



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

Managing anxiety with DBT

Guest: Dr Sophia Graham

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[00:00:10] Jaia Bristow

Hello, and welcome to this conference focusing on anxiety. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am so happy to be welcoming Dr Sophia Graham.

Welcome, Sophia.

Dr Sophia Graham

Hi, it's great to be with you.

Jaia Bristow

Thank you for joining us.

So anxiety, as we've been talking a little bit about off camera, is a big topic. So do you want to start by just sharing a little bit about how it shows up in your life? And talk to us a bit about your experiences with anxiety and what that means to you?

Dr Sophia Graham

So I really didn't have very much anxiety growing up or even through high school, even through some pretty traumatic events in my life. And then all of a sudden I was being discriminated against by my last employer in academia, and it was horrendous.

And there were various ways in which they weren't making reasonable adjustments for me, or accommodations in the US context, and I was asking them to, and it got more and more stressful. And then I decided to sue them, which was quite the decision. But it brought on this really, really intense, reactive anxiety for me. And I had a really hard time coping with it.

For the first time in my life, it was like this shock through my system, and my whole body was in that kind of fight and flight response, sometimes really frozen, sometimes really hyperactivated. And it really brought home to me how much anxiety is biopsychosocial.

So it's got the biological component, and I know that I have ADHD, I'm not neurotypical, and I know that we're more likely to have anxiety. And I look in my family and I can see that my mom and my brother both have anxiety. So the biological component is certainly there in my history.

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And then the psychology, the like, how much was I taught to cope with anxiety? And actually, I was really lucky, in my education we did quite a lot of work on mindfulness and relaxation and that kind of thing when I was quite small. So I did have quite a lot of coping skills, but a lot of them fell apart when I was under such intense stress.

And then the social, we know that people from marginalized groups have much higher rates of anxiety because we have so many more anxiety-producing experiences in the world.

So the biopsychosocial stuff really came home to me when this massive increase in anxiety happened as a result of a social experience in the workplace.

And actually, at first it was kind of hard to notice because I just felt overwhelmed all the time. It wasn't like I was calling it anxiety. It was just like this hugely overwhelming thing of panic. And it was just really difficult for me.

And I noticed that I started doing certain behaviors. So I'd pick up my phone and I'd play on games for hours, or I'd dive into a TV series and just not want to do anything. And as I got into some of those feelings a bit more, I started to be able to label it. I started to notice, oh, okay, so I'm really anxious. I'm having racing thoughts. I'm having these sensations in my body. I need to do something about that.

And for me, something was a combination of medication and therapy at that time. So I took an SSRI for about 9 months, and I was doing more therapy. And it has definitely got so much better. A bunch of the stuff that we're about to talk about really helped me. And I felt like I needed to come off the SSRIs because they were having some unwanted side effects and because I didn't need them as much anymore, actually.

So I got through that kind of moment of crisis, but anxiety still shows up for me more than it did before that happened. And I think that's a common experience. We have a traumatic event in our life, whether that's loss or something like what I experienced, discrimination. Sometimes a car accident or a really traumatic incident. And it just increases our anxiety, not just at that time, but on a more global level. And that was certainly my experience.

Jaia Bristow

Well, thank you for sharing that. And there's so much in what you've said, which is, I think, so important.

Number one, the biopsychosocial element, I think is so key that people sometimes overlook and think it's just one of the three. And that to remember that it does come in all those forms.

And I love what you shared about your experience showing up, that it can just come up any time in our lives, that it came from a specific event for you and that you didn't have it as a teenager. Lots of people do have it as a teenager, but that it's not something that you either have or you don't have. It's something that can show up. It's something that can dissipate for certain people.

I think it's really important that you talked about some of the ways that it showed up for you, but also some of the coping mechanisms you had for it initially and the way that you managed it before knowing really what it was. And I think that that's really important to highlight that it can, sometimes we notice the symptoms of it or the effects of it more.

