



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

Mindfulness and the evolution of anxiety

Guest: Dr Ron Siegel

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Anxiety Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Dr Ronald D. Siegel, an assistant professor of psychology part-time at Harvard Medical School, where he's taught for over 35 years.

Dr Siegel is a longtime student of mindfulness meditation and author of many books, including *The Extraordinary Gift of Being Ordinary: Finding Happiness Right Where You Are*, *The Mindfulness Solution: Everyday Practices for Everyday Problems*, and is a professor of *The Science of Mindfulness: A Research-Based Path to Well-Being* produced by The Great Courses.

Dr Ronald Siegel, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr Ron Siegel

Thank you for inviting me.

Meagen Gibson

So you've been studying and practicing mindfulness before it was a buzz term that everybody talked about, so I'm thrilled to get to speak with you today.

You've often written that we didn't evolve to be happy. Can you explain what you mean by that and why it's important for working with anxiety?

Dr Ron Siegel

Yeah. So many of the things that plague us today are actually the result of our evolutionary history, how our brains evolved. And we are working with a brain that evolved for very different circumstances under very different purposes, which doesn't fit in so well or doesn't service so well sometimes in modern life.

So let's imagine our ancestors. We have this common ancestor named Lucy who was found in Africa, whose skeleton was found in Africa. And she lived on the savanna there about four and a half million years ago. And we know she survived because we all share her DNA. But how did she survive?

[00:01:46]

She was about a meter or 3ft tall. She wasn't very fast. One of the first things they tell you if you ever go to a so-called walking Safari in Africa is, please, no matter what happens, just don't run. Why? Because everything out there that's scary is faster than you are.

Her sense of smell was pretty limited. Just ask your dog. We're not good at that. Her hearing was okay. Her sight was okay, but not a tough hide. How did she possibly survive?

Well, she had a few things going for her. One of them, which plagues us terribly, was this emergency response system, what we call the fight, freeze, flight response system that we share with all the other mammals. We'll talk more about that because it plays a huge role in anxiety.

Another thing she had was a prehensile thumb, a thumb that could pick things up, that turns out to be really useful and was going to really help her out when she became *Homo habilis* years later. The humans, the tool maker, allows us to have PowerPoint and streaming video.

And she was a social creature, that was going to help her out. And we'll see how that actually can help us with our anxiety problems. She could get comfort and cooperation with other people.

But the big thing she had, the thing that really set her off from other animals was this capacity to think. She could remember past experiences, analyze them, imagine future experiences and figure out strategies for survival. And that was our race in the whole. That's how come humans have prospered to the degree to which we have, actually to the degree of wiping out much of the ecosystem and many of the other animals.

But this capacity to think was not just some neutral computer. It has this very strong, what is called by cognitive scientists, negativity bias. Or as my friend Dr Rick Hanson puts it, our brains are like velcro for bad experiences and teflon for good ones. So bad things happen and they stick in our consciousness, we remember them. Good things happen, slide right off the pan.

So if we imagine Lucy out there in the savanna, we can see why she developed this negativity bias. Let's say she's looking at some bay shapes behind some bushes and they're kind of ambiguous and she's not sure what they are.

And she could have made one of two types of errors that actually correspond to errors in modern scientific research. Type one error would be to go, oh my God, it's a lion, when it's really just a beige rock. A type two error would be to say, I think it's a beige rock when it's really a lion.

Now, we could imagine that she could make countless type one errors, these false positives, and still live to pass on her DNA to her offspring. One type two error, thinking it's a beige rock when it's really a lion, that's the end of your DNA line.

So we might imagine that there are other hominids hanging out on the savanna, holding hands, telling stories of dynamite sexual encounters and luscious pieces of fruit, but those weren't our ancestors. Why? Because statistically, they died before they got to reproduce.

Our ancestors were the ones wandering around the savanna going, oh my God, it could be another lion, one of those poisonous snakes, that plant with spikes, remember what happened to Uncle Alfred when he encountered one? Those are our ancestors, and that's the brain that we've got.

[00:05:17]

So our brains are actually wired to make us into anxious messes. It was really good for survival, really good for passing on DNA, but as it turns out, natural selection, the evolutionary process that forms our brain, doesn't care about whether we're happy or not. It doesn't care how miserable we are as long as we survive and successfully pass down our DNA and can care for our kids.

So that's a huge reason why we have a problem. Because of this propensity to think in this way.

There are actually other things, too, that do it. It makes perfect sense that we evolved to avoid pain. If Lucy were to cut her hand and not care, well, she'd get an infection and die, and again, would not be very good at passing on her DNA.

But if she's afraid of pain and really tries to avoid pain, well, that's going to be very protective. And it's very protective for all of us. The fact that we see a bus coming down the road and we jump back on the curb. Yeah, good thing. We have some fear we're going to get hurt and we avoid pain.

