



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

In Therapy

Your anxiety toolkit

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[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 catching up with Sanaya, and we're exploring some of the key principles for learning to calm your nervous system and reset anxiety responses.

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This week we catch up with 22 year old Sanaya, who recently came to therapy to get help with her anxiety. In our last session, Sanaya opened up that she has a hard time admitting to herself that anxiety is something she struggles with. I explained that avoiding our issues actually makes them worse and gave us some practical tools to begin transforming her anxiety.

Well, Sanaya, it's lovely to see you. I've been wondering how you've been doing.

Sanaya

Yeah, I've been good since we last spoke. I've been doing a lot better. I've kind of felt a lot happier. Not sure exactly why.

Alex Howard

That's going to be my next question.

Sanaya

Yeah, I feel like I've just been a lot less anxious. I've still had days where I've been very anxious, but I feel like it's kind of something that I feel like I can control it a bit more. And yeah, I've just been a lot happier and I think meditating as well, it's helped me a lot. I've been really enjoying it.

Alex Howard

And you're managing to do it most days.

[00:01:58] Sanaya

Yeah, I think I've been doing it every day, I think, since we last spoke. I think there were a couple of days just after we spoke where I hadn't done it, and then as soon as I started it, I like, oh, yeah, I just enjoy it so much. I've even gone for a run, and then I've gone up this hill that's in my house and just sat there and done my meditation there.

Alex Howard

Oh, nice.

Sanaya

And that was, like, the best thing because it made the whole day, even though I had a very average day, I was just sat home doing work and not doing too much, like, making dinner or whatever. It made the whole day really nice, and I just felt fine.

Alex Howard

That's awesome. But it's also nice to know that having a good day is not necessarily dependent upon outside factors. It's also you can influence how you feel by what you do and the practices that you use.

Sanaya

Yeah, definitely. And I think before, I was kind of, like, heavily focusing on going to the gym, whereas I think the gym environment was actually kind of making me a bit anxious, which I didn't really realize. I think it was just all the people around there.

Alex Howard

Like, the stimulation and the noise.

Sanaya

Yeah. And then it's also because it's so close to my house, I have so many people that I know that go there, and then I'm like, Oh, let me go this early in the morning so I don't see these people and all of that.

Alex Howard

So you're like me, one of these introverted gym people? I don't like people looking. I just like being my own little space.

Sanaya

Exactly. And it's like, it's the gym, so you just want to get on with it, have your headphones in and just get it done. But yeah, recently so my ex boyfriend, he used to work there, so he goes there often, but usually when I go in the morning, he's never really there. But it's still on my mind.

[00:03:52] Alex Howard

You have to designated slots. You're not allowed to go in my slots.

Sanaya

And, like, I see all his friends because all his friends still work there.

Alex Howard

That's tricky. I get that.

Sanaya

So was it making me a little, like I wasn't really anxious, but I just knew that I really wanted to go to the gym. But then recently I went for a run and I was like, okay, this is probably the most calming thing because, one, it was kind of better than actually just lifting weights, which is what I did in the gym, just because I felt like my adrenaline had more adrenaline. I felt like I was calmer after.

Alex Howard

You probably burnt off some of your excess energy as well.

Sanaya

Whereas I think when I was just lifting weights, I don't as much.

Alex Howard

I mean, I think ultimately, from a health point of view, both are good. To have to variety. But I think it's also at different times, sometimes we need something that's really stimulating, other times, something that's really grounding, other times, something that's really restorative. And I think it's just listening to what you want as well.

Sanaya

So this week, I've been doing, like, both on certain days, I'll go to the gym in the morning, especially when my dad can drive me. And then on the other days, I've been just, like, going for a run or even like a walk, like a really long walk. And yeah, that's been really nice. And I feel like if I do that in the morning, it kind of just calms me throughout the day.

Alex Howard

It sets your body and your mind up for the day.

Sanaya

Yeah. And then where there has been times that I've got anxious at home later on in the day because I did the thing where you write down what points you feel anxious about the day.

[00:05:32] Alex Howard

Yeah, right.

Sanaya

So I noticed in the evening, like, late afternoon, that's when I'm most anxious.

Alex Howard

Do you know why?

Sanaya

I think that might be when, because I feel like I have nothing to do, I think. And usually when I do go out and meet my friends, the anxiety comes just before, like, in the afternoon, and the anxiety is because I'm going out.

Alex Howard

Right. And what are some of the anxiety patterns that you notice? So when you think about those times in the late afternoon, early evening, you're going out to meet friends, and it's a bit more anxious, do you have a sense of what the anxiety thoughts are? Like when there's the feeling of anxiety, but often there's a set of thoughts.

