



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

In Therapy

Our inner critic

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 life people on their therapeutic journeys.

And in this week's episode, we're going to be revisiting the inner critic, that voice inside of our mind which is always questioning us and criticizing us and judging our value as a human being. And how as we get more responsibilities in our life, often it can be a real block, a real obstacle to just having joy, to just being present, to being alive and being able to have a real sense of connection in this actual moment.

If you haven't already, please like, subscribe, click the bell icon to be notified as new episodes are released and do follow my Instagram [@alexhowardtherapy](https://www.instagram.com/alexhowardtherapy) for daily inspiration and support.

This week we catch up with 23 year old Sanaya, who came to therapy to help with her anxiety. Having seen significant progress in our last session, Sanaya learnt an important lesson, that when we work on our healing, our healing works for us.

With a slightly longer break between sessions, I'm keen to see whether she's been able to keep up the good work.

So Sanaya, it's very nice to see you.

Sanaya

Thank you. Very nice to see you too.

Alex Howard

How are you doing?

Sanaya

I'm good. I think on the whole I am actually pretty good. I've just been quite busy. In terms of anxiety, I've not felt anxious, really, very anxious at all since we last spoke, which is pretty good. And the only anxiety that I have really felt is when I've got something coming up, like an interview or something like that. So that was like a natural anxiety, which I'm used to and I know why it's there and how to deal with it. So it's been quite good.

[00:02:12]

And then in terms of the exercises that I was doing before and meditation, I have a whole week where I'm amazing at it and then I have a week where I don't even think about it at all and it's just been like that up and down since. I would say on the whole I've been pretty good.

Alex Howard

That's great. I'm really pleased to hear that.

You're saying it's a bit more event driven, like something that's coming up. Talk to me about any examples of that.

Sanaya

So I think I would say I only really felt anxious when I did have an interview coming up. In the summer it was social events as well, actually, at the moment, last weekend I didn't really go out just because I've been so tired. But I think social things with my friends and stuff, I felt a lot less anxious.

Alex Howard

Because one of the things we talked about two or three months ago was going out in the evenings and partly your anticipatory anxiety, but also managing your mum's anxiety about you going out. Has that been easier?

Sanaya

Yes, it has been. I think my mum's just accepted that as long as I let her know where I am and where I'm going and stuff, and I'm in an Uber now and stuff like that, she's been a lot more calmer about it, I guess. It's not really been that much of an issue, but obviously the past few weeks I've been working and so I haven't been going out as much as I would have before. But sometimes the day after I get a little bit anxious when I've gone out. I don't know why, but I think it's just...

Alex Howard

What's the content of the anxiety? What are the thoughts?

Sanaya

I'm not sure. It's just more so just as I wake up in the morning and feel a little bit anxious and I think it's just because I'm just so sleep deprived because I've gotten in later than normal.

Alex Howard

And later than normal is what sort of time?

Sanaya

So like it could be like 3am or something.

[00:04:32] Alex Howard

Oh, to be young. And you're waking up at what sort of time?

Sanaya

So I usually wake up around, after that I'd usually wake up at 10 in the morning and I do sleep a lot. Like I need my sleep.

Alex Howard

But you're sort of thrown off your normal sleep rhythm.

Sanaya

It's like on weekends I'll usually go out on a Friday or a Saturday and it will be that period of time where I'm just so tired and have little naps during the day. But on the weekends I've been, like my mum's wanted to do something, like we put up our Christmas tree every day and I was just so tired.

And I think because of that, and then also knowing I have work on Monday or tomorrow even, it's just this feeling of like it's unease, but it has been manageable and I know why it's there. You went out last night, you had a good time and you just need some rest. Like get an early night tonight.

Alex Howard

Yeah. One thing that happens is the more physically tired we become, our body then tends to pump adrenaline and cortisol and stress hormones to fill the gaps. If our energy should normally be here and it's there, we pump those stress hormones to try and raise our energy to meet that normal point, which then means you feel more anxious because it's like your body is using stress hormones to lift you physically, but then you have the anxiety and the worry that goes with that.