But as we'll see, I think in our conversation, that desire to avoid pain winds up extending on to the desire to avoid the pain of anxiety. And that actually, ironically, it's our attempts to avoid anxiety that really trap us in it.

I want to mention one more evolutionary legacy that we have, and then we'll see how they all work together to trap us in anxiety and how understanding it can help to free us.

The third one is, we're very preoccupied with ourselves. If I were to ask you right now, and if you don't mind answering me.

Meagen Gibson

Put me on the spot.

Dr Ron Siegel

Okay. Name something that makes you anxious. Not the worst thing ever.

Meagen Gibson

This makes me anxious.

Dr Ron Siegel

Okay.

Meagen Gibson

I'm going to be totally transparent. I spend most of my time in these interviews, sweating.

Dr Ron Siegel

That is a perfect example. And thank you for sharing that.

[00:07:24]

And in this current moment, it isn't really a threat to life or limb that's going on. It's actually a threat to self-esteem. To, what are people going to think of you? What will I think of you? What will your audience think of you? What will happen to your viewership depending on what they think of you? It's this kind of thing.

We're all actually very similarly preoccupied. Because if you'd ask me what I'm afraid of, same thing. Doing a good job right now.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly.

Dr Ron Siegel

I'm not actually thinking about global climate change, even though that's actually much more scary in terms of the fate of all of us.

Now, why is this? What's with this self preoccupation and particularly with this preoccupation with how am I doing and what people think about me?

Well, one of the other things you'll see if you walk around the African savanna with a naturalist is, they will point out, in group after group, they'll say, there's a dominant male surrounded by a group of reproductively promising females. And over in the next field over there, there's a bunch of usually a little bit younger males doing the species specific equivalent of playing basketball, trying to hone their skills so they can be dominant.

Now, who cares about dominant? Why would that matter? Well, as it turns out, the ones who are dominant and the ones who are reproducing with dominant ones, wind up getting a lot more resources, and they wind up having a lot more protection for their kids. And the chances of their DNA getting passed down are much improved.

So here, too, we can imagine another group of hominids hanging around, holding hands, this time singing Kumbaya and being very mutually supportive and being very sweet to another. And indeed, we do have some genetic instincts for this, but if they weren't doing any of this, trying to be the winners in the group, they also wouldn't get to reproduce that much.

So those aren't so much the genes we got. We got a huge dose of these genes that are concerned with social comparison. With, how am I doing? Who's better off? Who's more successful? And the way that this shows up in us modern humans is with relentless concern over self-esteem.

How am I doing? Am I successful enough? Do I earn enough money? Am I attractive enough? Am I kind enough? Am I evolved enough? Am I pretty enough? Am I handsome enough? The list goes on and on and on, and we're all quite preoccupied with these kinds of things.

And when we feel good about it, in other words, when we're feeling, whatever it is that floats our boat, strong or smart or competent or kind. Among meditators, you mentioned my background of meditation, it's particularly funny, like who's less concerned with self-esteem?

[00:10:31] Meagen Gibson

Or the self in general.

Dr Ron Siegel

It's a competition for being egoless. Who's more giving? Who has more gratitude for their lives? It's absurd, but our minds will turn anything into a competition where we're valuing ourselves and we're winning or losing.

And this causes a lot of anxiety. When you look at what people are most afraid of, the number one thing that scares people more than anything else is public speaking. What's up with that? Public speaking isn't dangerous as a general rule, they might throw a tomato, but not likely.

Public speaking is about, how am I going to feel about myself? Am I going to feel good about myself or am I going to have that horrible, sinking feeling of shame or defeat?

So this is built into us to have this concern with social comparison. It's built in to have these self-esteem concerns, but they're another huge, huge fountain of anxiety for us.

So as it turns out, we're hardwired to be anxious. We have all of these things that were really good for survival, that really ramp up our fight, freeze, flight system and make us feel as though we're under threat a great deal of the time.

Meagen Gibson

And that's really what it is. You just hit the nail in the head. We genuinely feel like we're under threat, even though the stakes of 6 million years ago, I think if I quoted you correctly, 6 million?

Dr Ron Siegel

4ish, but it does matter.

Meagen Gibson

Thank you. No, that's important. I want to get it right. My kids will come home and say, what did you screw up in the science today?

But the stakes are much lower. We're much better resourced in most parts of the world now, but we still feel like the stakes are just as high in our nervous system.

Dr Ron Siegel

Absolutely. And people will defend their image and try to protect it with even more vigor than they will their health.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. So now that we've laid the land and we understand that we're all hardwired for anxiety, what do we do about it?

[00:12:38] Dr Ron Siegel

Well, luckily, we also have other capacities that can counteract these things, but we have to practice, we kind of have to know which direction to point our noses in and try to move in those directions.

So for the first problem, the problem of thinking, and it's really not hard to see the role of thinking. If you were to take a moment right now and just think of something that tends to upset you. It could be the same thing, it could be something different. But let me ask our viewers all sorts of things that upsets you. Again, not the worst thing. I don't want to overwhelm anybody.

