



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

Anxiety as a stage of grief

Guest: Claire Bidwell Smith

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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 Claire Bidwell Smith, a therapist specializing in grief and the author of three books of nonfiction, *The Rules of Inheritance*, *After This: When Life Is Over, Where Do We Go?* and *Anxiety: The Missing Stage of Grief*.

Claire offers numerous online programs for grief in addition to working with people one on one. Led by her own experiences with grief and fueled by her work in hospice and private practice, Claire strives to provide support for all kinds of people experiencing all kinds of grief.

Thank you so much for joining me, Claire.

Claire Bidwell Smith

Thanks for having me.

Meagen Gibson

So first, I just wanted to reflect how validating and soothing your book, *Anxiety: The Missing Stage of Grief* is. And also anyone who enjoys our conversation here, you should definitely either buy or borrow the audio version of the book because Claire reads it herself and it's super soothing.

Claire Bidwell Smith

Thank you. It's the book that I most needed when I was going through my first losses, so I'm glad to hear that it's comforting to others.

Meagen Gibson

So I'd love it if you could start by sharing with us the story of how you personally made the connection between grief and anxiety.

Claire Bidwell Smith

So I was 14 when both of my parents got cancer at the same time, I'm an only child so it was a lot for my little family to go through. My mother died when I was 18, when I had just started college, and then my father died 7 years later when I was 25.

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And it was so much loss, so much grief at a time when all of my peers were moving out into the world in normal ways. And I found myself just riddled with anxiety, a lot of sadness as well, but so much anxiety, and it was very debilitating. I ended up in ER here and there with panic attacks and always the doctors just sent me on my way saying I was young and there was nothing wrong with me.

I just thought there must be something wrong with me emotionally, but I didn't connect it to my grief because nobody was talking about anxiety and grief.

And it wasn't until years later when I was studying psychology in grad school, and I was reading about trauma and PTSD, I started to put the pieces together, and I thought, wow, maybe I'm anxious because my parents died, which sounds laughable now to not have connected that, but there it was.

I became a therapist. I worked in hospice initially and then private practice. And along the way, I just saw so many of my clients also grappling with that same anxiety after a loss. And started to write about it online, and then I wrote this book.

So, I think that it was something that just wasn't being talked about in the grief world, but that was really happening for a lot of people.

Meagen Gibson

Thank you for that. It brings me to my next question, which is actually one of the people behind the scenes here at our Anxiety Super Conference, Miranda, is our fantastic editor and a really talented musician in her own right. And she also lost both of her parents in 2021.

And so when I knew I was going to do this interview, I asked her if there was anything that she wanted to ask you. And I'm just going to read her quote here.

She said, "How do you feel safe again in the world when you lose both of your parents, especially if you don't have your own romantic relationship? I have a sense that everything around me is still there and looks the same, but I'm in a completely different world, a bit anchorless in a deep, invisible way. All the stages of grief stuff doesn't reach me".

So if you can address what she said and then also incorporate what you mentioned in the book about Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' stages of grief, because I was so surprised by that and I have a feeling other people don't know about it either.

Claire Bidwell Smith

Well, my heart goes out to her. It's such a hard loss to go through. But Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, I love. She's the early pioneer of grief. She was one of the first people to really talk about it at a time when we really needed it.

But she was a physician in a hospital in Chicago, and what she was observing was that all the patients around her that were dying, were going through these five stages as they approached death with a terminal diagnosis.

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And so she came up with those, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. They make a lot of sense for someone who's just received news that they're going to die. You do go through a lot of those stages, and in that order often.

The stages were then later applied to the grief process, and they don't work quite as well. And even Kübler-Ross herself said that they were just meant to be guideposts and not a formula.

And I think one of the reasons why we've clung to them for so many years now, is that it's appealing to have this formula. If only we just had to go through these five stages, and then we could be on the other side of this immensely hard experience.

Meagen Gibson

Through a linear process.

Claire Bidwell Smith

Gosh, it would be great if we just had to do these five things and then we're on the other side. But it doesn't quite work like that.