So I don't think that's that uncommon, that if you have a late night, one has a late night and doesn't have as much sleep, as much rest as they normally get, to feel a bit out of balance the next day. The resolution is building your overall resilience and strength, trying to avoid too many crazy late nights and just managing it the best you can when it happens.

Sanaya

Yeah. And it's also nice knowing that it makes me feel like I can manage it a bit more. If there was a day where I don't really know why I'm anxious, I feel like if I completely cut anxiety out of my life, when it does come, I'd be like, oh my God, I don't know how to handle this. Whereas when I have those moments on the weekend, I know exactly what is happening. And I feel like when it does come on a random day, which I'm sure it will at some point in my life, I feel like I'll know a little bit. I'll know how to deal with it a little bit easier.

Alex Howard

And I'm not sure never having anxiety is even the objective because anxiety can also be helpful. Anxiety can be the sign that there's something coming up that I don't feel prepared for, and I feel anxious about it. And actually it's a sign that I need to prepare.

[00:07:25]

Like in the interview example, if there was no anxiety, you might just turn up to the interview without really thinking about it and prepping because you haven't really thought about it. It's the anxiety that gets you to do the research in advance and maybe think about possible questions they might ask and what you would say. There's a healthy place to have anxiety. It's just what you do with it. And does it feel like a message from your system to prepare, or does it feel like this overwhelming, dominating force that you need to escape and get away from?

Sanaya

I think sometimes with my confidence, I mean, sometimes I have really good days and I don't really think about anything. And then sometimes I have a few bad days where, I wouldn't say it's necessarily a body image thing, but that's what kick starts it. And then I'll look in the mirror and be like, oh, gosh. And then after that my day will go badly because these jeans don't fit me anymore or something like that. And it's like, I'll be a little bit, not anxious, I wouldn't say anxious, but just uncomfortable in what I'm doing. Like less confident speaking to people, not really want to go out.

Alex Howard

It sounds like there's some sort of inner critic piece that comes in. What are some of those things that you would find yourself saying to yourself?

Sanaya

If it is about my body, just that I've put on weight, that's usually what it is about my body. And then after that, it would start a whole, you need to speak more when you're with that person or be more funny or something like that.

Alex Howard

So it sounds like there's a comparing yourself to an ideal that you feel you should be. And that person has this figure, that person always says the right thing in these situations. Who is that idealized Sanaya? If I was sat here right now with that perfect version of yourself that you're measuring yourself against, who would I be talking to?

Sanaya

I think I do compare myself a lot to myself when I was in sixth form, and I wasn't great, I think I just was just a lot more fun. And I think I just genuinely didn't have a care in the world, which wasn't the best thing at all.

Alex Howard

Had you experienced any anxiety at that point, or it came soon after that, from what I remember?

Sanaya

I didn't really. It was just feeling nervous more than anxiety, and then the anxiety came during uni, I think.

[00:10:29] Alex Howard

So it was a sort of innocence in some ways as well, right?

Sanaya

Yeah, completely. And obviously, I think everyone has this stage where they're like growing up and they just don't really care about anything or I don't know, something like that. And that's definitely what I went to. And it's not that I want to be like that as such...

Alex Howard

There's something about the lightness and the playfulness of that you that you miss.

Sanaya

Yeah, definitely.

Alex Howard

Because that you is still there, right?

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

But it's not as easily available somehow. What is in the way of you being able to feel more that way? Is it your inner critic saying, people will think this or that or won't think, what's the obstacle to you being able to be a bit more playful and spontaneous?

Sanaya

I think I have just changed a lot.

Alex Howard

Okay.

Sanaya

I think I've just gotten older and things mattered to me more than other things. So when I was younger, I didn't really think about our career or anything like that. That wasn't the first thing on my mind at all. But now, obviously, that's what is probably most important to me.

Alex Howard

But is it possible to have more responsibility, get a bit older and still be playful and still have that light hearted, playful attitude to life?

[00:12:11] Sanaya

Yeah, definitely. I think then in terms of that, then it is the inner critic where there's probably perhaps stopping me when I think about, oh, you would have done that, you would have gone to that or done that if you were in sixth form with that person, but now I just need to accept that I might not want to do that anymore, and I shouldn't beat myself up about it if I don't. Does that make sense?