Meagen Gibson

Mild upsetting.

Dr Ron Siegel

Mild upsetting. Thank you.

But here and now, if it were not for the thought of the thing, would you be having a problem? And the answer is usually no, actually. And in fact, if we think of things that worry us, is the thing that worries us, usually the past, the present or the future? And here we realize it's usually the future.

Sometimes somebody will say, no, I'm really worried about what I did this morning. But on closer analysis, we realize, no, I'm worried that I'm going to be incarcerated this evening for what I did this morning. It's not this morning, it's the consequence of this that scares us. So we realize, oh gosh. So this thinking plays this huge role in anxiety and particularly this future oriented thinking.

Well, one of the things that mindfulness practices can offer here is, they are mostly about gradually training the mind to develop what cognitive scientists call, metacognitive awareness. It's the ability, not to stop thoughts, we don't get to get a blank mind, even though we'd love it. But it is the ability to see a thought as a thought.

So when I have the anxious thought of, I'm not doing a good job in this interview. There's also a part of me that realizes, oh, there you are with your anxious thoughts about self-esteem again. That's another one, check. Not so much believing in it and identifying with it so much. Where when I have the anxious thought of, oh gosh, what if this bad thing or that bad thing happens, I can have a little bit of awareness. There I go, catastrophizing again. That's my mind. That's Lucy's mind. It's doing its thing.

But what we're practicing with mindfulness practices is over and over coming back to something that's out of the thought stream. It might be the breath, might be sound, might be the feeling of the feet touching the ground as we walk mindfully. And simply training ourselves to step out of the thought stream repeatedly like, this actually helps. It actually helps us to not take our thoughts so seriously.

And interestingly, in the earlier days of cognitive behavior therapy, there was a lot of work done. Let's change maladaptive, irrational thoughts into adaptive, rational ones. And in the last several years, in what's been called the third wave of behavior therapy, we've become much more interested in, let's learn to have perspective on all thoughts. Let's learn to not trust them too much.

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Because we know that when we're in an anxious, revved up state, everything scares us. Everything seems really scary and bad things are going to happen. And when we're in a relatively calm state, we realize, well, maybe I will be okay. Maybe all these terrible things aren't going to happen.

So our thoughts both generate our fight or flight response, but they also are generated by our fight or flight response, which is why when we're caught in the thought stream, we can be in this cycle that just keeps us going, but actually practicing stepping out of the thought stream is one really important antidote that we have.

Another one has to do with the fact that mindfulness practices tend to bring us into the present. They're about being aware of our present experience with acceptance, or even with loving acceptance.

And given that what we're afraid of is always the future, if we can get in the habit of actually tasting our food right now, feeling the feet under our ground, noticing the clouds and the trees when I go for a walk, even feeling the seat that I'm sitting on right now, hey, there's a refuge here. This is going to be helpful.

And the reality is, we actually do live in the present moment. Everything else is fantasies of the past that we call memories, which cognitive scientists tell us they have very little relationship to what actually happened. Or fantasies of the future, which when we're wrapped up and anxious, God knows we imagine a lot of things going wrong that don't actually.

Mark Twain, who is a great observer of human psychology, he said near the end of his life, he said, "I'm an old man now. I've lived a long and difficult life filled with so many misfortunes, most of which never happened". That's how it works.

And then there's this third enormously important realm here, which is our self preoccupation and our worries about basically, self-esteem crashes, rejection, feeling inadequate, feeling no good. When I scratch the surface from the things that worry me, I get anxious every morning. I go to my computer, I start looking at the emails, and it's like, what am I going to see that's going to upset me? And I start feeling myself revving up with anxiety.

And if I think, okay, so what exactly are the kinds of things that upset me? And they're invariably something that's going to make me feel bad about myself. I do a lot of teaching in various forms, and I get upset, sorry to say, by the email where a colleague of mine was invited to do something and I wasn't. Oh, that's disappointing. Why wasn't I invited? Or I get happy when it's like somebody's interested in my work or somebody writes and said they read a book I wrote and it was helpful to them.

But when I look at it, it's mostly this self evaluation stuff going up and down. I'm not going to starve one way or the other at the moment. I know some people are living on the edge, but I'm privileged not to be. But this stuff nonetheless gets to me.

So if we can do something to shift from our continuous preoccupation with how am I doing? What do people think about me? To some other bases for well being, that's also going to help us a lot with our anxiety.

[00:19:28] Meagen Gibson

I'm really sympathetic to the roots of it because we used to have to anticipate the future thinking, the sun is going down, I need to get to shelter. Or I'm hungry, when do I get to eat next?

4 million years ago, when you were eating, you already had to be thinking about the next time you are going to eat or you're going to literally starve to death. Sun going down, predators, like all the things. And so this anticipatory worry that we've gotten in the pattern of doing just through evolution, I'm sympathetic to all of us.

