because like you said, people change, life changes, people die, people get sick. Home is an inside job. If home is where I know you, I trust you, you're safe, and your love is a constant, the only place you're going to find that is inside. And the only way you're going to get there is if you unclog by doing the grief work. It's worth it.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Don't cringe, because it's so great. You're absolutely right.

And I've had this silent victory thing about all the home organization obsession that we have now as entertainment, because my running metaphor for a very long time has been, it's like you open up your garage or your basement or wherever you toss the things that you don't want to deal with, the closet, whatever. And it's the task of pulling all of it out, which is just such a mess. And you make a way bigger mess before you clean it up.

But then you get to choose. You get to see the layout of what really is in here, and then you get to make choices about what goes back and why and where you put it and what you make room for. And then what you're left for, which is what I think you're saying, it's just all the space to create new memories or hoard new things.

### **Britt Frank**

It's true, though. The grief work is like organizing the closet. It's going to be gross and messy. And then once everything is labeled, in bins and put away, you can open the door without it all falling on your head.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Exactly. Without getting surprised by it, which is what we don't want.

So I know you've been very open and humbly talked about your addiction past and substance use. And I know that addiction and anxiety are so intertwined and concurrently all baled out together a lot. And so you had a great example regarding aviation training that you use in the book to explain this. So I'd love it if you could share that now.

### **Britt Frank**

So my husband is a pilot, and he was in the Navy. He's not a fighter jet pilot. He's a private pilot. He does the air show. And I went to the air show in Kansas City, and we saw the Blue Angels, and I was so

blown away by how they have to overcome so much human stuff in order to fly those jets and in order to do what they do. It's absolutely astounding.

**[00:29:49]**

So in one of my procrastinations, not doing what I was supposed to be doing, I just started reading up and watching documentaries on aviation and on the Blue Angels. And I came across all these great metaphors for healing from addiction.

And there's this thing in aviation called the OODA Loop. And if you take that framework and you apply it to anything that you're struggling with as far as the habit, it's about orienting and observing and getting curious about our behavior and then making decisions and taking action. It's an amazing and very simple tool for getting yourself unstuck.

So instead of going with some flowery metaphor, I was so in the weeds with fighter pilot stuff and aviation and all that. I'm like, I'm just going to write a chapter about addiction and aviation because it's so true.

And when pilots are learning to fly, they need to learn to trust their instruments. Not what they feel like, not what things look like. Because with our perception, your brain plays tricks on you all the time. And any pilot of any kind will tell you that. You can look like you're flying straight, but if your instruments are telling you otherwise, you can't always trust what you feel. Sometimes you have to trust your instruments.

And when it comes to anxiety or habits or addictions or depression, we can't always trust what our brains are telling us because sometimes our brains get it wrong and sometimes our brains misperceive. And so our instrument panel are our resources, are our friends, are checking the facts, are working with challenging our assumptions with getting more information.

So I really loved the pilot analogy thing. It works for me. I hope it resonates because it makes sense.

**Meagen Gibson**

It really resonated for me. And what I was thinking while you're just speaking now, is the physiology of anxiety can often make it so tough to literally trust your gut. To know what's right. And that's why we do gut checks with our friends where we've had an experience or a conversation with somebody that leaves us feeling crazy, as you would, or questioning our own reality.

And when you have anxiety and you get anxious responses in those kinds of encounters, then that gut check is so, the physiology of, I feel sick or my chest is tight and all of the things the body responds to as a result of anxiety can make it hard. People say, check in with your gut. And you're like, well, my gut feels like I'm going to throw up and be sick. So does that mean I was wrong?

And so your instrumentation, as so beautifully stated, is checking in with your trusted people in your life and explaining the situation and analyzing, well, what is true? Can I objectively look at this situation?

**Britt Frank**

And checking the facts. And it's true, our intuition that we all have at the core of our being, is never off. But if your trauma and your nervous system or whatever is interfering with your signals, then your gut

is, like you said, is going to be really hard to hear. Because is this my gut? Is this my amygdala? Is this my brain producing a tightening in my stomach?

**[00:32:53]**

So checking your instruments, meaning your physiology, is one, but your relationships are another. Checking the facts is another. Asking yourself, is there any other possible explanation for this besides the one I'm making up in my head, is another.