I think we come in and out of the stages. I think some of us skip some. Some of us never go through certain ones. And then there are others that weren't included, anxiety being one of them.

I think to answer her question, it's really hard to see the world in the same way again. That feeling of safety, security is gone. It was never really there to begin with, and I think the pandemic is a good lens to look at that through. We were all going along in the world thinking everything was fine and safe, and suddenly it was all ripped out from underneath us.

And it's hard to now even go back to a sense of safety. Now as a culture, as a world, we're bracing for what comes next. And that happens after you go through a big loss, too. You suddenly really know that terrible things can happen, hard things can happen, in a way that you really didn't know beforehand.

And I think the work there is work that we have to do as human beings in general. We have to learn to live with uncertainty. We have to learn to live with change and transition. At its core loss is about change, and change is about transition. And all of those things flow together. And once you really know what it's like to live through them, it's hard not to fear them again. But I think that there is an enormous amount of work we can do in order to learn not to fear them anymore.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Thank you.

I know that you said that anxiety is not always a negative emotion, but we give it such a negative connotation typically. So why do you think that is? And if it's not negative, what is it?

[00:06:58] Claire Bidwell Smith

When I was doing research for this book, I went to see an anxiety expert, and I said to him, is it possible to get rid of anxiety? And he laughed at me. And I was like, okay. And he was like, no, we don't get rid of anxiety. We use anxiety. It's actually very useful. We always have a certain amount of anxiety. It helps us prepare for life. It helps us get ready for an interview. It helps us get ready for a big trip we're going to go on.

There is a usefulness to anxiety, but it can get away from us and it can take over and it can become debilitating. And that's when we need to take measures in order to manage it and get our hands around it.

So I think it's really important to remember that, though, that the goal isn't to get rid of it. The goal is to diminish it on some level and also to learn not to react to it so much.

Meagen Gibson

Respond and listen, as opposed to react.

Claire Bidwell Smith

I think we have a behavior chain. We have an anxious thought that something bad is going to happen or that we ourselves have cancer or something. And then what happens from that thought is the important part to learn how to change. Rather than freaking out, starting to panic, calling our doctor, doing some terrible internet searches on this weird pain in my side, rather than going down rabbit holes like that, I think that we can recognize that we've had an anxious thought and return to a more normal place.

But usually we stay in that anxious cycle, and it just perpetuates itself. And it keeps us in a hypervigilant state, it raises our blood pressure, it creates a cycle of anxious thoughts. And it's very easy for all of that to get away from us.

Meagen Gibson

And just like your friend that you were doing research with, said that you can't get rid of anxiety. You also can't think your way out of it, which is what so many of us try to do.

Claire Bidwell Smith

I know. Anxiety is a tough one, but it's amazing, with a little practice and diligence, you can really start to make changes.

Meagen Gibson

I want to get to some of those suggested changes in just a minute. I have one more question before we get there.

So I don't want to take anything away from people who have suffered a loss in their life, but I'm wondering if we can talk about anxiety and grief associated with what I've heard Esther Perel call, 'Ambiguous Loss'. So where we're grieving people who are still very much alive but who the relationship is irreparable because of injury or illness or safety issues, and the grief and the anxiety that comes along with that.

[00:09:29] Claire Bidwell Smith

Those are really hard griefs to go through because there's this ambiguity, there's a lack of closure. Not that we ever really have closure when someone dies, but I think when we are in an existing relationship with someone who's here, yet they're unattainable in some way, I think that there is a certain hope that we may have even unconsciously, that it will change. There's a different finality that comes with death.

So again, we're back in that place of uncertainty, of just not knowing when we're in that kind of grief and relationship. We don't know how long it will go on for, we don't know if it will change. And so we're sitting with that uncertainty.

And again, it always comes back to this, how do we live with uncertainty? How do we live with lack of control? Those are hard things. And I think getting very centered, getting very mindful, getting very present, self-care and support are things that get us through that.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic little launch for what I was going to ask next, which is, one of the things I love most about the book, is that even talking about anxiety can be activating for some people. And you continuously check in with the reader and their level of anxiety at the end of each chapter and then warn them and prepare them for what's coming next as you're diving deeper into each aspect of anxiety and grief.