Alex Howard

Yeah. I feel like the playfulness, yes there are going to be situations where it's not appropriate or there's going to be places where something else is more helpful, but I think it's also very easy to get in a pattern of having gone through a difficult chapter of life where there was a lot of anxiety and confidence issues and that sort of thing, and you have much more space and freedom from that. But then it's sort of like, well, that playfulness was me before that, and that's not me at this point.

But I feel like you can have the best of both worlds. I feel like you can have the maturity and the wisdom that's come from some of the more heavy and difficult things that you have been through but also to have that . playful and lighthearted attitude to life as well.

Sanaya

Yeah. And I also think that in sixth form I wouldn't say that I wasn't going through anything because a lot of my family had a lot of issues at that point that I felt I had to deal with more than anyone else with my family. And the fact that I just had this carefree oh, I didn't care. And I would tell my friend, some of my close friends about it, and they'd be going through their stuff.

And recently me and my close friend had a conversation about it, and they were like, my God, we were so young and we were talking about how we had this, oh we don't care, we'll get through it, we're so much older in our heads. And then looking back on it now that we realized that there's, like all those issues that we dealt with then we're only really dealing with them now. Does that make sense?

Alex Howard

Yeah, it does make sense. And in a sense, sometimes we need that time to get a bit more clarity and a bit more maturity and a bit more perspective on those things.

Sanaya

Yeah. I think especially having COVID and lockdown, it was like everything just stopped, but like our minds just didn't. So it was like thinking back to everything and it was just quite overwhelming. And I think that also triggered a lot of my anxiety.

Alex Howard

Coming back to the inner critic, what does your inner critic have to say about fun? The fun that one has in their, remind me how old you are?

Sanaya

22. I'm 23 in January.

[00:15:40] Alex Howard

The fun that one has at 22, 23 is different to the fun one has at 17-18. And the fun you have at 17-18 is different to what you have at 11 and 12. And the fun you have in your 30s is different to what you have in your 20s, there's an evolution of that. But that core principle of having a playful, light hearted, fun attitude to your life is valuable.

What's the inner critic got to say about it? If you're wanting to be a bit lighter and a bit more playful about something in your life, what gets in the way of that?

Sanaya

I think a lot of the time, especially when I wasn't working, it was if I was to go out, I felt like I can't spend any money or I shouldn't really go out or something like that because I don't really deserve it, because I'm not working for it.

Now that I'm working for it, it's a little bit different, but it's still just like this, oh, I shouldn't be doing this because my friends got these jobs and these jobs and they're all set and I'm not yet, so I shouldn't.

Alex Howard

What sort of jobs have they got?

Sanaya

Well, I mean, it's different for a few of them, but a lot of my close friends have got the jobs that they want.

Alex Howard

But are they more traditional career choices that are a bit more predictable?

Sanaya

I would say half of them are, and the other half they are in the similar things that I would want to go into.

Alex Howard

Because the pathway you're going down, a creative path, is harder to get the right jobs.

Sanaya

Yeah. And I think some of them as well have got it because of their parents or something like that.

Alex Howard

Someone greased the door a little bit for them.

[00:17:40] Sanaya

Yeah. So I understand why I shouldn't be so hard on myself, but it's still a little bit, when you feel a little bit behind it's still a bit, oh, I need to keep up.

Alex Howard

And there's a truth that you need to keep challenging yourself and pushing yourself to progress and it sounds like your inner critic has got quite a lot to say about it.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

So if you're comparing yourself to a friend that, let's say is in a steady job on the path they want to be on, and then in that moment you're recognizing you don't have yet have that lined up, what would your inner critic say?

Sanaya

Just that I probably shouldn't go out. I should probably, even if it doesn't even mean I'll stay at home and work, it just means I don't deserve to go out and go and see your friends.

Alex Howard

So until you've got that job lined up, you have to self-flagellate a certain amount.

Sanaya

Yeah. That's what it feels like.

Alex Howard

When you say that out loud, what do you think about it?