Sanaya

It's usually anxious about how I'm going to get home, or it's anxiety about whether I'm going to be anxious when I'm out.

Alex Howard

So it's anxiety about anxiety.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

And the getting home is about coming home on public transport, late at night.

Sanaya

Yeah. It's just like how I'm going to get home. And I think if I was living on my own, I think if I wasn't living with my parents, it would be a lot easier. And I think that I wouldn't actually get anxious about it, but I think because I live with my parents, it's like this kind of worry that they'll worry about it, so I should worry about it too. So that's kind of annoying because I know if I was still at uni, I would still think about how I was going to get home, but I know that I would be fine.

[00:07:16] Alex Howard

Right.

Sanaya

Whereas at home at the moment, it's like my mum asks me so many questions about how I'm getting home. She will stay up if it's a late one, she'll stay up as well. If I'm getting an Uber I have to track the Uber with her. So I think it's like this worry of making them worried, but it's also making me really anxious because they're anxious.

Alex Howard

It's like it's just also causing you to overthink the situation as well, which then stimulates, we talked about last time, then stimulates your nervous system, and then it becomes almost like a self-perpetuating cycle.

Sanaya

Yeah. So a couple of weeks ago, I went on a night out for one of my friend's birthdays. And my mum was just like, beforehand, she was like, Oh, I hate you getting an Uber late at night. Isn't there anything else you can do? And I'm like, what else? What other option is there?

Alex Howard

Uber is super safe. It's actually logged and tracked in the app. So if something did happen, we know who did it.

Sanaya

I'm going to share my Uber with so and so. And then at the end, I'll carry on in the same Uber, and I'll come home, and they'll have it on their phones. I can track it with you, all of this stuff. But actually, she made me so anxious about it, and I went on the night out, and I ended up just drinking a bit too much, which made me feel even worse. And then the next day as well, I was just anxious about like, oh, God, you drink too much. And you were just embarrassing and all of that. So it was just that was annoying.

Alex Howard

Have you had a conversation with your mum about how her anxiety causes you to get more worried about it?

Sanaya

I've had one that was heated, but that was just before I was going.

Alex Howard

Was that more reactive? Like, she was putting pressure on you and you were getting frustrated than it comes. So what I think would be really helpful to do is to pick your moment carefully, like, find the moment that she's calm and you feel calm and just say something like, mum, I really appreciate how much you care for me and you want me to be safe. And it's a really wonderful, lovely thing.

[00:09:16]

And I notice sometimes the way that you do it causes a lot of stress when that doesn't need to be what my commitment to you is that I will do ABC, so when I'm traveling home, I'll tell you when I'm going to leave and I'll share my Uber, but as long as I do that, it'd be really helpful to me if you could not keep on sharing your anxieties and concerns.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

I don't know your mum, but how do you think she would respond if you case in that way?

Sanaya

Yeah, I think she would understand it more, definitely.

Alex Howard

Because where it comes from, of course, is that she loves you, she cares about you, and she wants to keep you safe. That's what she's trying to say. But what you're hearing is panic, panic, panic, panic. When you're really working hard to calm yourself down, the more kind of calmness you have in the environment, of course, the easier it is.

Sanaya

Yeah, no, I definitely think she would kind of understand it and be a bit calmer with me.

Alex Howard

Because normally when we have these conversations, we do it when we get to our limit of frustration, and then we do it as an explosion and then it has the opposite effect. So the trick is to pick it at a moment where you're not reactive and she's not reactive, and it's just a really carefully worded loving expression of what you need.

Sanaya

Yeah, no, that's definitely something that I have kind of thought about before, but I've just not really got around to doing it.

Alex Howard

Talk to me about, last time I saw you, you were having a better week because you were doing some work. And we talked about the fact that having something to do to focus on that feels like it's a progression and in a sense also stops your mind from running away was really helpful. Have you had work since last time or not?

[00:11:07] Sanaya

Yeah, so I've had a bit of work pop up, so I had that one at the exhibition, which carried on for a week after, and then I got called back into the school to do some admin for them, which is really helpful. So, yeah, I've had that at the moment.

But yeah, looking for work has kind of been, made me feel a lot less anxious about it because I think because I've been looking for other jobs, which I feel I could probably get, whereas the TV and film jobs I'm like, I think it was making me more anxious because I was like, I'm definitely not going to get these.

Alex Howard

So what's the stuff that you have been applying for more recently?