So I really like to think with anxiety of, you have an instrument panel with a variety of things and do not make a decision about yourself or about anything until you've verified with your instrument panel and you've cross checked and you've done all of these wonderful things that pilots know to do before making a decision.

Because almost always if we check enough sources, we're going to at least come to some conclusion that ends with, I'm not crazy, because there's no such thing as a crazy person.

**Meagen Gibson**

I have a 9 year old and genetically a little bit anxious. He's been vocalizing, he's an externalizer, thank goodness, so we always know what's going on and can help him out and be a guide. But we've started teaching him to just do the equal and opposite.

He'll be like, this is what's really scary. And I'm like, your imagination is so powerful. Look what you've imagined might be happening. Now imagine the best thing that could be happening as well. Could both things be true? And that's been really, because he does have a fantastic imagination and ability to be extremely creative, which, that kind of power when used for evil is also terrible. It can make you feel awful.

**Britt Frank**

Can I just say I love that your child is learning that. That's how you learn how to human. That gives me hope that some people are teaching their children emotional fluency properly, which is so great.

**Meagen Gibson**

Well, I will say, I'll recommend, I don't know if you know who he is, but there's an author, his name's John Kenney, I think, and he does little books. It's, *Love Poems for Married People*. And I think he did one that's called *Poems for Anxious People*, and it's not for children, but it's my 9 year old's favorite. And it's him having anxiety conversations with himself. And my 9 year old thinks it is absolutely hilarious.

And so now it's another tool where he can be like, I'm having a conversation with my bad thoughts. I'm like, okay, how's it going? And he goes back and forth between the two voices. And all of these tools are available regardless of your age or level of development or level of understanding. We can break it down into simple terms that work for all of us.

**Britt Frank**

I love that so much. And the equal and opposite technique is so powerful. Because we can all describe what anxiety feels like. Everyone knows what it feels like to feel like an anxious wreck. But to

ask yourself this question, what does it feel like to feel safe in your body? We're not taught how to. And again, it's not about toxic positivity. It's not about ignoring. It's about why don't you just try to catch yourself not feeling like crap?

### **[00:35:53]**

Because I promise you, your nervous system at some point during the day is going to feel less bad than others, because there's no way to stay in the same state. That's just not possible. So see if you can try to catch moments of, if not feeling good and safe, at least feeling a little bit less bad so we can actually try to catch some somatic markers of safety.

It doesn't mean you have to even do anything differently, even if you did nothing but try to catch your body in moments of feeling less bad. And then you can ask yourself, who am I with? What am I listening to? What am I doing? That's a very quick and easy tool for at least teaching your body that there are other options besides code red.

And so we just want to learn to both orient towards the things that we don't like and towards the things that we do like and that we do want. At some point in your day you're going to feel less bad than others. So catch those moments. And that will help your body not go into this very myopic singular focus threat response thing if it knows, oh, sometimes I feel like this, and then sometimes I feel like this. So try to catch it when you're feeling less crappy.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And when we become aware that we might have anxiety or that we're dealing with this kind of stuff, I think that we've gotten into a cycle where we have stress response and then just avoidance of stress response. And we've mistaken that avoidance, whatever those coping skills are of avoidance, as safety, the feeling of safety because we've gotten so far away from what feels safe.

And so I love that you named that because it's not just, I'm activated and stressed and now I'm going to do what I can to avoid it. And now also what would feel safe? And it takes some time to develop that and trust yourself enough and trust the world around you and your circumstances to even allow yourself to that exploration.

### **Britt Frank**

It's super scary. And so a really easy way, again, I'm very big, especially now, on, here are things you can do without having to do anything new or extra. We're all watching TV, we're all watching screens. We're all scrolling through stuff. Fine. You're going to be doing that anyway. So let's make it a mindfulness exercise.

After you've done whatever it is that you're doing or watched whatever you're watching, just ask yourself, how's my body feel? There are certain shows that I know on certain days I'm not going to be able to tolerate because they make my system do things that are really uncomfortable and unpleasant.

So if you're going to be stuck on a screen anyway, instead of what's wrong with me? Why am I so lazy? Why can't I power down my screen? Okay, you're going to be on your screen. We know that. I know that. You know that. So fine, let's work with it. Just ask yourself, which shows make me feel like crap? Which shows make me feel a little bit less like crap?

