



Conscious Life presents

# ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

## In Therapy

### Admitting you have anxiety

*Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.*

#### **[00:00:00] Alex Howard**

Hi, I'm Alex Howard and welcome to this week's episode of *In Therapy* where we follow real people on their therapeutic journeys.

In this week's episode, we're going to be catching up with Sanaya. If you haven't watched Sanaya's first episode, I do encourage you to check that out. You can find out more about her story and what's brought her to *In Therapy*.

But in this week's episode, we are really exploring how understanding your anxiety, understanding the biological processes that happen with anxiety can help break that link of anxiety about anxiety.

Also for this week's episode, we're sharing the full session. We're exploring a new format where we don't cut an hour's therapy into 20 minutes. We let you really see behind the scenes, all of what happens on the therapeutic journey.

But if you prefer to have the sound bites, do make sure you're subscribed to my [YouTube channel](#) because we're sharing mini clips from the episodes as we go through the week.

I also encourage you to click the bell icon and that will mean that as we release those clips and new episodes, YouTube will notify you. It will let you know. Please do also follow my Instagram [@alexhowardtherapy](#) for daily inspiration and support.

This week we catch up with one of our new *In Therapy* participants, 22 year old Sanaya. In our first therapy session, Sanaya discussed how her anxiety has increased significantly since she had to leave University very abruptly last year due to COVID.

Since then, Sanaya has struggled to find work and this also impacts her mood and self worth.

Sanaya, it's lovely to see you.

#### **Sanaya**

Hello.

#### **Alex Howard**

It's been a little bit longer than we planned, but how have you been? How are things going?

**[00:02:08] Sanaya**

Since we last spoke I was quite good straight after that and then for the past 2 weeks I've been just plummeted. I was trying to force myself to do the modules you'd given me, and I had already done some of them the week before, but in those last, I think it was last week, I couldn't even bring myself to do that. I was just like, there's no point.

And then actually this week I felt a lot better. I don't know why, but it feels like I've just come out of this, but now I'm anxious. Like, when is it going to happen again? So it's just like, it's been really up and down.

**Alex Howard**

And when you are in that low place, describe a bit more what you feel, what's going through your mind. What's the felt sense of being in that place?

**Sanaya**

It was funny because there was a point where I was really thinking about it and I was like, I don't even feel anxious anymore, I just feel really low.

Sorry.

I just feel like I've just found it hard to carry on.

**Alex Howard**

Say a bit more about that.

**Sanaya**

I think it's just once I reach a certain level I'm like, I don't know how to make myself do anything.

I was like, I really don't want to cry.

**Alex Howard**

I'll chuck you the box.

**Sanaya**

I just feel like any opportunity I just started crying.

**Alex Howard**

It's okay. If there's one place in the world it's okay to cry it's in this room.

**Sanaya**

I don't know why I've been feeling like this, but it's just like really low. I forced myself out of bed and get to the gym.

**[00:04:28] Alex Howard**

So you have maintained doing that throughout?

**Sanaya**

Yeah, I know that I just feel way worse if I don't go to the gym, so it's kind of like I force myself to the gym, but even then it's not the same after.

**Alex Howard**

Do you have a sense of the pathway into feeling low? Because it sounds like at the moment your mood is a little bit, it's up and it's down. It's not always clear why it's up and down. I think the more that we can make sense of that, the more we can understand.

And often it's not one factor. Often it's a little bit, if you think about your mood being like a boat with different loads on it, and it's not one load that causes your mood to go down. Often it's too many loads together that feel overwhelming. And often initially we work quite hard to keep ourselves on track, a lot of effort goes into that, and then we get to the point where we can't do it anymore. And that's the collapse of mood.

And sometimes in those places of low moods, there's also, because we sometimes give up, everything seems too hard, there's also a rest that happens because we're not fighting so hard to keep things going.

**Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

And then a little bit of energy and motivation starts to come back in again, and then we find ourselves climbing back out.

If you were to think about what those loads might be. The things that feel that they're weighing you down, what might some of those be? I think one of them, just to jump in, I think one of them is this ongoing anxiety. That your nervous system feels ramped up. So things that wouldn't otherwise be anxiety inducing become anxiety inducing.

So everything is just harder than it otherwise would be because you're working to manage your kind of anxiety, as we talked a bit about last time. What would be some of the other things that you think are a load on you and on your system?

**Sanaya**

I guess what kind of adds to the anxiety more than anything is not having a job and not really knowing what I'm doing with my day. But other than anxiety, I don't really know. I'm not really sure what else. I feel like anxiety is the main thing, and lots of different things just add to it.