Sanaya

Yeah. I know that it's silly.

Alex Howard

But it's not about judging you for it, it's more about, is that fair? Is that helpful?

Sanaya

Well, it's not really, no. It's something that I don't really listen to as much. I think during the summer I definitely did, whereas now I don't really give into it. If I want to go out, I'll go and do it.

[00:19:25] Alex Howard

It sounds like that's part of what's different since the summer as well.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

Because it's one thing to go, I'm not going to go out because I haven't earned any money for a few weeks and I need to save things. It's another thing to go, I'm not going to go out because I don't deserve it, because that feels like a self punishment in a sense.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

And it sounds like that's happening less, but it sounds like it is still happening.

Sanaya

Yeah. I think I still have that feeling, like a majority of the time, but a lot of the time I do just go out anyway because I know how I would be feeling if I didn't, which is just mopey and whatnot, which is a little bit what I got this past weekend. But actually it was just like I had this fear of missing out. But also the fact that I was just so tired, so it was like, it was a bit like that.

Alex Howard

Have you tried using the STOP Process on those thoughts? Like you don't deserve it until you've got the job sorted, you shouldn't be having fun. Have you tried stopping those thoughts?

Sanaya

I think I have done, but quite a while ago.

Alex Howard

Okay.

Sanaya

So not necessarily about when I punish myself in terms of going out or something like that. I don't think I've used it really, but maybe I will try.

Alex Howard

I think that would be a good place to use it.

[00:21:02] Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

Because in a sense, part of what is only going to help you do even better in interviews is having your aliveness, like having your sense of passion and energy for something. From my point of view, as someone who interviews people for job roles, I want to feel that person's aliveness. I want to feel like someone's going to come into an office and some people can light up a room, but even if it's not lighting up a room, come in and have a sense of like, let's go, let's have fun, let's enjoy it along the way.

And it feels like that's a part of you, and it's a part of you that's been quite free before, but it's a bit more tightly held and restrained at this point. But actually it's part of the life force that makes you who you are.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

What does it feel like as we talk about it, as we recognize there's a part of you that's not be given as much freedom as it perhaps deserves?

Sanaya

It makes me think that there's probably a little bit more to work on than I perhaps thought. And obviously feelings like that are universal, everyone feels like that at some point, but yeah, I guess that doesn't mean that you shouldn't work on it and try and change it.

Alex Howard

When we talk about that sense of, there's a few more words that come to mind, like spontaneity and playfulness and aliveness and freedom, when we talk about that, where in your body do those feelings come from? If they were to have a location in your body, what would it be?

Sanaya

So feelings of being alive?

Alex Howard

Yeah. Like playful, fun place.

Sanaya

I think probably my chest with my heart.

[00:23:10] Alex Howard

Okay. What would it feel like?

Sanaya

Just like light and not necessarily heavy or a bit more free.

Alex Howard

So a lightness, freedom. What else do you notice?

Sanaya

Yeah, I'm sure it's just like a lot of energy.

Alex Howard

When you notice a bit of that feeling, how does your inner critic respond to it? There's a bit of energy, a bit of bubblyness, aliveness. If you let yourself feel that a little bit, what does your inner critic say in response?

Sanaya

I think right now it's not saying anything, but I think it would be enjoyable at the start to feel that. And then I think slowly my inner critic would come into it.

Alex Howard

What might it say?

Sanaya

Just that I should probably stop and do some work.

Alex Howard

Would it say about what other people might think about it? Might they judge you? If you were being a bit more spontaneous and fun and letting your personality be a bit freer in a sense, is there an idea that other people might have a judgment around that?

Sanaya

No, they don't judge it.

Alex Howard

Is there anything else that you think about that is in the way of that being more free?

Sanaya

No, not really.

[00:25:29] Alex Howard

Could it be more free?

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

What would happen if it was more free? How would that be expressed?

Sanaya

I would just have a lot... Everything would be a lot less to think about.

Alex Howard

So there'd be more spontaneity?

Sanaya

Yeah. I would just not really think about anything, I would just do it. And in that way, I would just feel a little bit more free just by doing that.