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So, I noticed when I start watching a lot more TV and start bingeing Netflix shows for much longer, usually that's the sign that there's something up for me. And it's not always super obvious. Or other things like my relationship to food really changes depending on my mental health and things like that.

So it's really important to show and to highlight some of the coping mechanisms and that there's nothing wrong with those things either, but that they can be pointing towards something else.

And I love that you also talked about some of the strategies that you used to manage your anxiety and that you used medication at the time and therapy, and that those can go really well hand in hand. And some people sometimes need just one or the other.

And I love as well that you talked about the transition, that it does show up still in your life, but there's moments of intense crisis where it needed to be dealt with, moments where it's more acute and moments where it's more in the background or maybe dissipates completely for a while and disappears and then rears up again.

And yes, anxiety is one of those things that it's so important to talk about because it's so different and can show up in different ways for different people and at different times and can be so, when it is present, it can be so overwhelming.

So I know that you're obviously a coach and you work with lots of clients, and you're a relationship coach as well, particularly. And so how do you work with your clients around anxiety?

Dr Sophia Graham

Well, I think one of the things that I really work very hard on with clients around anxiety is just noticing it, because the interoception, that ability to notice what's going on in your body and to label it, whether that's thirst, whether that's hunger, whether that's needing to pee or an emotion or a sensation that's going on for you, there's a range of capacity for noticing.

So some people notice the slightest thing, and that can add to anxiety. It can mean that you need to pee all the time, or it can mean that you're noticing every little change in your body. And when people are at that end of the spectrum, it's about allowing those things to be, without responding to them urgently.

So giving yourself a little bit of space before responding and reminding your body that it's okay to feel things without having to react to them straight away.

And at the other end of the range are people like me who find it much more difficult to notice those things. So you might not notice you need to pee until your bladder is full to bursting, or you might not notice that you're hungry or thirsty very quickly, or it might hit you just like a ton of bricks when you're really thirsty or really hungry.

And similarly, noticing that sense of anxiety in your body. It might be there if you go looking for it, but you might just not bother for days at a time. So you're doing things, like you were just saying, you're watching more TV or I was picking up my phone and playing games on it, but you're not necessarily noticing that that's related to something going on in your body, some kind of tension somewhere, maybe in your chest or your stomach.

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Also, emotions that are happening in my body. So the sensation in my chest or my stomach of anxiety, or my shoulders being up around my ears. I could walk around for days with shoulders for earrings without necessarily noticing that was what was going on.

And so a really important piece of the work with basically every client is figuring out, where are you? And if you're someone who's got really significant anxiety, you're probably towards the edges of that. You're probably either noticing absolutely every tiny thing in your body and responding to it as though it's an emergency. Or you're noticing virtually nothing in your body or ignoring it or blocking it out and pushing it down. And you need to start to get into those queues and notice what's happening.

So that's the beginning piece, I think. And I work both one-to-one and in groups, but I think groups are actually where it's at, to be honest. I think working with other people, especially if you can work with other people with shared marginalized identities, is one of the most amazing ways that you can make change. And it's certainly a way that I found incredibly helpful.

And I usually do a lot of work with dialectical behavior therapy skills. So that's like a bunch of skills around regulating emotions, coping with intense distress, coping with interpersonal interactions so that you can say no and get what you want and have boundaries as well.

And they form a lovely group of skills that really help lots of people to deal with anxiety. And we know that they're really effective. So there's some really good research that shows that dialectical behavior therapy skills are effective for people with personality disorders, for people with ADHD, and also for people with anxiety and depression.

So they're really helpful across the board if people can engage with them and if it's the right approach for them. Because different approaches really work very well for different people. But I think most people can benefit from DBT skills, but I guess I would say that because it's one of the things I love to do with my time.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. And yet again, that introspection I think is so important and so important on so many different levels, but especially with anxiety and with the way that it does show up in this kind of very somatic way all the time.