**[00:06:56] Alex Howard**

So it's almost like because of the anxiety, things that wouldn't be hard become much harder. Not having a job is hard in lots of ways. It's hard because of the pressure to put yourself out there and to get a job. And that feels like probably a burden. But also not having a job also means you have a lot of time and time to think isn't always helpful because then what happens is the catastrophizing in your mind getting run away is allowed to do that more than perhaps otherwise it would.

**Sanaya**

Yeah, definitely. And I think I was just really anxious about this session because I was like, oh, I knew that I'm going to have to talk about it.

**Alex Howard**

One of the patterns that people I think often can have is that they know that they're struggling with anxiety, for example, but if I don't talk about it, I don't have to think about it. So as soon as they feel a bit better, they just don't want to think about it, because if I can pretend it's not happening, then it's not happening.

And the very act of putting a spotlight on it is in of itself sometimes anxiety inducing. We almost feel it more. The problem is for the anxiety pattern to be different, you have to learn some strategies to do it differently.

**Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

And as we talked about last time, you've got some strategies that you use, and those strategies help some of the time, but you just need better strategies and you probably need more options in terms of strategies.

**Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

It sounds like, though, when you get to that place of low mood, there's also a place of not wanting to talk about it. Is that all right? When things are better, you don't want to talk about it, but also when things are bad. Talk me through what happens when you're in that place where you're particularly low, it sounds like there was just no motivation to do anything.

**Sanaya**

I just either just kept napping or I would just try and give myself things to do where I knew I wouldn't have to do anything that would make me really anxious. So I wouldn't go and meet my friends because that involves getting on a train or something.

**[00:09:14]**

But like doing things with my family, I kind of, like forced myself chatting, keep busy to do something like that, which probably helped me but I guess in turn, I just was trying to forget about it.

**Alex Howard**

It sounds like when things are going well, there's an avoidant pattern of not wanting to talk about it. And when things are going badly, there's an avoidant pattern not wanting to talk about it.

**Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

Is there a place in between? Or is it just generally that the strategy is to do the best you can to pretend that it's not happening?

**Sanaya**

Probably do the best I can to pretend it's not happening.

**Alex Howard**

How common do you think that is?

**Sanaya**

Pretty common, I guess.

**Alex Howard**

It's one of the main strategies that people use because it's like, I'm anxious that if I pretend that I'm not anxious, then I can pretend that I won't feel like I'm anxious. The problem is if we want the circumstances of our life to be different, we have to learn to do something different.

And being here, of course, is challenging. We're putting literally spotlights on what's happening, and it is possible to learn strategies for it to change. It's possible to have different ways of being with them. It takes a certain amount of courage, in a sense, in the short-term, but also a certain amount of just fuck it, I've had enough of things being like this, and I'm going to do what it takes to give a chance to things being different.

One of the things that can also sometimes happen with, for example, the videos that I sent is that sometimes people can have resistance that comes up to watching them because the very act of talking about it and listening to someone talk about it in of itself can feel a bit anxiety inducing. And again, it's almost like I don't want to watch it because if I watch it am I going to get more worried by watching it? I don't know if that's something that you experienced.

**[00:11:20] Sanaya**

Yeah. It was like when I was good, I was watching it and I was really interested in it and enjoying it. And then especially, like the meditation parts, I found that I was meditating and really enjoying it and felt a lot calmer afterwards.

And then I think the other two videos, I was at a point where I was watching it, but if I wasn't doing something else, like tidying my room or brushing my teeth or something and I was focusing on it, I would then just turn it off because I didn't really want to listen to it, basically.

So I did listen to them and do all the tasks, but it took me a while to get through it all, and it was all in different stages. I didn't watch the third and the fourth video the whole way through at all. It was like in different chunks just because I wasn't even busy, I didn't want to do it.

**Alex Howard**

This is not about shaming of you having not done it. It's actually the opposite. I'm really interested in that resistance that comes up because I think that's part of what we need to understand to be able to change what's happening.

Often the inner resistance that we have developed as coping strategies to help us get through difficult things that we go through. So we go through a challenging time, we develop the best coping strategies we can to deal with that, and then they just become our habits, and then we get used to doing that, and then it becomes our default way of responding to things.

I'm wondering if you have a sense of where that kind of pattern comes from, of not wanting to talk about it or think about it. Is that something you remember learning at some point? Was there any memory around feeling anxious and feeling either shamed or embarrassed about feeling anxious or feeling that if you talk about it, it's going to make it worse, or do you have any sense of where that comes from?

**Sanaya**

I feel like a lot of ways of dealing with it and getting through it, I've kind of been able to push it away. Like I'll just carry on and fake it till you make kind of thing. But I feel like, especially with COVID, I feel like it just caught up with me.