Alex Howard

Yeah. So there's not necessarily a judgment of what others might think. I'm wondering if there's anything else that's in the way of it? Or it might be, just as you and I are talking about it, it might be that you can just go, actually, I'm going to let myself be a bit more myself a bit more free. I feel like as we're talking, there is still a bit of a contraction that's there.

Sanaya

Yeah. I don't know. I think it is just my inner critic. I think it's just a judgmental thing.

Alex Howard

Can you name the judgment a bit more?

Sanaya

I guess it's just more like, what are you doing? I think it's like I can't really pinpoint exactly what it is. I have inner critic judgments about my body image or something like that, or something I've said or something I will say or something like that. But I guess it's not really specific to anything. It's just like sometimes I'll have like a really, what's the word? Where I realized that I'm like a person. I didn't know how to explain it. I just realize I'm a person and I'll look at someone else and think, oh, they said, that weirdly. And then I'll be really conscious of how I talk or something. So I have like a judgment on someone else, which I don't mean to have.

[00:27:58] Alex Howard

Which then gets put back onto you.

Sanaya

Yeah. And then I'll think like, oh, you do this or you do this and that's even more embarrassing or something like that.

Alex Howard

So what would happen if your inner critic says to you, what are you doing? And in response, you said, why do you care? Or you said to it like, what the fuck has it got to do with you?

If you were to respond rather than like, because what happens is it goes, what are you doing? You're like, yeah, I know, I'm sorry. There's a diminishing or collapsing that happens. And I'm wondering what would happen if your inner critic said that and you were just like, fuck you. How dare you speak in that way? I'm free to be me.

Sanaya

I think I just have to get over that barrier of like, that's so cringy.

Alex Howard

Welcome to my cringey world.

Sanaya

Yeah, exactly.

Alex Howard

But again, what is it that tells you it's cringy? It is your inner critic.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

So what if it said to you, oh, my God, that's so cringy, and you said to it, fuck you, I can be me.

Sanaya

Then I guess it would go away for a bit.

Alex Howard

And what if every time it showed up in that way, you told it to fuck off, with different variations?

[00:29:27] Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

Because at the moment, what's happening is it comes in and attacks you, there's a collapsing that happens. And what I'm saying is, each time it comes in, you're like, actually, I'm allowed to be me. I'm allowed to be a bit more playful and spontaneous. And yeah, sometimes you might say something a bit dumb or sometimes you might laugh in a way that sounds... But Seriously, who gives a shit?

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

Surely part of the purpose of life is to live fully as yourself. And some people are going to like it and some aren't going to like it. But in a sense, what we do is we reject ourselves before anybody else gets a chance to do so.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

So it's like rather than taking a bit of a risk and being more spontaneous and more free and risking someone making unkind comment or whatever, we don't take the risk in the first place for the fear of someone doing that, but then we've already rejected ourselves. So it's surely better to put yourself out there and risk some rejection from other people as opposed to a guaranteed rejection from yourself.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

What goes through your mind as I say that?

Sanaya

It's similar to the anxiety thing and I feel like I have somewhat managed that. And in the same way telling it to fuck off, it's like the same thing with inner critic. It's something that before this session, I didn't really think there was anything much to talk about because I was like, I'm not feeling anxious anymore.

Alex Howard

Which, by the way, is great because the anxiety has improved.

[00:31:23] Sanaya

Yeah. And then in terms of the inner critic, it's just something that I just thought everyone feels like that so you just have to learn to live with it.

Alex Howard

I think everyone has elements of it. We all have an inner critic, and there's definitely a spectrum of how severe it is. If I look at my life 20/30 years ago, I felt paralyzed by my inner critic. And I think about my life now, it's like, yeah, I have an inner critic, but it doesn't have that much power. Generally speaking, I'll put myself out there and I'll say the things I want to say, and I'll be spontaneous in the moment, and I'll do dumb shit. And sometimes it's funny, other times it's not funny, but I don't feel crushed and I don't feel emotionally attacked by it because I've trained my inner critic that ultimately I am in charge.