Sanaya

Literally just stuff near my house. So there's an Itzu near me. So I applied for like a part time there. And then the other stuff that I applied for, mainly like, agency works for events. That's what I did for the exhibition.

Alex Howard

Yeah.

Sanaya

So I quite enjoyed that. It was a temporary job and I just thought I would love that and something a bit different every time. So I've applied for different agencies, basically that I found. So I'm they get back to me, which some of them have already.

Alex Howard

I also think one of the unspoken things, well, sometimes spoken things in careers is that who you know, it's a bit of a cliché, but who you know is often more important than what you know. And the more at your stage of your career, you can expand your network and you can just get to know a lot of people in the industry, the better.

A lot of the people doing that kind of event stuff and often people doing front of house and theater stuff is people like you. People that are also kind of out there hustling, trying to make things happen. And you just need to have a connection with one person who they get a bit of a break and then they bring you.

Even if you're doing a job, which is a bit tedious and boring and not very well paid, the more you're just out there meeting people, getting to know people, expanding your network, I think that is really valuable.

Sanaya

Yeah, definitely. And it's also quite nice just because I feel like I'm doing something but also talking to everyone as well it kind of makes me feel like, oh, I'm being social and actually I managed that situation fine. So it's kind of like building up my confidence.

[00:13:38] Alex Howard

Yeah. It's funny, I was having this conversation with one of the team in our training company recently that it's really about constantly expanding what you feel comfortable doing. So initially, being a runner on a show might be a stretch, but you do that enough, then after a while I could do that in my sleep. And then you go in next day, perhaps if you want to be front of camera, you do a bit more of that.

Even something like this, the first time you sat here probably would have been like, holy shit, cameras. And you feel much more comfortable now and maybe I'm wrong, but you feel more comfortable now than you did then. And I think it's just constantly putting yourself not in a way we are, constantly pushing yourself in a way that's unkind, but just challenging yourself to get more comfortable and more familiar with more and more different situations, then it's almost like if that's your comfort zone, you grow it to that and then to that, and then suddenly something that was a big stretch just becomes what you naturally, comfortably do.

Sanaya

Yeah. And I also think this week I've been a lot happier because I felt like the jobs that I've been applying for, there's more hope there. And it's something a bit different as well because it's quite daunting when you've gone through all the TV and film jobs and you're like, well, I've applied for all of these ones available, there's literally nothing left and I don't know what more I can do, whereas the other ones, finding new stuff and obviously there is more hope. I'll hopefully get there.

Alex Howard

I also think about the early years of my career and some of my biggest breaks came in literally the most random places.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

It's like I met the co-founder of the Optimum Health Clinic nearly 20 years ago on a speed dating event. It's like, you do not go speed dating to meet someone you're going to spend ten years doing your company with. But that's just how it was and it's like the more that you give yourself opportunity, the more than opportunity comes.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

Last time we also talked about some of the biology of what happens with anxiety and I was explaining about the adrenaline, cortisol and how that happens and just trying to give you a bit more of an understanding of that. Was that helpful or not? I'm curious as to our reflection if that took some of the fear away from those sensations?

[00:16:09] Sanaya

Yeah, I think also it kind of made me think, oh, like, it's not me and it's not fixed, kind of thing, so, yeah, it was definitely helpful to know why it's happening. It's not anything that is personal to me.

Alex Howard

Right.

Sanaya

It's just science, basically.

Alex Howard

And it literally happens to hundreds of millions, if not billions of people. I can't remember the exact stats, but a high percentage of people at some point in their life will struggle with either depression or anxiety in some way or some form.

But in a sense, the thing that makes anxiety so awful is the unknown terror of like, oh my God, am I going to die? Or what's happening? The kind of extreme fear. And it's almost like, actually, right now, the reason I feel this way is it's just tons of hormones pumping through my system and actually, the more that I think about the worst case scenario, the more I tell my body that that might happen, so the more it creates those hormones but actually it's just chemicals. Actually, the calmer you are, the less that happens. The calmer you become, the less it happens. And then you're resetting your system as a result of that.

Sanaya

Yeah, I think it also makes sense to me why now, when I do exercise, I feel like if there's a science or why it's there, it feels like there's a science to control it as well.

Alex Howard

Totally. Well, one of the things that exercise does is the research shows it reduces cortisol. So cortisol is the stress hormone. So when you have an anxiety attack, or when you're feeling really anxious, if we were to do a blood test or a urine test or a saliva test of your cortisol levels, they would be higher.

When you exercise effectively, what you do is you burn off some of that excess cortisol, which then lowers your level. Also, what happens is when you exercise, you sleep and you rest more deeply, which means that your system resets itself in a healthier way as well, so you also just release less of that in the first place.