**Alex Howard**

The problem is that what we resist will persist. So the more that you push away, that part of you, but also it just takes so much energy to push away and to fight those feelings. And I think that's where you go into this anxiety induced depressive state almost where it's taken so much energy to fight against it, and then you just get to the point of just exhaustion and you collapse a little bit for a few weeks and you're physically tired, you're emotionally tired, you probably feel a bit numb as well in that place because of all the effort that goes into fighting it.

**Sanaya**

Yeah and I think one of the reasons why I feel a lot better this week is because I've got just a temporary job for this week.

**[00:14:38] Alex Howard**

Okay.

**Sanaya**

That has just come out of nowhere. So I think a lot of my anxiety from last week and the week before was probably down to money. I felt like a lot of my friends are going out and stuff, and I was struggling to keep up and I just hate worrying about money as well.

So, I think this week has been quite good purely because I know I've got this job. It finishes on Friday, but it's just an extra bit of income that I didn't think I was going to have.

**Alex Howard**

Also it's giving you a purpose and a focus and a sense of some community, probably, some identity. It's not just the money piece of it but obviously the money is part of it.

**Sanaya**

I feel so much better once I am working. Money is good, but also getting up for a reason.

**Alex Howard**

What's interesting is that it sounds like your mood has been, when I say your mood I mean, including the anxiety and the emotions and that kind of wider piece, is quite heavily dependent upon what's happening in your life, which, of course, it is for all of us in its own way. But we want to be able to get you to a place where there's a level of emotional stability and resilience that doesn't feel so easily shaken and impacted by what's happening.

And equally, anyone who spent a sustained amount of time looking for work and not having work is going to struggle. That's like an objectively difficult experience to go through. So I think it's important to be gentle and to be kind towards yourself, that it is challenging.

I think it would be really helpful if we could work to get meditation to the same attitude as going to the gym. I'm really impressed by the fact that you went to the gym even in your lowest point, because it sounds like there was an awareness that I will feel even worse if I don't do this, which is a sign that you were able to maintain a level of functioning even though you were clearly in a really difficult place.

If we can find a few more things, like going to the gym, I talk about it as psychological scaffolding that it's like if this is a wobbling and all over the place, which we all can be in our own ways, the scaffolding becomes a stability that just helps us stay a bit more steady. And going to the gym can be one of the pillars of that, meditation can be one of the pillars of that, having more awareness can be one of the pillars, how you relate to yourself.

And it's like you gradually build these different ingredients that just give more stability to how you feel. And you've already got a taste of that with the going to the gym. We just need to build upon that and to have more of that.

**[00:17:32] Sanaya**

Yeah, definitely.

**Alex Howard**

When you think about your anxiety and the episodes that you've experienced, how do you feel towards your anxiety? We like to talk about your anxiety as it's a thing. How do you feel towards that?

**Sanaya**

It's just annoying. It's really frustrating, I guess. I obviously don't like it.

**Alex Howard**

And if you were to turn your anxiety into an object or a person or a symbol, what would represent your anxiety, do you think?

**Sanaya**

Just something that I can't really change.

**Alex Howard**

Okay. So there's a belief that you can't change it.

**Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

Okay. What are some of the other things that you think about with that?

**Sanaya**

Scared.

**Alex Howard**

Okay. So it's something that you can't change. It's something you feel scared of. What else?

**Sanaya**

It's just really intense, I guess I can't really escape it when it happens.

**Alex Howard**

So there's a sense of being overwhelming as well.



**[00:18:53] Sanaya**

Yeah, definitely.

**Alex Howard**

And yet there have been times that you've been able to have different experiences. Tell me about some of those.

**Sanaya**

So when I just force myself to go out and do some exercise or something on times that I felt really anxious and my body feels a bit like I can't really control it. I've taken myself out for a run, so that usually calms me down, definitely.

And then there's been other times where I felt anxious, mainly about a journey or something, and I've just forced myself to do it. Inside I always know that it's going to be fine, but it's just like just this worry.

**Alex Howard**

So what you're recognizing is when you use an avoidance strategy, it tends to actually make it worse?

**Sanaya**

Yeah, definitely.

**Alex Howard**

What are some of the inner critic patterns, like the self-judgment patterns that tend to come in when you have anxiety? So the ways that you judge yourself, criticize. Because I think there's also a shame element, what people might think or how you judge yourself with that.

**Sanaya**

I think it's just I don't want people to judge me for it, and I also judge myself for it.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah.

**Sanaya**

If I was someone else, I just would hate her.