And I've dealt with that myself and have trained myself out of it in medical stuff. So you go to the doctor for something routine, and they're like, we'd like to do a follow up about X. And you're immediately, you're on the Internet and you're like, well, what does that mean? And what does that road look like?

And so I had to train myself to be like, well, today I don't have anything. Literally nothing is wrong today. And somebody, my spouse, well, what if? And then we'll deal with that then, but today, nothing is going on. Today, I'm a perfectly healthy human being, and I'm going to carry on like that until I know otherwise.

Dr Ron Siegel

And it's the thought that maybe something is wrong that is the threat that's triggering our whole emergency response system when there really isn't an emergency here.

Meagen Gibson

No, not yet. And it's our way of giving ourselves the illusion of control. We feel like we can, and I definitely have this pattern. As a young adult, if I can think of all the worst case scenarios, then they can't possibly come true. It's like this magical thinking phenomenon. Like, my anxiety is a superpower and I'm clairvoyantly in control of the future because I've anticipated all of the bad things that could possibly happen to me. And missed out on so much of my present thinking like that.

Dr Ron Siegel

The Stoics, who were these Greek philosophers who wrote before the Common Era, as they say, in ancient times, they actually had something, they called it, my Latin is terrible, but it was basically Premeditatio Malorum, thinking of all the bad stuff so that you could kind of inoculate yourself.

Meagen Gibson

I was well practiced.

Dr Ron Siegel

I was going to say, there's a venerable history of people doing what you're good at, and most of us are good at. Why is catastrophic thinking such a big theme in cognitive sciences? Because we all do it.

And you raise a really interesting point. A lot of times those of us who are anxious, are afraid to not be anxious because we're afraid if we're not super anxious, we'll be insufficiently vigilant. That somehow the anxiety is protecting us.

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And there are situations in which that's true, like before you go to the airport, if you're traveling internationally, it probably does make sense to check that you have your passport because it's really going to be a problem if you show up there without it. But there are so many other things where imagining the worst is really not at all helpful to us.

Meagen Gibson

Well, and that negative bias that you were talking about is so fitting here because, like you said, you can have 100 instances in which that thing doesn't come true, but the one time it does, you'll be like, see! This is why!

You said something related to being harmed or walking across the street, I think you mentioned earlier. I should probably change this practice now, but I have two young children, and whenever they're doing their skateboarding or they're riding their bikes or whatever, on wheels, I'm always like, do you have your helmet? And they're like, well, I rode to so and so's house without my helmet the other day and nothing happened. And my reply is always, well, how many times do you get to get hit by a car and live? They're always like, none. I get none.

So I probably should find a more productive, positive way to figure that out.

Dr Ron Siegel

I think that's a reasonable way. It's certainly a vivid image.

Meagen Gibson

It's working so far.

Dr Ron Siegel

So far.

Meagen Gibson

So we're talking around mindfulness, but I would love it if you could speak to what exactly mindfulness practices are and how they can help us work with anxiety most effectively.

Dr Ron Siegel

Okay, so mindfulness practices are any practices that help us cultivate awareness of present experience with acceptance. And so they help us to pay attention, and they increase our capacity for concentration, because we're typically in a mindfulness practice and will choose an object of awareness. Probably most of our audience are familiar with some of them.

Something like, you might close your eyes and have an alert posture and just begin to follow the sensations of the breathing in the body. And the usual instructions are, every time the mind wanders off to something else, gently and lovingly bring it back to whatever this anchor is, whatever the sensory experiences.

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And in doing that, a number of things happen. One is, we do start to get perspective on the thought stream. We start to see, oh yeah, there's another thought. Oh, but I can come back here. There's another thought, I can come back here.

Another thing that happens is we start to actually live more in the present because we start to ground ourselves in the sensory experience of the present.

But then there's another thing that happens in mindfulness practice. You'll be sitting there doing one of these meditations, and discomfort will arise. Maybe it's an itch, maybe it's an ache, maybe something like that. Stomach growling.

And what we're taught to do in mindfulness practices is, if the discomfort gets kind of strong, to simply turn our attention to the discomfort and stay with it, let the discomfort be the object of our awareness. So instead of paying attention to my breath, I start paying attention to the ache or the itch.

And what we typically find is that there's this impulse to make it go away, this aversion response like, oh, I don't want to feel that. I want that to go away. And if it's really bad, go ahead, okay, we'll scratch the itch or do something like that. But if it's moderate, if it's not too strong, we start to play with it. We start to experiment. Well, what would happen if I just stay with it?

And lo and behold, often we find that it transforms by itself because everything's always changing in consciousness and the itch comes and it goes. And then we start paying attention to the ache, and then we're back to the breath again, or then there's the sound outside of the room. And this skill of being able to be with discomfort and not compulsively or automatically do something and get rid of it, that turns out to be golden.

I'll give you an example, since you're talking about your kids, from one of my kids. So my kids are grown now, but when one of my daughters was younger, she had a really hard time with heat and humidity to such a degree that the vacation in Florida wasn't, let's not try that. That's not going to be such a vacation.