So there's a lot of evidence and research that shows that physical exercise and things like meditation and mindfulness doesn't just make you feel better, but it actually changes the biology of what's happening behind anxiety.

Sanaya

Yeah, it definitely makes sense now. And, yeah, it's quite comforting to know why it's happening or not why it's happening, but yeah, why it's happening.

[00:18:45] Alex Howard

How far did you get in the RESET program? So you were doing Module Three because you mentioned about the checking of times of day in terms of where you are. Did you get the Module Four in terms of the STOP Process?

Sanaya

Yeah, there was actually one time where I did do the STOP and it was quite funny because for a while it worked, but it was actually on the day that I went out and I was quite nervous to go because my mum had made me so nervous beforehand and I remember doing it to myself in the toilets going to stop, and it helped calm me down quite a bit before. So, yeah, that was helpful. But after that, I still got anxious.

Alex Howard

Yeah. So the thing to remember about the STOP Process is it's not a miracle that you do it once and everything just sort of actually changes. It's almost like you've got two lines going along and you make a few degrees shift in one of those lines and it doesn't look like much at the start, but if those two lines keep going, actually the distance gets further and further away.

So in a sense, what you're doing is you're gradually training your system. But if your pattern is, but I'm still anxious, it's not working, or my anxiety is getting worse, it's not working, then in a sense, you're putting yourself back into the anxiety state. As opposed to, right now, I'm going to do this process, it might calm things, it might not, but gradually, over time, the general trend is you're teaching your system to be that much calmer.

You mentioned that the two things that give you anxiety at the moment one was the your mum worrying, so we talked a bit about that and you've got a bit of a plan on that. You also mentioned that the anxiety about anxiety.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

Say a bit more about that, by the way, just to say, I recognize that putting a spotlight on this is probably not the thing you must want to do, but just to qualify, the reason why we're doing that is that the more we can give you tools and strategies effectively, we're trying to take this thing that feels completely out of your control and that happens to you and feels really scary to something that you know you can influence and is not happening to you. It's chemistry in your body that you're gradually retraining. So that's why it's helpful to talk about it.

Sanaya

Yeah. So I think the reason is just because I've had moments where I've been really anxious before when I've gone out or done something, which pretty much most of them were right after COVID. So when we first were able to, pubs are opening, so I go and see my friends at the pub and then I just have a really bad, I just get really anxious. Go to the toilet to kind of like calm myself down, but then

realize, no, I just want to go home. So I feel like I've had those situations happen to me at that point in time.

[00:21:48] Alex Howard

So it's part of what, because it's almost like we have formulas for how we create our state. So it's like having a recipe. You're going to make a chocolate cake, you need some eggs, you need some sugar and you need some flour and you put all the things together in the right way and get a chocolate cake. But if you change chocolate for coal or you change, I don't know, eggs for paint mixer or something, you get a different outcome.

There are certain ways that you think, certain ways that you breathe, certain ways that you move your body that create a state of anxiety. It sounds like one of the things that you do is you think about something that's coming up and you replay in your mind times that you've been in that situation and had anxiety and go, what if it's like that? Is that right?

Sanaya

Yeah, that's pretty much it.

Alex Howard

You mentioned that example soon after lockdown that you went out. Is there generally that or is there like a few different ones that you find yourself replaying and thinking about?

Sanaya

Yeah, it will just be like even just meeting one of my friends one on one. I remember I feel like it was completely fine looking back on it, but I just remember after that thinking, oh God, what was I talking about? Or why did I say that? And just thinking that it was really awkward between us, even though I knew that it wasn't. But I think it's because I hadn't done that in so long and I hadn't seen her in so long. So I feel like there was those moments.

And then recently when I saw her again, I was like, oh, I'm going to feel the same. It's going to be a bit awkward. And it wasn't fine, but yeah, it was just situations like that that I think I found made me quite anxious. And I think purely just because I hadn't done it for that whole year.

Alex Howard

That makes sense. So what's happening is you've got these few memories that were unpleasant at the time, and then each time you think about going to certain situations, you replay those memories and you kind of think, what if this happens? And what if it's like that? And understandably, your body starts to get more anxious because it's like, well, what if it is like that?

Which is a little bit like the penalty takers in the World Cup final for England, right, because they know how to score penalties. I mean, it's like if you were to take the three guys that missed, they probably score, I don't know, 80% of the penalties that they take. So statistically, at least two out of the three of them should have scored the penalties.