**Alex Howard**

Is that true, though? If you saw someone else that was really afraid, would you hate them? Because I'm not sure that's true. I think your inner critic has a whole way of judging you and beating you up, but I think if you saw someone else that was feeling upset or feeling scared, I think you'd be empathic towards that point.

**[00:20:50] Sanaya**

It's just different when it's like how you want yourself to look.

**Alex Howard**

So it doesn't meet your idealized self image, the way that you want people to perceive you.

**Sanaya**

Yeah, basically.

**Alex Howard**

I'm curious. We all do this, by the way. I'm smiling because it's such a universal thing. Who's the person that you think you need to be to be liked, to be loved, to be saved, all the things that you want to be in the world?

**Sanaya**

Definitely someone who's just confident.

**Alex Howard**

So someone who comes across as confidence.

**Sanaya**

And doesn't cry all the time.

**Alex Howard**

I don't think you cry all the time. You're in a very specific context right now where I'm asking you all the questions you probably don't want me to ask you, which, of course, that feels challenging.

**Sanaya**

Yeah, I don't know. Someone who's fun all the time and doesn't really worry about things.

**Alex Howard**

Is anybody fun all the time?

**Sanaya**

No, but I would have been.

**Alex Howard**

So here's one of the things that often happens that inner critic voice that we all have has this impossible ideal of who it says we need to be, we should be, we have to be. And then we compare ourselves against that ideal, and we never quite live up to it.

**[00:22:13]**

And the further we get from it, the more stressed we become, the more worried we become, more anxious we become. And then the closer we get to it, often we don't even feel better for getting close to it because it's almost like a moving thing that however well we do, it's never quite good enough for that idealized image.

So it sounds to me like you're putting an enormous amount of pressure on yourself as well. Pressure on yourself to be fun and confident and have it all together and to be that way all the time. And if you're not that way, there's this relentless self-criticizing, judgment, beating up on yourself, giving yourself a hard time.

**Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

It sounds pretty harsh to me. What do you think?

**Sanaya**

Yes, I know it's harsh, but it's just a lot different when it's yourself. I don't really think that I'm being harsh on myself at all because I don't really..

**Alex Howard**

Because you're normalized to it. This is what you do.

**Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

Totally. And that's part of yours and my job together here is to put a spotlight on some of those things so you can go, oh, hang on actually, maybe I don't have to do it that way, and maybe it's not even helpful that I'm doing it that way.

**Sanaya**

Yes.

**Alex Howard**

When you have anxiety, what do you think is actually happening in your body? What do you think is actually the physical construct of anxiety?

**Sanaya**

It's like an anticipation for something to happen, but nothing's actually happening.

**[00:23:44] Alex Howard**

Yes. On a very simple physiological level, your body is pumping certain chemicals, so you're pumping a lot of adrenaline and a lot of cortisol. And those hormones, those kind of chemicals of the body, are designed to give your body the resource it needs to respond to physical danger.

So if you're walking down the street and you don't see a bus coming out, you step into the road and the bus goes flying past, you get a massive hit of adrenaline, of cortisol so you can respond. It's what's called the fight, flight or freeze response. I wouldn't fight a bus. You could try fighting a bus, but you're more likely to flight, trying to get away from the bus. You might freeze and not move and hope that it doesn't hit you.

It requires a great deal of energy in that moment to respond, which is why there's a whole bunch of physiological changes that happen. So, for example, blood goes from your digestive system to your arms to your legs so you've got the power to be able to respond quickly.

That's great if you're under physical threats or if you're being chased by a saber-tooth tiger, you need that adrenaline, that cortisol to be able to respond to the situation.

The difference is the danger is often an imagined danger. So think about going on the tube and what if I feel anxious? And what if this happens? What if that happens? There's not a physical threat to deal with in that moment.

So you've got all of these chemicals pumping through your body. You've got these adrenaline, you've got cortisol. And cortisol is a powerful hormone. It's like in the movies where someone's flatlined and they inject them and they go, they kind of shoot to life, they're putting adrenaline in their body.

So you're pumping all of that adrenaline through your body, and it's unneeded, so you've got all this additional energy that's pumping through your body. But also that's why when you exercise, what you're actually doing is you're burning off that unnecessary energy. It's why you feel calmer on the other side of it.

The other thing that happens is you probably stop breathing. So what happens is your breathing will become very shallow and so the balance of carbon dioxide and oxygen to your brain starts to change. And that it's almost like when we stop breathing, our body thinks that we're dying because it's not getting enough oxygen. So that's why one of the most powerful things you can do when you have anxiety is just to breathe deeply because it will counteract, it will shift that balance.