And I was this mindfulness guy and teaching her this stuff and she was my daughter, ignoring it. But year after year she was exposed to this. And then one year she was about 11 years old and I think we're just here in New England, but it was a hot and humid time and she was starting to perspire a lot and feel uncomfortable, and she somehow got it in her, let's try what dad has been saying all along.

Okay, turn your attention to the discomfort and feel what it feels like to perspire. Feel what it feels like to feel hot, as though it wasn't a problem you had to solve, just something you might be curious about or interested in. And all of a sudden she got it. Oh yeah, it's just a set of sensations. Are they my favorite sensations? No, but are they really threatening? No, not that either.

And instead of it being a whole big problem, it was okay. And she later went on, she actually wound up studying Arabic, and she spent a year living in Cairo, including in the summer. And I'll tell you, talk about heat and humidity, Cairo is rough. And she could do it. She could do it. And the air conditioning in her apartment was not great, wasn't up to the test, but she could do it.

[00:27:44]

So we can actually train ourselves to be able to do this. And this becomes really key when addressing anxiety, because most people think that the idea of treating anxiety is to get rid of anxiety, but that's not actually how it works.

Dr Ron Siegel

There's a story that I find very helpful, and I share it a lot. And I once heard. And it was an actor who was going to play the role of an astronaut in one of these movies about the early space program. And the actor wanted to represent the astronaut faithfully so he was asking him, I really want to know what your experience was like. And the actor was saying, I never would have had the courage to go up in one of those early rockets. I would have been scared shitless.

And as a little aside, I once had a chance to do some work for NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. I know that sounds very impressive. I did a workshop for the mental health employees at NASA who help the rest of their staff with difficulties. But nonetheless, I got to be at the Kennedy Space Center and behind the normal lines. And I had my NASA pad for a day, I was very proud.

And in this experience, I learned a lot about the space program that I didn't know growing up. It was happening when I was a kid, these early voyages into space. And I learned that we were in competition with what was then the Soviet Union, and they were quite ahead in terms of infrastructure. They had a lot more rockets developed, but we had better technology for kind of figuring out space travel.

So the NASA engineers came up with this brilliant idea. They said, we don't have enough rockets, but what we do have is a very large arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles with multiple targeted nuclear warheads on top. What if we metaphorically unscrewed the nuclear bombs from the top of these missiles and crafted a capsule that would fit on top of our existing missiles and send somebody into space in that?

And that's what they did. That early Gemini capsule, that was made of a size and shape and weight to fit on top of an intercontinental ballistic missile. The astronauts were Air Force guys. They knew what was going on.

So back to our story with the actor, if we can. The astronaut said, I think you misunderstand courage. Courage isn't about not being afraid. It's about doing what needs to be done even as you feel the fear. We were terrified going up on top of an ICBM into space. God knows what was going to happen.

So this becomes critical, because when we're anxious, we become avoidant of the thing that makes us anxious. And if I were anxious about flying in airplanes and I avoided going in airplanes to avoid the anxiety, or even anxious about public speaking, as I am right now, but avoided, or as you shared, but avoided doing it in order not to feel the anxiety, then we would both have an anxiety disorder.

If we do it anyway, then we're just nervous people. In fact, we're both just the progeny or, not the direct progeny, but the descendants of Lucy. Which we are. And of course we get anxious. That's just what it is. But it's not an anxiety disorder. It doesn't have to limit our life in any way. It just brings up this unpleasant feeling sometimes, like the itch or the ache or the...

[00:31:10] Meagen Gibson

Sweating.

Dr Ron Siegel

We can actually learn to get used to and be okay with. And that becomes the absolute key to working with anxiety disorders.

People imagine, oh, mindfulness, well that's about relaxing. So I'm going to learn to relax so I won't feel anxious. Sorry, that's not what's going to happen. What we're going to do instead is we're going to use your mindfulness practice to be able to be with anxiety so you don't have to avoid it anymore and you can be free to live your life fully.

And that's our goal here. It's living a full life rather than being with anxiety. Because if you try to get rid of anxiety in order to live life fully, you're going to be waiting a very long time, I'm afraid. And that is the heart of anxiety disorders, is trying to make the anxiety not be there.

Meagen Gibson

I'm really glad that you... Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt.

Dr Ron Siegel

No, interrupt and then we'll talk about the last part, this issue of self-esteem and anxiety, too, because mindfulness can help us with that, too.

Meagen Gibson

Good. I just wanted to say that I'm so glad that you framed it that way, because I know, speaking from experience, and I've been meditating probably 20 years now, but didn't really reap any true benefit from it for my anxiety until probably 5 years ago.

And every time I would talk about anxiety or having it, people go, oh, you should meditate, you should do mindfulness. And it got me so angry, I'd be like you shut up.