And it's, what you're talking about, that needing to pee, for me when I'm anxious, it immediately impacts my bladder. And that's something from my own past and my own history, but I will need to pee basically constantly. And even when I've just been, I will still feel that need to go again and that sense of urgency. And then it will create this vicious cycle of needing to go and then feeling like I need to go, so that makes me stressed and anxious and then because I'm anxious, I need to go more.

And I think it's really interesting, again, because of these biopsychosocial elements, how much it does impact our bodies and impact the function of our bodies and impact, as well as impacting the way we think, the way our brain suddenly operates, the way we relate to the world.

And so I love when you talk about group work. I think that is so important, and that can really help with the social element. And again, that kind of peer support, especially for marginalized and oppressed communities, communities that have been discriminated against because that discrimination can definitely create a lot of anxiety.

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And like you said yourself, when you shared your experiences, that was what triggered your anxiety initially, was that an experience of discrimination like that.

So tell us more about these DBT skills and what it is. So DBT is dialectic behavioral therapy, if I remember correctly.

Dr Sophia Graham

That's right.

Jaia Bristow

And so what is it? How does it work and why is it 6great for anxiety?

Dr Sophia Graham

So dialectical behavior therapy skills are kind of different groups of little things that you can learn to work with emotions, to tolerate distress or to feel less distressed about something that's happening, even if it's an unwanted thing, and to have an easier time interacting with other people, basically.

And the perspective of the woman that created dialectical behavior therapy is that there are four ways to deal with any problem. And the first way is you solve the problem. Because if you can solve it, you should solve it. So obviously, that's the first way.

And solving a problem can require emotion regulation skills because you might need to reduce your activation so that you can clearly think through how you're going to make this, whatever it is, work.

Or it might require interpersonal effectiveness skills because the problem might be that you're really anxious about asking for something from someone.

Or the problem might be that you're really anxious about saying no to something or going into an interpersonal situation and feeling scared that you're not going to be able to put across your point.

And so some of the skills in dialectical behavior therapy are all about figuring out how to ask for things and whether it's an appropriate time to ask for something. And how to say no, and how to say no in a way that's kind and gentle that has what you need to communicate in it, but also some softness because you might want to protect the relationship at the same time.

And building skills around those things, around asking for what you want and saying no and knowing when you can ask and addressing some of the underlying beliefs that get in the way of you doing that, solve a lot of social problems for people, actually.

My favorite one of the interpersonal effectiveness skills is all about just figuring out what you want from an interaction. And what you want is one of three things, usually. It's, you want to maintain or improve the relationship between you and the other person in this interaction.

You want to maintain or improve your self respect. So you want to feel good about how you interacted with the other person, and you want to feel like you're standing up for yourself or you're feeling confident about what you're doing or you want to get something out of it or say no.

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So you have a specific thing in mind you'd like the other person to do or not do, or you'd like to say no to something they've asked for. And it's usually one of those three things.

And once you figure out which it is, it's so much easier to actually have the interaction. And it sounds so simple, but when you actually start doing it and thinking about it, it really helps.

And it really reduces anxiety around those interactions because you don't have to be thinking like, what should I do next? Am I doing this right? You've got dialectical behavior therapy skills to help with each of those.

Whichever choice you're making, there's a skill to go with that and to help you either make the request or say no in a way that supports that objective, what you actually want to get to.

Jaia Bristow

Sorry, that's fantastic. I think even just, already that first skill and that idea that when you're interacting with someone, why? What is it you're trying to get?

And what I love about that, and how I can imagine and really helps with anxiety is, it takes a lot of pressure off the interaction itself. And there's all this work you can do beforehand on your own to reflect and to figure it out, and then you've got all these skills you've talked about that go with each of these options. So there's a lot of support.

And often anxiety, you can feel a lack of support, whereas here there's a lot of support and a lot of holding and framing. And I think that, again, anxiety can just feel like you're out in this ocean and there's no ground, there's no holding.

So, I love that as a skill. I love it. And it's definitely something I'm sure I will use at some point in my next anxious interaction about how can I do this? So thank you for sharing that.

Dr Sophia Graham

Yeah, I love that one. So solving the problem is definitely one helpful thing to do if you have a problem.