But they also know it's like the most important moment of their entire life, literally the most important moment of their life. And so they know this, what they're probably doing when they're standing there

is going, oh, my God, what if I miss? What if I miss? What if I miss? If I miss, this is going to be terrible. They're actually visualizing missing the penalty.

[00:24:44]

And then, of course, that has a big impact. And that's why visualization, particularly in sports psychology, because it's like the result is so measurable, like, you can see the impact immediately. It's so powerful. In a sense, what you're doing in that instance, when you're thinking about going and doing something and seeing yourself having anxiety, it's sort of the same. You're mentally rehearsing it being the way you don't want it to be.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

And then, of course your body goes, well, shit, if I go there and I do have anxiety, no one would want that, right? I wouldn't want that either. It'd be horrible to go there and have anxiety. So maybe I shouldn't go, but then if I don't go... And then you probably go into, like I call mental tennis, where you go, well, if I go, I could do this, but if I don't go, I'm going to let them down. And then you kind of rationalize it around in your head, which also probably raises your anxiety level.

Sanaya

Yeah, definitely. That sounds about right.

Alex Howard

That's the formula that when we have anxiety that we do. We take a bad experience from the past and we visualize it in the future as though it's going to happen and then we keep replaying it.

Sanaya

Yeah, it was kind of like when I was trying to, there was a book that I was doing, which is like a manifesting book, and I did it once, read the whole book once, really enjoyed it, felt like it made me a lot happier. So probably a few months ago when I was feeling low, I was like, I'll do it again. But then I would meditate and try and visualize good things, but then I would just be like, oh no, now I'm making it bad because I'm like, visualizing me not getting the job or something like that. It was definitely like this kind of like battle in my head being like, no, just visualize the good stuff and I just couldn't.

Alex Howard

And then you get stressed trying to do that.

Sanaya

And it was like the same thing with meditation was I would like, meditate and then all of these bad thoughts would come into my head and I'd be like, well, that just did the complete opposite to what I like was meditating in the first place.

[00:27:02] Alex Howard

There's different ways that we can work. There's a few ways we'll work with this, but particularly, this is where the STOP Process is really helpful. Because when we get into an internal battle of we're trying to visualize the positive, but then that sneaky voice in our head says, yeah, but what if this happens? We go we end up kind of getting more and more kind of stressed as a result of it.

Just recognizing that that's what's happening is helpful because then we can use your STOP Process to go, hang on, I'm imagining all the worst things happening. Or I'm trying to imagine the positive, but then I'm worrying about the worst. To be able to just see that and to stop and to calm and reset your system.

Something else that we may well come to as well is taking some of those memories that are replaying and restructuring those in how you think about them. What I mean by that is a little bit like having a record. Remember like CDs back in the day, those CDs, and you play a CD, but then if you get a few scratches on the CD, it doesn't play in the same way.

So you're replaying certain memories. If we can change the way that, you're not going to change the memories because what happened, happened, but if we can change the way that you think about those memories, then it doesn't carry the same emotional charge, if that makes sense.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

So when you were doing your STOP, it sounds like you said you're in the bathroom and you were doing your STOP, you probably felt like a bit of a plonker doing your STOP the first few times. Most of us feel a bit strange initially, but it's like what I was saying earlier, it's like growing the comfort zone that one gets more comfortable doing it. How are you doing your STOP? Was it like that or like that?

Sanaya

It was one hand. Because when I watched the video, I did them all, and I felt like the one hand felt the most normal and helped me. I feel like it just worked better.

Alex Howard

Yeah. And how are you saying? Was it like stop or pause?

Sanaya

I did stop and then I just do some deep breaths and wait while and kind of repeat the stop, but in my head. I definitely felt calmer and kind of instantly happier. Because it was at my friend's house. I had just gone to my friend's house before, and then I was feeling a little bit overwhelmed. And then when I went to the toilet, I did that. I came back out, and I guess I just kind of carried on. I didn't really kind of completely forgot that I had done the STOP, and I was fine. But I guess subconsciously, I think it just was still there. Like, wherever the issue was, the anxiety was still there.

[00:29:42]

So I think it kind of showed in me just, like, drinking more, which ended up with me being like, the next day, oh, gosh, I shouldn't have drank that much and feeling anxious about that whole night before saying sorry to all of my friends, even though they were like, I literally don't know what you're saying sorry for.

Alex Howard

You're, like, nor do I, I can't remember. But I think the thing to think about here is we want to be really careful not to go into a mindset of, has it worked? Is it working? But I was still anxious. We're trying to just gradually shift the balance.