And so for the people at home who are like, I can't believe you would suggest that I do a mindfulness practice when I'm anxious, but the way that you've spoken about it, it's not getting rid of it, it's not dispelling of it. It's just being in the discomfort of it, just literally being with it. If I could paraphrase what you're saying?

Dr Ron Siegel

Absolutely. It's about developing that astronaut courage, the courage to be able to be with discomfort. And then we're free. Because if I'm not afraid of being uncomfortable, I can do anything. I can't fly. It doesn't make me Superman. But it means that all the things that I might avoid.

The applying for the job, the asking the person out for the date, the speaking publicly, the writing and letting people read my writing, and on and on and on. The going to the party, the kinds of things that we tend to have difficulty with, or bring up the difficult topic with somebody we care about, all these things.

[00:33:43]

The threat is we may feel anxious when we do them, and yes, we may, but that's okay. And we start to realize that gosh, the sensations of anxiety, the same sensations we have when we're excited, actually. It's the same ramping up of the sympathetic nervous system. Only in one case, we're saying, oh, this is horrible. I've got to get rid of this. And in the other case, we're saying, this is fun.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. It's the same. Before I get on stage to speak to an audience, I feel the same as I do before I get on a roller coaster I really want to go on. The stomach, the brain, all of it feels the same. This is a terrible idea. Why am I doing this? I might be sick. All the sensations are the same. And I'm glad you named that, too.

I've told this story a couple of times, but I was on a field trip with 300 4th graders about a month ago, and one of the little boys came up to me and he said, I'm worried I might get sick. My stomach feels weird. And so we just talked about it and we determined that he was feeling scared and excited.

And I was like, of course you are. They feel the same in your belly. And he was like, oh. I was like, let's invent a new word for that. And he was able to name it. And then has said that much to me, he's on a baseball team with my son, and he's come up to me, he's like, I'm next up to bat. I feel the same way I did on the field trip. And I'm like, I know, right?

So he's able to just be with the anxiety. And when we collect those micro moments through mindfulness, we learn we can survive. We don't have to avoid the discomfort. We will survive this.

Dr Ron Siegel

Totally. And I've been on stage in front of large groups of people, and my heart is racing like crazy. And yet I've come to the awareness that that's okay. That's what happens under the circumstance. And go ahead, open your mouth anyway and do your thing. And it is when we're trying not to feel anxious that we suffer and we get stuck.

Meagen Gibson

And I know I've developed a one sentence phrase that I say to myself when those feelings come up, which is just like, look how much you care about this. That's just all I say to myself. Look how much you care about this. You wouldn't be in this position if you didn't think this was fun or want to be here, deserve to be or whatever it is I think I need to hear at that moment. Just, you wouldn't be here unless you were supposed to be. And look how much it means to you. And then I just allow all this stuff to happen.

Dr Ron Siegel

And as a clinician, sometimes people say, oh, you guys are talking about regular anxiety, but I have panic attacks. Well, I'm a little bit, what should I say? Willing to go out on a limb with somebody like that.

If somebody calls me up, even on the phone and they say, oh my gosh, I'm having a panic attack, what should I do? I'll say, well, are you in a situation where you don't have to worry about falling down

and hurting yourself? They say, yeah, I'm sitting in a chair. Say, okay, close your eyes. Can you make it worse? Can you intensify the speed of your heart rate? Can you intensify the speed of your breathing?

[00:36:54]

Because I want to really help you to no longer be afraid of panic attacks. I want to help you to develop the courage that you can panic and survive it. So let's do this. I'm here with you on the other end of the phone.

And invariably, what happens to the person, no, I'm not doing such a good job of ramping it up. I said, well, try harder. Because a panic attack, the heart and soul of a panic attack is trying not to panic. It's trying to not have this experience of dread and the heart racing and all of that. And if you move toward it and you just decide, no, I'm going to go for it, you discover that it is actually not life threatening.

Now, there's a handful of people who have serious cardiac vulnerabilities, but we're talking about for the vast majority of us, it is really not life threatening. And once you realize that you're free to panic, you're done with panic attacks. That's pretty much the end of it. But it's a little bit like you can't cheat and say, okay, I'll accept panic attacks, so I never panic again. No, you have to really accept it.

Meagen Gibson

Really go into it.

Dr Ron Siegel

It's okay and I'm going to go there.

I just want to make sure that we have a few minutes to talk about this last thing, about the self-esteem related stuff, because it's so important.

Meagen Gibson

Take all the time you need, please.

Dr Ron Siegel

Even when it comes to panic attacks, it's mostly, I'm going to be embarrassed. People are going to see me paralyzed. People are going to see me sweating. People are going to see me doing this or that.

And so we really need help as humans to counteract this propensity for self evaluation and particularly this being addicted to trying to feel good about ourselves and so dreading the shame of feeling bad about ourselves.