The second way to address something is to change how you feel about the problem. So this is where you can't necessarily solve the problem. The problem is, the situation is going to happen. You're going to have to go visit your mom or you're going to have to make that phone call to the bank, or you're going to have to do something that is bringing up anxiety.

And a lot of the time we have this anticipatory anxiety about this future thing that is really difficult for us. And changing how you feel is within the emotion regulation skillset and it begins with outlining how you feel. So getting a sense of what this emotion is and what are the different aspects of it? What are the thoughts that go with it? What are the sensations? What are the urges? What's happening in my body when I'm feeling this?

So a lot of the time that means a racing heart, it means your blood pressure is higher, your muscles are more tense. Noticing what's happening with the emotion.

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And then looking at the beliefs that maybe are supporting this emotion being really intense or that are getting in the way of you managing it. And thinking about, does the intensity and duration of this emotion fit the facts of this situation or is something from the past coming up for me and really impacting on this? And then figuring out, okay, so what do I want to do about it?

And the DBT skills we have, have a bunch of different choices around what to do once you've got to the point of just noticing and knowing what the emotion is and whether it's related to the past or related to the present.

And a lot of the time it's a mixture of the two. A lot of the time something that's intensely distressing right now or that you're feeling anticipating anxiety about right now is really related to a bunch of old stuff.

So for me when I think about this, I think about going to a medical appointment because it took me like 12 years to get endometriosis diagnosed. And I just kept getting told nope by a bunch of doctors. And now when I go to medical appointments I feel super anxious about that, that I'm just going to be dismissed again.

And so in advance I have all of this anticipatory anxiety coming up. I'm thinking like, oh I'm going to have to go to this doctor and they're just going to think I'm complaining or that I'm only here because I want attention. Or they're going to have all these thoughts about me which actually are none of my business and don't really matter, but they're going to treat me in a way consistent with those thoughts and they're just going to dismiss me and I'm not going to get the care that I need.

And changing how you feel about that is really hard because I have so much experience of that happening, as do so many queer people, as do so many women, as do so many black people and brown people. It's really hard to get the health care that we need, and lots of us have these traumatic experiences of just being dismissed when we need help.

And so changing how I feel is checking the facts and thinking about the doctor I actually have now, with the relationship I actually have with her now and my experience with her, rather than with all doctors in general.

Some of the anxiety is coming from the fact that I have had difficult experiences in the past, and I can calm myself down by thinking about the resources I have now, the relationships I have now, the support I have now, and the fact that this doctor that I'm seeing now does take me seriously. And that if I'm seeing someone she's referred me to and they don't, she'll still help me get the help that I need somewhere else.

Which puts me in a very lucky and very privileged position because I have that, but it's one of those ways that you can shift feelings, and there are all kinds of ways. But the really important part of learning emotion regulation skills is moving away from rumination and towards an alternative that's more productive and helpful, that gives you more information and more choice.

So that's changing how you feel.

[00:22:26] Jaia Bristow

Yeah, it's a tricky one. When you first said, changing how you feel, I was like, what? How? If only it was that easy.

But I like what you're saying around noticing whether it's, like why, why is this situation filling me with dread and anxiety? And looking at one's history and understanding where the trauma comes from and where the fear comes from.

And then by having that understanding, that creates some space around it and then trying to recognize what's real in this moment and what's not and what can be supportive and what isn't.

But, changing how someone feels about it definitely feels like a harder option than just magically solving the problem. So, of course, that's what I love about these skills that you're sharing, is that you have different options depending on the situation, depending on the reality of the situation and your own history and your own relationship to the situation.

And then with each situation, you've got all these different options and these different tools and skills that can be brought to it. So, it's fantastic.

Dr Sophia Graham

And it puts you in the position of choosing. So I can't tell you how to solve this problem because I don't know all the resources available to you. I don't know all of the skills that you have and I don't know your past relationship to it, but you do.