So another way to think about is like a seesaw. And on one side of the seesaw is all the anxieties, all the things you're stressed about, all the things that cause your system to get overstimulated. On the other side is all the tools and techniques, the STOP Process, the meditation, the exercise, other things we will come to. And it's about shifting the balance enough that you find yourself in a calm, healing state.

It doesn't mean you have to resolve all the worries or get rid of all the anxieties. It's just having enough strategies and tools that you're able to shift that balance. We want to be careful, but that pattern of, is it working? It hasn't worked. It's not going to work. That we just don't give that too much attention or too much traction. That it's not about any one time you do it. It's about gradually teaching your system to become calmer over time.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

So you were doing stop, again?

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

Okay, good. And as we're sat here talking, now, what is there coming up, like, when you're perhaps going out or a time that typically, what I call anticipatory anxiety would come in?

Sanaya

What I'm thinking is mainly like my next worry is tomorrow evening I'm supposed to go out, and I'm not really anxious at the moment about being anxious.

Alex Howard

So you might be tomorrow afternoon or closer.

[00:31:56] Sanaya

But also what I'm anxious about now about it is just they're getting home. But yeah, at the moment I'm not anxious because it's somewhere that's near to where I live.

Alex Howard

Where are you going?

Sanaya

It's literally just to a little pub/bar that we've always gone to. And it's just in Ealing, really close for me, and so I'm still worried about how I'm going to get home. Well, not really how I'm going to get home, just having the conversation with my mum, just thinking about her. But actually, I'm not yet anxious, I think, because I've done that bar so often.

Alex Howard

Yeah. So going back to what we were saying, it's kind of in your comfort zone somewhere.

Sanaya

Yes. It's not like I have to travel far for it. It's, like, very close. I know it so well. I've had so many good nights out there.

Alex Howard

Which is also interesting, by the way, because remember what I was saying around your brain is trying to guess or imagine how you're going to feel, and you've got a good stack of positive memories. So it's like, when your brain's going, am I going to be anxious? Actually, I've got that memory, that memory, that memory. No, I think I'm going to be okay.

Sanaya

Yeah, definitely.

Alex Howard

Is there anything a bit further out that, when you think about it, is a bit more of a stretch in terms of where you're going?

Sanaya

Yeah. Do you mean, like, things that I'm anxious about?

Alex Howard

Yeah.

[00:33:23] Sanaya

There's my friend's birthday, which actually the night out, where I ended up drinking too much and going home early. I also spent £40 on an Uber because I was just like, I need to go home. And I was in Hackney going all the way to West London, and I spent so much money on an Uber, but I just had to in that moment. And all of my friends are like, there's no way that I was getting on a night bus or anything like that.

So that bar my friend really liked, so she wants to go back there for her birthday, which is in a few weeks. But actually, I'm not that anxious about it at the moment.

Alex Howard

But it might be the case that if it was the afternoon now and it was this evening, that you might remember that time and start running that through your mind.

Sanaya

Yeah, definitely. And that time before was the only time that I've ever been there as well.

Alex Howard

So let's work with both of these examples. Let's work with the one about going out tomorrow night and your mum, and then we'll also work about going to your friend's party. When I say work with it, what I mean is we're just practicing the STOP Process on it. So as you sit here now and you're thinking about going out tomorrow night, it's not like a big stress or anxiety. It's like, how am I going to get home? When you start thinking about that, how do you feel in your body?

Sanaya

Like, I don't know. My heart kind is racing a bit.

Alex Howard

There's a little bit of, like, an anxiety that comes in.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

And can you see how just by thinking about it, that sends a message to your body to start pumping some more cortisol and more adrenaline? So going back to what we said last time, and we're saying that there's, like a recipe, like, you think about something and then it sends a message. So we want to change what you're thinking. We want to change the message effectively that you're sending. When you were doing the STOP Process, were you doing it with your eyes open or closed?

Sanaya

I did it with my eyes closed.

[00:35:33] Alex Howard

Yeah. So it might be easy now to close your eyes, but you can open your eyes. Not like you have to sit there and go, I can't open my eyes. So you can kind of be a bit fluid. But if you want to close your eyes for a moment, just imagine thinking about going out tomorrow night. Notice that you get that little bit of that kind of feeling in your chest. And then as you notice the thoughts about it, like, how will I get home? And what if this happens? When you're ready, do your stop. So you do the gesture and you say the words.

Sanaya

Stop.

Alex Howard

And then relax your hand. And then just feel the feeling of your body on the sofa. Feel the feeling of your toes. Notice your shoulders relaxing. Just feel that feeling of that stop in your body. It's like you recognize there's a certain pathway of thinking that you've spent a lot of time in the past going down, but actually, you don't need to. And actually, instead, you can send the message to your body to relax, to be calm, to be here in this moment.