And we can use mindfulness practice to this, too. We can use it both to really feel the feelings of when I go up, hey, I'm doing a great job in this interview, people are going to love me. That'll last about 10 seconds before something goes wrong, and we hit a bump and we crash. And the crash feels so bad. To feel ashamed, to feel I failed at something. And the feeling good, feeling successful feels so good that it becomes an addiction.

[00:39:14]

Anything which is like this, is terribly addictive. Anything with the difference between the bad feeling and the good feeling is... Take crack cocaine. I haven't had a lot of experience with it, but my understanding is you smoke crack cocaine, you feel really good for a few minutes, and when it wears off, you feel really bad. And the instinct is, you better get more crack cocaine. And that's why it is so addictive. And the same is true for the self-esteem things and self-esteem boost.

So if we actually use our mindfulness practice to learn how to be with the crashes and be with the disappointment and notice that those two are just sensations in the body, it winds up being really useful for us because then we stopped hearing that so much. And we also start to notice how unreliable this is. Because none of us stays up for all that long in this arena.

And there's two reasons for that. One reason is that, well, what goes up goes down. So let's say you're really at the top of your game. You're literally an Olympic gold medal winner. Well, what is the chance of winning the gold in 4 years and 8 years? Not so great. And even if you're not at that level, we recalibrate.

For example, I do a lot of trainings with mental health professionals. And most of us, you've probably have had this experience, most of us had the experience of earning an advanced degree at some point and even getting a license to practice. And when we got that, that felt pretty good. I finally made it. After all these years of study and internships and practicing and all this, I finally made it. That felt really good.

And I'll ask the audience and mental health professionals, who here woke up this morning feeling really good about yourself because you have your terminal degree? And everybody starts laughing the same way you're trying to laugh, except one newly minted therapist who raises their hand and says, why is everybody laughing?

Because the problem is we habituate to things, whether it was as a kid learning to put the multicolored concentric shaped doughnuts on the pole in the right order and getting that cool cone look, and going, hey, mom and dad, look what I did! That felt really good. Were we to do that today, it wouldn't quite float our boat in the same way.

And the same thing for learning to ride a bicycle, graduating elementary school, getting the advanced degree, having our driver's license. Everything we habituate. And then we start comparing ourselves to a new group, and then we need more.

So it just never works. We can never arrive at this stable, secure sense of self who has made it, because our measuring stick keeps changing and because everything in life changes. And frankly, the body eventually and the mind eventually start to fall apart. The life cycle is tough this way. So it's really not going to work for us.

And one of the things that we can use our mindfulness practice for is to really break this addiction to achievement. And I mean this very broadly. For one person, the achievement is, I'm a nice person. For another person, I'm rich. For another person it's, I'm smart. For another it's, I'm gorgeous. For another it's, I've got friends or I'm an Internet influencer.

[00:42:37]

But we really do have to work at this, and especially in this era of social media. You don't see a lot of Instagram or Facebook posts that say, woke up this morning, had the runs again, afraid I'm going to get a bad performance review at work, and my girlfriend is going to leave me.

It's, here I am in this fantastic place doing fantastic things with fantastic people, and you're missing out. That's what people are exposed to all day long. And everybody is a wreck over this stuff, trying desperately to somehow put together a life that's going to be good enough and feeling like we're falling short so much of the time.

And we need to free ourselves from this by using our mindfulness practice and other things, to savor the present moment, to simply learn how to enjoy eating an apple and being present to the apple or seeing the sunrise or set. Because these events aren't subject to all this analysis, am I doing a good job eating the apple or bad job eating the apple? We're actually savoring the apple.

And equally, if not more important, connecting to other people. Because when we can connect to other people and feel a sense of safety, like where are we? Like when you're talking to a really good friend and you're being honest and you're sharing your vulnerabilities and they say, oh gosh, I know what that's like. I feel something similar.

Or even when you just said being nervous, a little while ago, being nervous. Now it's like, what a relief she's honest. I can be nervous too. We can be nervous together. It's going to be okay. When we have that safe social connection, all of these concerns about how we're going to appear start to diminish.

And it's really after being in my 60s myself, and still super preoccupied with the stuff, that drove me to write the book you mentioned, *The Extraordinary Gift of Being Ordinary*, which is an attempt to use mindfulness practice to free ourselves from some of this so we can be less frightened and less stressed that we are somehow not good enough. And instead find ways to connect to other people safely that feel loving and good and where we can all relax more together.

Meagen Gibson

I'm so grateful that you're also vulnerable enough to name that it's been an ongoing process for you and one that keeps revealing itself throughout life. I think that we want people to write and sell books to have it figured out, because then they're going to sell the solution to us. And I don't trust anybody like that anyway.

Dr Ron Siegel

Well, one of my hypotheses for why I was still struggling with it and still do struggle with it, was, well, I'm just inadequate, that's why. Because that's another myth we have in our culture, that real winners aren't anxious. This is like this crazy mythology. Real winners simply feel secure and solid, and they don't have any fears.