So the challenges when we have anxiety is anxiety thoughts tend to create more adrenaline and cortisol, which then creates more anxiety thoughts. So you get in this loop that you worry in your mind, you pump adrenaline and cortisol in your body so you feel more anxious, so your mind speeds up when you worry more.

That's the cycle that you go into when you have anxiety, or if you're having a panic attack. That you're pumping these chemicals, these hormones in your body, which are designed to run really fast or to deal with physical danger. But because there's no physical danger, you're just sat with all of these hormones pumping through your body.

And then it's almost like your brain starts to look for danger because your brain is trying to make sense of it. So your body's in a state of physical danger. So your brain is then looking for what if this

happens? Or what if that happens? And then it almost becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy because although there isn't actually any danger, you've got all the responses if there is.

**[00:27:29]**

And in a strange way, if there is a physical danger, like you going to get hit by a bus or whatever, then once you know you've survived, the whole thing calms down again because it's like, oh my God, I should've been more careful. I shouldn't cross the road listening to music. There's a calming down response.

But in the instance of an imagined danger or anxiety, you also don't get that moment of, oh, now it's okay. Which is why distraction sometimes works. If you distract yourself enough, guess what happens? Your body stops releasing adrenaline and cortisol, and those levels start to calm down again. And then you suddenly go, oh, actually, I feel a bit calmer. So then the mind calms down.

It's a bit like in, if you've ever seen any of those Cold war films where Russia and America are kind of ramping up missile attacks. And then one goes down a level and the other one goes so the whole warning system gradually comes down again. So part of learning to work with anxiety is firstly, understanding the thoughts which tell your body to release adrenaline and cortisol.

So if we can understand the thoughts that trigger that response in your body, we can start to work with some of those thoughts. And there's different ways and different strategies we can use to work with those thoughts.

The second thing is when those hormones, when those chemicals are pumping through your system, understanding what's happening and why it's happening can be very helpful. Because if we don't look at it through the reference point we're talking about here, all we know is that our body is in a state of anxiety and there must be something wrong and it becomes this self-fulfilling prophecy the more we think about it.

If we can recognize, I've just released a load of adrenaline and cortisol, it's probably going to take a little bit... If I stop releasing it, my blood levels are already too high. It's going to take 5-10 minutes if I stop pumping more, for those blood levels to calm and come down to normal.

So it's learning to be with, in this moment right now I don't like the way that I feel, but I understand why I feel this way. And if we can learn strategies to calm your system, what is going in or ramping up, ramping up, ramping up, you notice it go up and you catch it and you stop it and then you can learn to calm your system down.

One of the ways to think about it is from the perspective of what's called neuroplasticity, which is where you condition or train your brain to do something. This is where someone like Emma Raducanu who's playing tennis, has drilled these shots so many times that it's not like she sees a ball come over the net and goes, I'm going to move my arm. The whole thing is a completely automatic response. It's a condition response.

And this is why with tennis players or golfers, if someone comes and starts to change a few things in their swing, it can completely throw their game off for a little bit. They have to relearn all of those pieces to recondition the pattern.

**[00:30:38]**

You've learned a load of conditioned responses. So in certain situations, like public transport, certain things, there's a whole bunch of thoughts that go with that and those thoughts trigger a whole bunch of hormone responses, which then trigger a bunch more thoughts around that. We need to gradually change some of those conditioned responses, some of those patterns to train your system to just then naturally respond in a calm way.

Really the point I wanted to make is that what feels scary and overwhelming and out of control, there's a whole science to it. There's a whole mental, emotional, physiological process that's happening and we can understand it and we can learn to change it.

I know I just gave you like a 10 minute lesson. I think it's important to have a shared vocabulary in terms of understanding it. I'm wondering, as I've been talking, what's been going through your mind about that? Does that make sense? Does that help? Does that not help? I'm interested in how that is for you.

**Sanaya**

Well, it's comforting knowing that it's all science and that it can be changed. And it is just something that I just need to train myself to and get used to thinking a different way or coping in a different way. It's definitely comforting and interesting knowing how we're all triggered and stuff, basically.

**Alex Howard**

So I think the way to think about it is there's really three time points in this. There's what I call anticipatory anxiety, so there's anxiety before you do something where you're imagining all the things you don't want to have happen.

There's then anxiety as it's happening, like anxiety in real time. There's then a post mortem anxiety that something's happened and we're now replaying what's happened in our mind. And if you ever have that experience where you have a bad experience and then you keep rethinking about it which is almost like preparing to have an anticipatory anxiety next time we go into that situation.

So, for example, you have experience on public transport, you keep replaying it afterwards and you practice, it's almost like you're training your mind to have that experience. And then next time you go on public transport, you start remembering all the times that it hasn't gone well. So you train your system to respond in that way.

**Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

So if you can teach yourself to have a negative experience, you can teach yourself to have a positive experience. It's about understanding the science and the structure of how those experiences are created.

**[00:33:45] Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

Coming back to what we were saying a little bit earlier about your relationship towards anxiety, having talked a bit about how anxiety is created, the physiology of anxiety in terms of the chemical releases that happen and the thought patterns, understanding a bit more, how does that change how you feel towards it?

**Sanaya**

I still dread it, but understanding it, it's a bit more comforting knowing I do understand it. Whereas before when you don't really know much about it, it's a lot more scarier. And also you're not really sure how to deal with it. Whereas knowing more about it, you know there is a way to deal with it. You don't have to feel like that, I guess.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, because, obviously there are different pieces to this and we're just getting started and I work together around it, but just one particular thing that's worth mentioning is, if you're in a moment where anxiety is really high, that you're having a panic attack or you're having really strong anxiety, in that moment there's not a lot of capacity for lots of rational thinking because our mind's already racing too fast.

The thing that I always say to people is, remember there are chemicals and hormones that have been released that once your level starts to normalize, you will feel better again. Every time in your life that you've had intense anxiety, at some point, you've always come out of it.

**Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

So when we're in it, the fear is, this is going to last forever, I'm never going to get out of this. And that's what makes it so intense and so overwhelming. If we can remember, this is a feeling that feels really intense right now but I know that the reason why I feel this way is my cortisol and adrenaline has gone super high, it will come down and the fastest way to get it down is to breathe, to try and calm those thoughts that are feeding it.

And if your anxiety has gone from three or four up to a nine or ten, as soon as you see it drop to a seven or a six, you know you can relax because you can see that the trend is that it's coming down. So it's finding that perspective in the fire of the storm to go, this is a chemical reaction that's happening in my body that's making me think and feel all these things, but it's going to pass. And the fastest way for it to pass is to stop perpetuating it by feeding it. I don't know if that's helpful to think about it in that way?

**Sanaya**

Yeah, it's definitely helpful. It's still quite difficult though.

**[00:36:40] Alex Howard**

Of course. This is about having enough strategies and tools. At the moment it's like the anxiety feels like this really big, powerful thing that you feel powerless against. And it's gradually reducing that and increasing your sense of capacity and strategies to work with it that suddenly the dynamic changes, and it's something that maybe I get anxious from time to time, but it's not something that dominates or something that feels scary or feels overwhelming.

To put another way, the day that one stops being afraid of anxiety, the anxiety has lost its power. At the moment, you have anxiety about anxiety, and your anxiety about your anxiety is what's feeding your anxiety.

So when one gets the point they're not anxious about anxiety, they can ride the waves and they know that it's not going to be overwhelming, it suddenly stops having so much power, and then the anxiety massively calms.

**Sanaya**

It does make sense. It just sounds silly in a way.

**Alex Howard**

I think there's a few pieces that would be helpful to put in place. Learning to work with anxiety is something over a series of sessions us working together. So I want to put in place some building blocks that help us do that work. And I know that in a sense, it can be frustrating to want to kind of, I need to know it all now so I can fix it and not feel anxious anymore, but when something has been in place for a long time, it takes some time to learn the tools and the strategies.

It sounds like module three, which was looking at things like helper pattern, achiever pattern, anxiety pattern those sorts of things, was more difficult for you to be able to focus with, but I think you mentioned you did some of the exercises. Was there anything that particularly came from doing that that was insightful and helpful?

**Sanaya**

Yeah. I felt like a lot of the exercises... So that was the one where I would mark like a rating of how I felt. I realized I was never really ten, but I was never really zero either. And in a way, it was just making me more anxious, noticing exactly how I was feeling and giving it a rating. It wasn't really comforting until there was a moment where I had dropped a level.

**Alex Howard**

And what helped you drop?

**Sanaya**

I think it was just being distracted because I'd come back to it and be like, oh yeah, I have to do that. And then it'd be like, oh, I completely forgot that I was super anxious this morning. I feel a lot better now and then it was comforting knowing that I had gone about my day without giving it much thought or much power or anything.



**[00:39:50] Alex Howard**

Which also brings us back to the value of you having something to keep you focused, for example, having a job this week. That it gives you something to do to put your focus into. And when you're just stuck at home, particularly without the money to go off and do fun things, it's like it's easy to go down the rabbit hole of getting caught more and more in your anxiety and your patterns.

Are there things that you could be involved in which are not necessarily paid work whilst you're waiting to get paid work, any kind of volunteer work or things that you could be helping with that, even if it's not going to give you money, it's going to give you experience and give you confidence?