**[00:38:35]**

At least start paying attention, because we don't have a choice over the world. We don't have a choice over our physiology all the time. We don't have a choice over a lot of things. We do have a choice about, am I going to click on to a show that makes me feel like crap, or am I going to click onto a show that makes me feel not like crap?

That is the easiest, most time effective, cost effective way of working with anxiety that I know of. Just pay attention to what you're watching, good or not good, and then make an adjustment.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I love that advice. My husband and I have a rule: if we watch something heavy, we have to watch something really funny right before bed. If we finish something heavy like *Vikings*, people are dying, then we cue up something we know that for 20 minutes is going to make us laugh really hard, and then we're okay. Now we can go to bed.

### **Britt Frank**

I love that. I can't watch *Vikings*. I want to. It's such a good show, but it stresses my system out so bad. I can't do it. It's a great show.

But pay attention. And this doesn't mean stick your head in the sand and pretend that the world isn't on fire. You can be of service to other people and stay informed without tormenting your nervous system. Because frankly, if you over-ingest news, you're not going to be useful to anyone anyway because you're going to go into freeze.

So limit what you're doing just to the degree that you can still function. This isn't about I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine. The world is out there. But pay attention to what you're watching and what you're doing, at least so you know, so you're a little bit more aware of the things that you do have control over, because there's so much that we don't.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Last probably, what I think might be the last, we'll see. I want to talk about something you name explicitly regarding emotional regression.

So I have experienced this viscerally in my family of origin, and I haven't lived anywhere near them in more than 25 years. And yet when I go home and I get stressed or activated in those old patterns of relationships, I turn into the worst version of my 14 year old self.

And I think this kind of experience is really shocking for people, especially anyone who's on a conscious growth path or trying to do the work. We somehow think we're wearing some kind of self-help Kevlar and can't be impacted by old stuff or old other people's stuff. So what would you say to someone trying to break free of those patterns and understand that emotional regression pattern?

### **Britt Frank**

So I do it too. I don't care how mature or how emotionally developed you are. When we're around our family of origin, we are going to regress to a younger age. It's almost a universal experience.

**[00:41:03]**

So again, let's start by naming it. If you don't know that there's a thing in your psyche called emotional regression, you're going to think you're crazy. What's wrong with me that every time I go to my family of origin, all of a sudden I'm doing crazy things and I'm saying things and it's like somebody else has hijacked my brain. Cool. Guess what? That's a thing. That's called emotional regression.

So if you don't know that's a thing, in the holidays, this is why the holidays for therapists is what tax season is for accountants. Because everyone is emotionally regressing. No one knows that is happening. And everyone is experiencing anxiety and depression and panic and everything else.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I also find that that happens at the end of the school year as well for aging out of high school people or aging out of college people.

### **Britt Frank**

It's a thing. It's a thing.

So to make it super short and manageable, your psyche is not just one thing, but you're made up of lots of parts. Any complex system is made up of lots of parts. So you have nice parts and you have mean parts and you have little childlike parts that are scared and you have teenage parts that are super cranky and get really pissy. And so there's not just, I am this one thing. Your personality is a collection of lots of different parts that all feel different ways.

When you're around people like your family of origin and suddenly you're experiencing a 13 year old part or a 9 year old part, first, it helps to name oh, wow, this feels like I'm an angry teenager right now. Just start by naming that. Then ask yourself, what would an angry teenager need right now if I were to help them?

And a lot of times we try to intervene with these self-care things that are not appropriate. So if I drink a kale smoothie, but I have an angry 16 year old, a kale smoothie is not going to ring the bell for that 16 year old. Or a really hardcore workout is not going to soothe a terrified infant part.

So the first question to ask yourself if you notice you're feeling younger or smaller than your chronological age, how old do I feel? You don't need to know exactly and you don't need to know why, but generally, does this feel like I'm a little teeny, tiny baby? Does it feel like I'm a sullen toddler, does it feel like a cranky teen?

Then ask yourself, if I had a child this age standing in front of me who was very upset, what would they need from me? What would they need me to say to them? And what would they need me to do for them? And that will help you match your self-care interventions to the part of you that's needing the help.