I don't buy it. There are those who compensate for it by telling themselves that they're not anxious and by always posturing as though they're not anxious, but I don't buy it. I don't buy that anybody is really free from these kinds of ups and downs, even the people who posture as though they are.

[00:45:53] Meagen Gibson

All of my family of origin, all of us kids, tend to be on the more anxious side, as is my mom. And then I remember I was sitting with my dad one day, and he said, he has a difficult time understanding us, he said, I can just stare out the window some days and just think of nothing. And I've always thought maybe I just wasn't as smart as the rest of you.

And we all looked at him when we were like, are you kidding? We're so jealous. You can just stare out the window and think of nothing. I was like, wow, what's that like to just have a mind vacant of thoughts? And he was like, you're jealous? I was like, oh my God, I've been trying to do that for 20 years.

Dr Ron Siegel

And there are differences. There are cultural differences, and there are genetic differences. We're talking about the aspects of anxiety that are universal. And indeed, some kids are simply born more anxious.

They do studies with newborns in which some of them you introduce a novel stimulus, like they'll show them something on a TV screen or something, and their nervous system is going like this. And they've actually devised ways to study newborns where the first hours of life they can ask them what they like. And you think, how are you going to ask them what they like? Well, it turns out that newborns can regulate the frequency of sucking from the moment they're born.

And they put a pacifier that's hooked up to a computer in their mouth and the kid actually learns within a few minutes that if I suck more rapidly, it turns on the TV set. If I suck less rapidly, it turns off the TV set. So you can ask newborns, do they like novel stimulation and some do and some don't, and they'll tell you that very early on.

So there are differences among us, and some of us are going to be more prone to anxiety than others and other factors, too. But there are also aspects of this that are quite universal.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. So if somebody's on the beginning of their mindfulness journey, what would you recommend as their first steps and introduction?

Dr Ron Siegel

Well, sorry, I'm plugging books here.

Meagen Gibson

Please do. I've lobbed it to you. Take it.

Dr Ron Siegel

Okay. Thank you.

So another one of my books is called *The Mindfulness Solution: Everyday Practices for Everyday Problems*, really walks you through how to set up a mindfulness practice and then how to use it to work with anxiety, to work with depression, to work with interpersonal difficulties, even to work with

physical pain and stress related disorders and the indignities of aging. So it's kind of a package that way. But it also shows you how to do the mindfulness practices.

[00:48:21]

And I have at my website, it usually helps to start with guided meditations, I have a number of them at my website. So that's drronsiegel.com. I imagine you can give a link to people.

So those are one way to start. It doesn't have to be with me. There are a lot of other people providing useful mindfulness instructions.

And then I don't know if you want to do a quick exercise specifically for working with anxiety?

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Let's do it.

Dr Ron Siegel

Okay. There's a much longer version of this on my website called Stepping Into Fear, but we'll just do a 3 minute version of it.

If you're not driving while you're listening to this, you might want to close your eyes if you're comfortable doing that, and find a comfortable and alert posture just so that you can feel like you're paying attention.

And notice if all is going well right now, you're already breathing. In fact, the breath is happening all by itself.

We're just going to start with a few moments of feeling the cycles of the breath, feeling all the sensations of the in breath and then the sensations of the out breath. Allowing thoughts to come and go as they might.

And now what I invite you to do, and only do this if you're comfortable doing it, is call to mind something that makes you a little bit anxious, not super anxious, just a little bit anxious, so you can generate a little bit of anxiety or fear.

And I want you to keep breathing and bring your attention to the sensations of anxiety or fear in the body. Notice where exactly in the body you feel it. Maybe it's the chest or the stomach or the jaw, back of the neck. Wherever it might be for you.

And all we're going to do is practice being with it for a few moments as though it weren't our enemy. This is my old friend fear. It saved me from a lot of dangers. Think of how many times it got me to hop back on the curve when a car was coming. We need fear for survival. It's okay. And just feel the sensations of fear or anxiety in the body.

You might notice as we were discussing before that it actually feels a lot like excitement also, the kind of tension and the heart racing. It's really quite safe to feel anxious.

[00:52:13]

If it starts to fade, just do what you need to to ramp it up a little bit. The idea of this practice is simply to learn how to make friends with anxiety, to shift from seeing it as something to avoid to something that you can be with.

And if we had more time or if you follow it on my website you'd continue this for a number of minutes but for now just allow your attention to come back to the breath and let the anxiety reach its own level, so don't try to get rid of it but don't try to hold on to it either. Just let it be if it's there.

Bring your attention back to the breath. And to bring this to a close I'll ring a bell and just listen to the bell from the beginning of the ring until it trails off into space and you can no longer hear it.

And when you're ready you open your eyes again.

And it's just that simple. It's just the practice of, instead of how to relax and get rid of anxiety, how to make friends with it.

Meagen Gibson

Thank you very much. I want to leave everybody there in that nice peaceful place.

Dr Siegel, thank you so much for being with us.

Dr Ron Siegel

Thank you so much for inviting me.