And just like when you do your meditation and you notice that you feel more relaxed, you find yourself just being able to come into the moment. Just feel the weight of your body on the sofa. Feel your hands, feel your shoulders relaxing. And inside of your mind, you hear the words, very good, well done. And then allow yourself to open your eyes when you're ready. How does that feel?

Sanaya

Yeah, it's calming.

Alex Howard

Yeah. Good. Can you see how if every time you started to send a message to worry to your body, you'd stopped and you sent a message to be calm, can you see how in time, it doesn't mean you're never going to get worried or never get stressed, but it's almost like if that's your baseline at the moment, over time you would gradually teach your system to become calmer.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

So let's take the other example. Let's imagine it's like a few weeks time and you're thinking about it's, maybe the afternoon or the day before of going to the bar where you had the eventful time last time. When you're ready, just close your eyes for a moment. Imagine starting to think about you're replaying that memory and remembering when you do that, actually, you're telling your system to be worried about it, when actually you don't need to. And then again, when you're ready, you put your hand up and you go, stop.

[00:38:00] Sanaya

Stop.

Alex Howard

Okay, good. Relax your hands. And again, just feel your mind pausing, recognizing that actually you can tell your body to do something different. You can tell your mind to do something different. You deliberately, in this moment, notice your breathing being a little bit deeper. You notice the muscles in your face and in your neck and in your shoulders relaxing a bit more easily. You feel the feeling of your feet, your toes just feeling a bit heavier as you feel the sofa supporting the weight of your body.

And then again, inside of your mind, you hear the words, very good, well done. And then again, you can open your eyes when you're ready. How you doing now?

Sanaya

Yeah. It's really nice.

Alex Howard

What else is there, that when you think about it now, in the old way of thinking, you would have likely started to kind of rehearse things not being the way you want them to be.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

What else can you think of like that?

Sanaya

So what do you mean?

Alex Howard

Sorry, let me ask a question a bit better. So we take an example of kind of how you're going to get home and also the example of going somewhere that's either not familiar or going somewhere that's been a bad kind of experience before. What else can you think of? Either you find yourself rehearsing in an anxiety way or that kind of anticipatory anxiety, either situations coming up, or other times that you notice yourself getting anxious.

Sanaya

I'm not sure.

Alex Howard

Okay.

[00:39:51] Sanaya

Yeah. I don't really know, really.

Alex Howard

How do you feel right now? We've just spent the last, whatever it is, 40 minutes talking about anxiety. How do you feel?

Sanaya

I feel quite calm right now.

Alex Howard

Does that surprise you?

Sanaya

Yeah, I don't feel anxious really at all. I feel really calm.

Alex Howard

Because you remember last time, one of the things we were talking about is that just the very kind of thing of talking about anxiety was anxiety inducing.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

And remember I said to you that it was almost like you'd learned to deny or pretend that you weren't anxious because you didn't want to have to talk about it, because if you talk about it, it makes it worse. So it was almost like the monster got bigger because it was like we were kind of pretending it's not here. And then actually, we've just spent 45 minutes so far talking about anxiety and actually you seem pretty calm when you came in, but you seem even calmer now.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

Does that surprise you when we look at it like that?

Sanaya

Yeah, it does.

[00:40:55] Alex Howard

What does that mean about you and your relationship to anxiety?

Sanaya

I can control it and it doesn't have so much control over me that I previously thought it did.

Alex Howard

How does it feel to say that?

Sanaya

Yeah, it's quite good.

Alex Howard

Yeah. If you said that to yourself at the beginning of our first session or last session, would you have believed that?

Sanaya

Oh, no, definitely not.

Alex Howard

And the point of what we're saying right now is not that you're never going to have anxiety again or that there won't even be times between now and next time where anxiety feels tricky. This is not a black and white binary thing of either anxiety is in control as how it felt before, or you're always in control, which is a bit more what it feels like now. It's just going back to that seesaw and it's like before it felt like all the power was with the anxiety and now it feels like there's some power and then some influence with you.

And it's like the worst case scenario is it might be that you have a really bad episode of anxiety, but you know something you didn't know before, you know that whatever it feels like is biochemistry and the biochemistry has got too much adrenaline, too much cortisol, too much stress hormones of the pumping, but you know that at some point it's going to calm and it's going to settle.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

But the better case scenario, which I think is more what you're going to experience and more what you're going to see, is that you have ways of setting things up so that you win.