And then you reference chapters 8 and 9 repeatedly where there's tools and techniques to help people process their grief and anxiety. So I'd love it if you could explain and describe a few of those tools for us now.

Claire Bidwell Smith

Well, anxiety is funny because we can get anxious about the anxiety. And again, it's one of those things, once you start having anxiety, you get worried about, am I going to go to a party or work or get on an airplane and have an anxiety attack? That's worrisome.

And I think that that is something that we really need to be thinking about as we're working on the anxiety, because the more afraid we stay of it, the more it grows in its own power over you. If it comes in the room and every time we slam the door rather than getting to know it, then it just continues to hold so much power.

We really need to get to know our anxiety. Ask yourself, when does your anxiety come on? What does it look like? What are the anxious thoughts? And this is part of the tools that I talk about in the book, but really getting familiar with it rather than continuing to be afraid of it.

So even keeping a list, when are all the times you are anxious? Is it just all the time, or are there certain times? Are there certain triggering events? Are there certain thoughts that cycle back? Is it the same thought all the time?

And then really looking at your behavior. So what do you do when you're feeling anxious? What do you do when you have that anxious thought? For some people, they will have an anxious thought, and then there's a behavior chain that follows where they will do the things like checking on the internet or they'll have a glass of wine, or they will do some other maladaptive coping skill.

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So looking at the behavior chain and then starting to make changes there. It's pretty easy to start to do it. The big part is starting to really recognize the anxiety.

So for me, an example is that because my parents both died of cancer, I would have a pain in my side. And before I knew it, I was off to the place where I was imagining that I had cancer, I was picturing myself in the hospital bed saying goodbye to my children. And then I was an anxious mess. And from there I would have behavioral reactions. Maybe irritability or a panic attack, or I would have a glass of wine or whatever it was that would follow suit from that anxious place.

So when I began to work on it, I would start to catch myself in that negative fantasy. There I am in the hospital bed, and I would catch myself there and be like, okay, that's when I would stop and just pivot and say, Claire, you're having an anxious thought. And I would turn and try to do something soothing and move away from it.

Whereas previously I would lean into the anxiety and really play out this thing and just fall into this spiral. But when I started to take a step back and soothe myself in more healthy ways, it lessened in its power, the thoughts stopped coming as frequently.

Meagen Gibson

And you've mentioned before, acceptance, and so much of anxiety is that feeling of a loss of control. And the way I've personally understood this in my life, is the trail of thought that you were just describing, is that if I follow that thread all the way, if I think about all of the possibilities, then I now reassembled some sense of control, which is just an illusion. It's like trying to grasp onto smoke.

Claire Bidwell Smith

We think we're doing something when we worry about something. It gives us the illusion that we have control over it. And I think some people become afraid to stop worrying. If I don't worry through it and I don't think through every negative scenario, then I'm not going to be prepared and on top of this thing. But really, that's just keeping you in that anxious cycle.

Meagen Gibson

It's magical thinking, too. If I imagine all the worst possible scenarios, then I'm prepared. It's like this proper mindset for bad things happening. Which and I've heard anxiety described as praying for the things that you don't want, and it helps me reframe, oh, okay, maybe I should stop.

Claire Bidwell Smith

It's amazing how little we spend having positive fantasies or allowing us to dream about things we want. We're constantly thinking about all the terrible things that might happen and all of that.

And so even just counterbalancing, like not even getting rid of the negative anxious thoughts, but just adding in some positive ones. Adding in, let me fantasize about living a long life. Let me fantasize about everybody being healthy. We never do that. And we really should.

[00:15:30] Meagen Gibson

And I think for so many people who have had trauma experiences or experiences in their past, it's such a hard cycle to break, but obviously there are tools and techniques to do that.

One of the things that I wanted to touch on again that you talked about just really briefly is panic attacks, because I know several people who experience them. Inspiration is the wrong word, but the incident that inspires the panic attack is sometimes really far removed in hours from the actual panic attack.

And so it's sometimes hard for people to get curious about their anxiety and their panic, when the inciting incident that caused the panic attack is so far removed. So in that scenario, what do you recommend for people to start to get in tune with what those two connections might be?