**Sanaya**

I think definitely. I think one of my worries with that then is, oh, gosh, I'm not applying for the jobs that I want. So there was a job where I was like I could work, but it's like a part-time job and I would get paid for it but it wasn't necessarily what I wanted to do. And I just got anxious about that because I thought if I take this job, then I'm not going to apply for the ones that I really want to get.

**Alex Howard**

There's a certain amount of self wisdom and self radical honesty, in a sense, that I think is very important when we're at difficult chapters in our lives. And I think the tendency that we can all have in our own ways is to comfort ourselves by seeing things in a ways that feel familiar and feel habitual.

The problem is that if we do what we've always done, we get what we've always got. If you continue doing things as you are, you're going to continue feeling as you are until hopefully at some point the job happens and then you're in a better place. But then the risk is then the job finishes and then you're back in that place.

It's like there's a certain amount of inner work that you need to do, that if you do, your whole life is going to be so much easier and so much better as a result. But that means taking some steps outside of what feels familiar and taking some steps outside of your comfort zone.

And it's not doing that in a way that's very self judgmental while beating up on yourself. It's just being really clear of yourself and saying, I believe there's a chance that things could be better and easier, but I've got to take some brave steps to do that. What do you think about that?

**Sanaya**

Yeah, I know you're right, basically.

**Alex Howard**

What's the resistance that comes up?

**Sanaya**

I don't really want to give in to it.

**[00:43:02] Alex Howard**

What do you mean by giving to it?

**Sanaya**

I don't know. I don't really want to accept that I am anxious.

**Alex Howard**

In a sense, I think there's a place where you want to pretend it's not happening and the act of almost committing to a path of addressing and working on your anxiety is an admittance of happening.

**Sanaya**

I think it's also finding a job as well, I know it would really help me out if I had a little part-time job or something like that, but the fact of finding it and going through that is making me anxious. So it's like something that I want to avoid, even though I know it will make me feel better.

**Alex Howard**

But here's the challenge, applying for it is going to make you anxious, but not applying for it is going to make you anxious. Right now you've learned the strategy of anxiety and you've got good at it. You might not want to get good at it, but you've learned how to be in a state of anxiety. And that's the default that you're going to apply to whatever you do until you learn how to do it differently, which you are beginning to learn and you are able and capable of learning.

But again, as I said earlier, what you resist will persist. Pretending that it's not there doesn't make it go away. It actually just gives it more power because then you're having to constantly fight to distract yourself and avoid it. Does that make sense?

**Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

Some of the upcoming steps and things you need to do are a bit challenging, but they're actually not as challenging as doing nothing, because doing nothing just guarantees you're going to be anxious anyway. Whereas if you actually take these steps, yes, you're going to have some anxiety perhaps along the way, and it's going to be difficult, but you also have the potential that you're moving forward.

**Sanaya**

Yeah. I think I just need to force myself to do things sometimes. It's just hard, like knowing something is probably what I need, but it's just so hard to get there, especially when I know it's going to make me anxious. Whereas in my mind doing nothing, I know it's going to make me anxious, but at least I'm not doing anything. Do you know what I mean?

**[00:45:55] Alex Howard**

Yeah. But also just to be quite specific, it's not so much that the thing itself makes you anxious, it's the patterns that you run in your mind about doing it that make you anxious. I think that's an important distinction. Because if it's the actual thing that makes you anxious, I get it. You wouldn't want to do it. But what happens is doing that thing triggers a set of thinking patterns that you've learned to do, and that's what you don't want to happen, but that's what we want to change.

What do you think the next few weeks need to look like in terms of taking... I'm going to say a few more things and then ask you a question. How do you feel about doing a daily meditation practice, given you've had some quite positive experiences working with it? How do you feel about committing to doing that?

**Sanaya**

Yeah, I feel good about that.

**Alex Howard**

And I feel the fact you've been able to do the gym, I feel you can do that.

What else do you think needs to happen over the next few weeks?

**Sanaya**

I need to push myself when I know something will probably make me feel better, just to choose to go down that route rather than the route of doing nothing knowing that I'm going to be anxious anyway.

**Alex Howard**

I think a key part of this really is the accepting that you have anxiety at the moment. I don't subscribe to the idea of someone saying, I am an anxious person, because it's not part of your identity. It's a behavior. It's something you learned to do. But if you own it and you admit it, you're empowered then to change it and to do something about it. What do you think about that? That makes you smile.

**Sanaya**

It's just a bit daunting.

**Alex Howard**

But you know it being daunting isn't necessarily a bad thing. I'm a really big believer in self-esteem and self-worth is something that we grow and something that we earn. And when we do things that are hard and we do them anyway, that also grows that muscle that tells you that you can do hard things.