So going back to the example of the penalty takers, with the right mental strategies and the right tools, it doesn't guarantee that next time they're going to score the penalty, but it increases the likelihood they're going to score the penalty. Because if they're like if I don't get this right it means I have to get it right, score the penalty but the pressure that in of itself becomes anxiety.

[00:43:06]

As opposed to you just want to stack the odds in your favor the very best that you can, which then comes back to the daily routine and practices that you're using like the running and the weights and the exercise I think is really important and I'm really impressed that you've really stuck to that and you've got structure of that. I think the meditation is also really important.

I think it's also really great that you're getting busier in terms of job and work for the reasons we talked about at the start around network, around having focus around, having a sense of momentum in terms of what you're doing. I think the next piece to work with is this piece around practicing the STOP Process.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

I would love to see you doing it at least five or six times a day, going for a few rounds of the process. Like, it might be in the morning before you get out of bed, it might be kind of when you get back from the gym, it might be before lunch. Having some regular, we want to have some proactive times that you do it and obviously you can use it reactively, that if you find yourself getting anxious, you can go, hang on, I'm going to use the STOP Process to calm things down.

But we also want to be proactive with it, because in a sense, what you're doing is that throughout the day, just by being stimulated, by being busy, we're getting a bit more kind of adrenaline in our system. And there's a kind of threshold that when you cross it is when anxiety starts to feed anxiety.

We want to try and keep your overall stress levels low enough that we don't go past that threshold where it gets that momentum. So it's like through the day, you're gradually ramping up a bit and then you do your STOP Process and you bring it down again and it breaks up a bit. And it's like a bit like having a pressure cooker that you just keep letting the pressure out a little bit.

So you're then in doing that, you're training your nervous system, you're training yourself to be in a calmer state, which then means when it gets to that time of day, like 4 or 5 in the afternoon, where you'd be more likely to get anxious because perhaps you're going out, your system is that much calmer that it doesn't get the momentum into the anxiety it would have done otherwise.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

Does that make sense?

Sanaya

Yes, definitely.

[00:45:24] Alex Howard

How do you feel about putting that into practice?

Sanaya

Good. I feel like I'm looking forward to doing it.

Alex Howard

Yeah. Good. And sometimes at this point, I give people a bit of a pep talk around commitment and motivation, but I'm sat with someone who's doing running and weights pretty much every day, meditating every day. I actually genuinely believe you can do this, so I'm not going to give you my little 3 minute pep talk that sometimes comes out.

Sanaya

So even when I can't be bothered to exercise and stuff, and sometimes that does really help and then I have my day where I haven't gone and done the exercise and then I feel awful, and then I'm like, the next day I know I'm going to have to exercise. So it's kind of like that, like, I know how it can impact me. So if I'm already sat here and I've done it and I feel good, then I know that I do want to do it and see it through.

Alex Howard

Good. And you'll also find in the RESET program, there's an audio version that you can always download to have on your phone. So if you do go out and you find yourself particularly worried at the moment, you can actually put it on your headphones and listen to it and actually use that as a way to calm these down as well.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

There are definitely some more strategies and tools that we can bring in as well, and some that are not in the RESET program that I think would be really helpful. But I'm also mindful of not adding too many things in. Like, I feel like with the exercise, with the meditation, and now with the STOP Process, you've got a really good little toolkit there, and I think let's give that the chance to really get it bedded in.

What questions you got for me. Do you have any questions?

Sanaya

Yeah, I don't really think I have any questions, really.

[00:47:13] Alex Howard

Okay, good. Keep going. You're doing really well. I'm really pleased to hear and I'm really pleased to hear that you've been committing and following through because that's also its own act of self love. Like it's saying I care about myself enough or I care about my well being enough that I'm going to commit to myself. So well done for doing that.

Sanaya

Yeah, thank you.

Alex Howard

Okay, good. You're welcome. Good. So I will see you, we'll have to book in a time, and I'll see you in a few weeks.

Sanaya

Okay. Thank you so much.

Alex Howard

You're welcome.

I hope you found this week's episode helpful. Hopefully also you get the take home message that anxiety is something that can be changed. We aren't born anxious. We have learned and trained ourselves to have anxiety patterns and responses. And with the right tools and strategies and support, it's absolutely possible to reset and to rewire our nervous system.

If you'd like to find out more about how to do that, there's a free 3-part video series for my RESET program. You can find details in the link below this video. And the next intake of the program starts at the end of January.

In next week's episode, we're going to be catching up with Sally from season two. Sally has recently been back to Spain as part of her processing of the loss of her mother. She also has some very exciting news about developments in her career. So I look forward to talking with you next week.