Claire Bidwell Smith

Well, I think it's really important to notice and to note that anxiety has a lot of physicality to it. So our body really reacts to anxious thoughts and feelings, and our heart rate will go up, we can get nauseous, our stomach can constrict, we can get light headed, we can breathe rapidly, all of these things.

And it's a chicken or the egg sometimes. Sometimes we'll start to feel that way, then we have anxious thoughts like, oh my God, I'm dying or something's wrong with me. Or we can have anxious thoughts that then lead to our body having that reaction. And in that moment, it feels very overwhelming. It feels like something real is happening. So many people end up in the ER with panic attacks.

And so doing things to calm your autonomic nervous system, it's the number one thing you can do when you're anxious or when you're having a panic attack, just calm breathing. It sends a message to your brain that everything is okay, that you are safe. When you keep up the hyperventilating and the pacing around and clenching muscles, that continues to send these chemicals and hormones through your body that are the fight or flight response.

So anything and everything we can do to just calm down our autonomic nervous system is so important.

Meagen Gibson

I know you mentioned meditation as well, as someone who has had anxiety in the past and is managing it pretty well right now, I'd say, I know that for decades, every time somebody would tell me to meditate, I would be like, clearly you don't know what it's like to live with anxiety.

However, having been meditating consistently for the last 5 years, now I'm on the other side of it. Now I'm one of those annoying people that suggests that people should meditate.

But if we can just talk about that for a little bit. And I love the way that you talk about in the book, and you did here, you talked about breathing and getting in control of your autonomic nervous system first. Then you went into meditation. Because I think if you can't regulate your nervous system, meditation is going to feel like a hostile environment.

[00:18:24] Claire Bidwell Smith

You're not going to meditate in the middle of a panic attack. All you're going to be doing there is getting grounded, calming your nervous system down, doing those things. Meditation, I too, I feel like I annoy everybody by talking about it, but the thing that I think is really helpful about meditation more than anything, as it relates to anxiety, is that it really helps you become aware of your thoughts.

So when you're sitting down to meditate, my goal with meditation isn't to achieve some Zen, mountaintop, peaceful nothing happening. But mine is so that I start to notice all the thoughts.

We wake up in the morning and our brain clicks on and it's like a ticker tape screen on the bottom of the news channel where it's just like streaming stuff and you're running away with each one. And what we can do is we can have thoughts but not run away with them.

And meditation is great for that, because when you sit in silence, you close your eyes, and the minute you close your eyes to get quiet, it's like, oh wait, I need to get almond milk at the grocery store. Or, I've got to call Susie back. And all these things start to pop into our head. That's not a bad thing. That's just the way your brain works.

But what we do in meditation is, you just notice it rather than thinking, I need to get almond milk. Oh, and I got to get tomatoes and I've got to get this, and do I have enough money in account? Rather than going down that rabbit hole, just notice that thought about the almond milk and let it go.

And then we can start to apply that in our day to day lives. When we have an anxious thought, my husband is coming home late from work, is he dead in a car crash? I'm having an anxious thought. I'm not going to go down that rabbit hole.

And that was the game changer for me with my own anxiety. I just had never realized that I let myself run away with my thoughts all the time. These big, scary thoughts that I didn't have to attach to.

Meagen Gibson

And just the activity of your mind. I think for the first couple of years of meditation, I had to sit with a notepad next to me so that I could just discharge, and I would try it before I actually started meditating, discharge all of the milk and the tomatoes and things, the ones I was conscious of that were running in the background.

And then I would sit with a piece of paper in case anything else came up that I really needed to get rid of. And I was like, alright, I hear you. Here you go. And then go back to it.

And then I know one of the other things that you talked about, obviously, you're a writer in addition to being a talented therapist, and you talk about the act of writing and expressive writing, in the book. And so as a mechanism for anxiety and coping with grief, how do you see writing playing into someone's work?