Because often even our best efforts at self-care fall because we don't know which part of us is the one that's injured. So it's like if your knee was bleeding and I put a Band-Aid on my wrist, that's not going to do anything because we have to match the part that's wounded to the intervention that we're using.



**[00:43:41]**

So how old do I feel? What would a child this age need? And what can I do? What are my choices? And then that will help you feel a little bit more empowered to manage emotional regression, which we all call anxiety.

If we don't know it's regression, I'm just going to say I'm so anxious around my family. Well, yeah, but you're anxious because of emotional regression. And then underneath that far enough is grief and blah, blah, blah, blah. But let's start with matching our self-care interventions to the age of the part of us that needs the help.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And I love that you objectified it like that. What would a child at this age that was experiencing this, mean? Because if you ask me, when I emotionally regress, what would I need? I think every parent child relationship, to be fair, has a mismatch occasionally. There are needs that are just mismatched.

If you've got parents who are quiet, more academic, super introverted, and they've got a really active, engaged, popular child, there's going to be a mismatch there in needs and able abilities to just feel seen and heard. That happens in every household, to a degree anyway.

But if you as a child had needs neglected and you knew what your needs were and then they weren't met in ways, then it's really hard when you emotionally regress to actually state what you need. You don't even know. Speaking of a friend of mine who went through this.

But to say, what would a child who is experiencing... Immediately, I've got five solutions. I know how to comfort that kind of a child, but if it's me, I'm like, I don't know. I don't know what I need.

### **Britt Frank**

That's why externalizing matters. Heck, if I knew what I needed at that age, I mean, really, half the time, if you said, Britt, what do you need right now? I don't know.

So we have to start with, how old do I feel? And then what would any child... And it's not that deep. Teenagers generally need snacks, rest, TV or friends. Those are the four categories. Little teeny, tiny babies, tend to need biological needs like going to the bathroom, being fed, being changed, or sleep.

And so you can very quickly get to what's an effective intervention if you just objectively say, what is an appropriate developmental need for a child this age? It will make it a little less overwhelming. I don't know who I am. Okay, what does the 3 year old need? Snacks. Get them a snack.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Well, anybody whose parents that have been around teenage years also knows that sometimes they say things that aren't actually what they need. And they're like, I just want to be alone. Really what they want is for you to sit next to them on their bed, but just don't talk. I want to be with you, but I want you to pretend like you're not here. So it's confusing. It's confusing for them. It's confusing for you.

So, really getting quiet and trying to name the part, validate it, acknowledge that it even exists. Okay, I see what's popping up right now.

**[00:46:35] Britt Frank**

It makes sense.

**Meagen Gibson**

It does. It makes total sense.

And I think you called this in the book, psychological homesickness or something like that. Does that sound right?

**Britt Frank**

That's like, I want my mom.

I know when I'm anxious or if I'm having a hard day, there's this primal desire and yearning to have someone take... All of our fairy tales and movies are based upon this notion of someone is coming to rescue us. Either a Prince or a Fairy Godmother or something from outside of us is coming to save us from ourselves.

And this sense of home that we're wanting, again, home is an inside job. And ultimately the savior, the person to rescue us. And I'm not talking spiritually. I'm just talking on the human plane. Whatever you believe is fine, we're not talking about that. But the thing that you're needing is going to come from a relationship that you have with yourself.

And so psychological homesickness happens when we outsource the role of parents. If you are grown, no matter how much we need other people, no matter how much we need to be with our fellow beings, we need to know that the only mother and father that we get once we're grown is the one inside of us.

And so really cultivating that and developing language around that and rituals around that. Because you're not going to feel like home if you think that home is inside the body of another person or inside an object that you buy or inside of the food that you ingest. Home needs to be where I love you, I see you, I am going to keep you safe to the best of your ability, is a constant. And the only relationship you can have that with as an adult is yourself.

**Meagen Gibson**

I can't think of anything better to end on.

Britt, where can people find out more about you, your work, the book?

**Britt Frank**

I spend way too much time on Instagram, so come say hi. It's just my name [@brittfrank](https://www.instagram.com/brittfrank).

And you can find out more about the book at [scienceofstuck.com](https://scienceofstuck.com) and you can buy it wherever books are sold.

**[00:48:35] Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic. Thanks so much for being with us today.

**Britt Frank**

Thank you.