And whether you like it or not, you've chosen a hard career. You've chosen a career that's going to involve lots of small steps that are hard steps. This is your practice. You get used to doing some hard things that feel challenging. But each time you do something that's challenging, you grow your sense of capacity through doing that. It's like, well, it's hard. I did it anyway.

**[00:49:04] Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

In a sense, this is your training ground for you to become the woman that you need to be to have the career that you want to have. This is not just a hurdle you need to get over. This is the very training ground for you to develop those capacities, to develop the courage, to develop the strength, develop the commitments, develop the sticking power, to stick with something like this therapeutic journey, even though at times you're not going to want to.

The people that I've worked with over the years, having worked with very famous actors, actresses, the music industry, the common denominator among those people is not that they haven't struggled with their mind and emotions, because all the ones I've worked with have. The common denominator, though, is that when things feel difficult, they've learnt to move forward anyway.

It's almost like things get hard, we can step back or we can freeze or we can step forward. And the people that have the life that I think is what you ultimately want have learnt it wasn't something they were born with, but they've learnt when their impulses to step back or to freeze, to take a step forward.

And I think that's my challenge to you over the next few weeks. Do it gently with yourself. It's not about your inner critic beating up on you or being cruel to yourself, but it's learning that when your instinct has to pull back or to freeze to take those gentle steps forward, and that is growing that capacity then inside of you. And it gets easier the more you practice to do that. How do you feel about that?

**Sanaya**

Yeah, I know that it makes sense. I just hope I do it.

**Alex Howard**

Well, here's the thing, you're not going to do it every time, and that's okay. This is not about perfection, this is not about being that perfect self that you think you need to be. This is about if some of the time between now and next time, you can do that, you've done great. That's the challenge.

And I think keeping going, getting going with the daily meditation practice, I think would really help. I'd like you to revisit modules three and four and to go to module five. And hopefully what we've talked about today, it will feel a bit easier to do that. Start working with some of what's in there, but then we'll really work with that more together next time as well.

So don't feel you have to get it all figured out. Just do the best you can, and then we'll bring more of that because I want to get more into some tools and strategies next time but I feel today that this frame and this perspective, I think is important. Any questions you have for me?

**Sanaya**

I don't think so.

**[00:51:59] Alex Howard**

How do you feel about what you need to do?

**Sanaya**

I feel a little bit deflated, but I feel okay.

**Alex Howard**

Deflated in what way?

**Sanaya**

Just that I think I've spent like a while avoiding speaking about it, so I feel like today was just a bit overwhelming.

**Alex Howard**

Can I give you a piece of feedback?

**Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

I think you've been really brave in talking about it. And I would like, as you leave, that your internal dialogue not to be, it was difficult to talk about it, and I can't do this because it was difficult to talk about it. I would like your frame to be, it was really difficult to talk about it, and I did it anyway. And that's exactly what Alex was talking about, taking that step forward when it feels hard. And if I could do that today, that means that I can go the next step.

**Sanaya**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

Most people find this process really hard. The reason why most people don't sit in this chair with the cameras on, you're going like the premium hard, but the reason why most people don't work on the things that are hard is because they're afraid to do so. The problem is they suffer more, not less, as a result.

In my view, there are three types of people in the world. There are people that have problems that talk to themselves and talk to others about them. There are those that have problems that talk to themselves but no one else, and those that have problems that deny they even have them. We all have problems, but if we want to make life easier, we have to admit it to ourselves. But that's often not enough. We also need to have support from others. And you've already taken some very brave steps being here. The fact you could do that shows you can do this. Any other questions?

**[00:54:02] Sanaya**

No, not really.

**Alex Howard**

Okay. It's been lovely seeing you. I look forward to seeing you next time.

**Sanaya**

Thank you.

**Alex Howard**

You're welcome.

I hope you enjoyed this week's episodes of *In Therapy*. Please do let us know what you think about this new format. You can share your reflections and thoughts in the comments below.

And remember, as we go through the week, we're going to be sharing some of the key moments, key sound bites from this week's episode.

Next week, we're going to be catching up again with Al. Al's come to *In Therapy* to work on his health, anxiety. And in next week's episode, we're particularly going to be looking at some of the patterns of thinking which can drive and perpetuate those anxiety patterns. Here's a taste of what's coming up next week.

You've trained a way of thinking and responding which you can almost go from 0 to 100 miles an hour in that pattern almost instantly because you've conditioned and trained yourself to do that.

**Al**

It's the angst that comes from it and the feeling that like, oh my God, what if I'm dying? That just colors everything.