It doesn't mean it's always easy and it's effortless, but there is a fundamental shift in that power dynamic. That's what happened for you as you spoke to with your anxiety, your anxiety was this big intimidating thing, and now it's the smaller thing that you ultimately feel in control of. And exactly right, we want the same outcome with your inner critic.

Sanaya

Yeah. I think just because I'm comparing it to during the summer when my inner critic was just like, horrendous.

Alex Howard

Yes.

Sanaya

Probably a lot to do with my anxiety, but obviously now it's a lot less. When your anxiety goes your inner critic goes a little bit too.

Alex Howard

That's right. The two go a little bit hand in hand. The more anxious we get, the faster the system is happening, the more that we're almost looking for things that are wrong and things to judge ourselves with, the calmer you are also the easier it is to see the inner critic because there's less of a noise that's happening.

Sanaya

I wouldn't say that my inner critic is something that, like similar to the anxiety that I can manage really. It just comes and goes and I have days that I don't even think about it and I have days where it's like my inner critic is just really bad. But I just thought that's just a little bit of a down day today, like a normal thing.

[00:33:48] Alex Howard

And what it sounds like what you're hearing now is it's actually something you could change. How do you feel about doing that?

Sanaya

A lot more positive about it because I know I can change it. It's something that I definitely want to work on and then just getting back to having more and more of those good days and having less of a hold over me, I think.

Alex Howard

How far did you get in the RESET program modules? I remember we got up to modules four and five when we were working on the STOP Process. Have you gone any further than that?

Sanaya

Yeah, I did go further than that. And I remember watching nine.

Alex Howard

Which is on the inner critic.

Sanaya

Right. Yes. I watched the inner critic one, but I haven't watched that, it must have been two months ago.

Alex Howard

I think it'd be really good to revisit that because I think the exercises in there would really help with this piece. And I feel like as the anxiety is so much calmer, it's a really good place then to go, right well, let's also get that inner critic piece a bit calmer.

So you've got again, when the inner critic is big, we tend to feel small. When we defend against inner critic, we tend to then be able to feel bigger and take up more of our power and more of our potential. But it's about training your inner critic. And I think it's like a good next step for where you are.

Sanaya

Yeah, definitely. It's something that I really want to work on. But I'll definitely watch that video again, revisit it.

Alex Howard

Yeah. Good. Well done for doing the work. I want to make sure you don't beat yourself up for the fact that you've had some days and weeks off. You've been working hard. You've just been working hard on something different to your inner world because you've been able to because your inner world's been in a better place. And as you get into January, I think it'd be really important to get back to that exercise routine and meditation routine, but you've got the tools that you need to help you do that.

[00:36:17] Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

Do you have any final questions?

Sanaya

No, I don't think so. Just in terms of watching the videos, is it nine you want me to watch?

Alex Howard

Yeah. I mean, why not do nine, eleven and twelve? You can do ten if you want. It's not like ten is a bad module, but nine is on the inner critic, eleven is on the inner child, and that's often the part that can sabotage us. And twelve is more about goal setting and focus and structure, which I think as you come into the new year would be a good focus for you as well.

Sanaya

Yeah.

Alex Howard

But if you don't start those until you finish the job at the beginning of January, I think that would be totally fine because it sounds like right now you just gotta keep powering through.

Sanaya

Yeah. It's nice to have that to focus on as well because I think I don't want to neglect it too much.

Alex Howard

Good to see you.

I hope you found this week's episode of *In Therapy* helpful. I think what Sanaya was working on is such a common problem, the narrative and the story that our inner critics have of what we need to do, who we need to be before we can have joy, before we can give ourselves a break, before we can be happy in our lives.

But the reality is that the more hard we are on ourselves, the more serious we become about things, the harder our lives feel and the more serious the struggles we face become. And bringing in a level of lightness and playfulness and letting ourselves enjoy our life along the way towards the goals we're trying to achieve is so important.

I'm curious as to what your narrative is? What's the story that your inner critic has about what needs to happen for you just to be able to enjoy your life, to be able to just be here, be present in this moment? I look forward to reading your comments and I look forward to seeing you again next week here on *In Therapy*.