Claire Bidwell Smith

I think writing is just so helpful for everyone and anyone. And I know it's again, one of those annoying things where, I am a writer, but a lot of people don't want to write and don't like writing. And you don't have to like it, and you don't have to be good at it, and you don't have to share anything you wrote

with anyone. It doesn't have to have any kind of consequence other than it being a place for you to just get things out of your head, off your chest.

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It's a great thing to do in the mornings, and you just purge everything and then you can go into your day rather than carrying all that stuff around. I also think that sometimes when we write, we end up writing things that we didn't even realize we were thinking about or carrying with us.

In grief I think it's a wonderful way to connect with the people we've lost, writing them letters or writing about the grief or writing about them. And those are really great places to make space for grief.

I think part of my thesis is that I don't think that we make enough space for grief, and as a result, that causes anxiety. So anything and everything you can be doing to just make some space for your grief to flow, will help with the anxiety. And so writing is a great way to do that.

Meagen Gibson

And not only in our cultural expectations of grief, but in our work environments we're just not given the space. It's not only, you have to return to work the next week and resume work as if nothing's happened, but also the people around you want you to get back to living your life without the person that you had in your life before. And so that can be incredibly jarring, as my friend Miranda already pointed out.

And you mentioned letter writing as well. And so I can see that as being an extremely grounding activity. If you wanted to, on a daily basis as part of your grief process, just write your loved one a letter on a daily basis. If that was all your writing practice consisted of.

Claire Bidwell Smith

Absolutely. I think when we lose someone close to us, the incongruence that we feel in wanting to talk to them and not being able to talk to them is really difficult. So giving yourself that place where you are still talking to them. It doesn't matter what you believe in, just writing to them feels good deep inside of ourselves.

Meagen Gibson

There are so many stories of clients in your book that you shared. And one of them was a woman whose brother had passed away, and he was her person. He was the one that she would call every single day on the way home from work.

And I really felt that loss as she was describing it. And so you had recommended that she write letters, and she was like, okay, I'm going to share my day with him. And every single day she would just write what had happened and imagine what he might say back.

Claire Bidwell Smith

I think it's amazing. I think when we've been close with someone, we end up having an internal relationship with them after they're gone. I can still ask my parents things, like what they would think

of my husband or what my mom would think of something I'm wearing. And I know what their answers would be. I know them so well, I can close my eyes and listen and hear their answers.

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And in that sense, I think we can continue our relationship. We can continue to lean on them and to connect with them. It's not something we feel right away in the first weeks and months of grief. I want to note that for those who are going through a new loss, it's really hard to imagine having that kind of relationship with your loved one. It is something that comes later, but it's hopefully something you can keep in the back of your mind that you will work towards and maybe even look forward to.

Meagen Gibson

One of the things that was the most touching in your book to me, and I was actually on a walk listening to the audiobook when I heard it, was you sharing that when your father wrote the letter, that your mother's voice took over the letter that he was writing to her. And that when you read it, you could totally hear all of her words and her thoughts and her feelings coming through in his voice. I can't remember if you said this or not, but that had surprised him as well.

Claire Bidwell Smith

He wrote a letter to me and he decided partway into the letter to switch and have it be from my mother. And the whole tone of it changed, the vernacular changed. Everything about it was different, and it sounded like her. And I think it was just as cathartic for him as it was for me. It was a really sweet moment.

Meagen Gibson

And I think that's probably one of the best ways to love someone, is to know them in that way and know how they might react or respond or what they might say or how they might feel in any situation.

Claire Bidwell Smith

Yes.

Meagen Gibson

Well, Claire Bidwell Smith, thank you very much. How can people find out more about you and your work?

Claire Bidwell Smith

They can just find me at clairebidwellsmith.com and I'm on all the [social media](#) and my books are anywhere books can be found.

But I just want to add that I think grief can be really hard and really scary, but it can also be really transformative and beautiful as well. It really asks us to look into ourselves and look into our lives and what matters to us. And that the anxiety that comes is normal, but that it can also be really worked on. And so to not give up hope. There's a lot that you can do to heal.

[00:26:23] Meagen Gibson

Thank you for saying that. It is normal and there is a lot to do to heal. Thanks again.

Claire Bidwell Smith

Thank you.