And so by having these choices, rather than having a therapist that you see once a week where maybe you can come to some idea of what you'd like between you in that hour, but the rest of the time, nope. This is actually about giving you skills that allow you to make these choices.

And of course, sometimes you'll want therapy support as well, but it's just more resources. It's more tools in your tool belt to allow you to move towards the life you want to be living all the time.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And the more tools that we accumulate, the less anxiety we have in some way, because suddenly there's not this idea of, oh, I can't deal, I can't cope if something scary comes up.

Sometimes even just developing the tools themselves actually means you don't end up needing them, but you have them handy. It's like the whole Sod's Law, if you go out with an umbrella, it's not going to rain, but if it does, it's okay, you have your umbrella there. And I think that sometimes it's a bit like that with these tools as well.

And I think that element of choice is so important. Being able to choose, being able to make decisions and have autonomy and not have someone else dictate what you should be doing but feeling like, okay. And then being able to try things out and see if it works, and if not, okay, this tool isn't working right now. Let me find another one that's better suited. Because sometimes we don't know immediately what's going to work and what's not.

So I'm excited to hear about some of the other skills in your DBT belt.

[00:25:24] Dr Sophia Graham

So if you can't solve the problem or change how you feel about the problem, then the third option is to tolerate the problem. So this is about gritting your teeth and getting through. This is about tolerating the intense or difficult emotions until the problem is done with.

So I guess a good example of this is, if you're non-monogamous and your partner is on a date with somebody else and you're having a moment of really intense distress or jealousy, and you have decided you do not want to interrupt the date, you don't want to ask your partner to come back or whatever, and you know they're going to come back at a certain point. You know they're going to come back tomorrow at 12:00. You've just got to tolerate the problem.

You've decided you can't change how you feel right now because it's too intense. You can't solve the problem because you're committed to this relationship structure and to both of you having autonomy. So tolerating the problem is all about finding the skills that you need to make it to tomorrow at lunchtime, to get through this distressing moment of intense emotion.

And these skills really are about self-soothing and regulating emotions, down regulating emotions in a way that just allows you to get through the crisis without making anything worse.

So this isn't about fixing anything because emotions are normal and intense emotions are a normal part of life. And sometimes you do just have to get through that moment of emotional crisis.

And we do that with self-soothing, various different, using your body to soothe yourself. And in fact, one of my favorite skills comes from this module, distress tolerance. Which is all about teaching people that even when the emotions feel incredibly difficult, we actually have some power to change them. We actually have some ability to reduce the intensity of them even if we do nothing to change the situation.

And I think one of the most powerful things that that helps with is the anxiety about having an emotion or the anxiety about being panicked or the anxiety about not being able to cope if we're angry or if we're sad.

So tolerating the problem really is all about learning that we can, even if it's horrible, cope with that intense emotion.

Jaia Bristow

And so I'm wondering if you could give a few examples of some skills that might be used for self-soothing in that tolerating the problem instance, for example.

So you gave the example of someone's partner is off on another date, or I'm sure those kinds of feelings can come up in all kinds of things. But say if there's an anxiety about an exam tomorrow or something like that, again, it's like you can't solve it, you can't make the exam go away, and you might not be able to change how you feel in that moment. You might just be really stressed. So what are some self-soothing skills that you can share?

Dr Sophia Graham

So we were talking right at the beginning about how we both notice our anxiety when we're distracting ourselves from it. So when we're watching the television and getting really deep into

something, or when I'm playing games on my phone, distraction is actually very effective at getting through a distressing emotion without making things worse.

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The danger is when distraction takes over your entire life. So, yes, distraction is useful when you're having an intense crisis right now to get through, but it doesn't move you towards a valued life if you're permanently distracting yourself. So distraction is useful, but you need boundaries around it.

But I have a lovely little box here which has self-soothing things in it which I keep on my desk. And it has things like, this makes a nice sound, and it's very pleasing to pop. And it's just one of those things that you can distract yourself with using tactile and auditory sensations.

And I have things like, I have a scent necklace, so it's a locket that has lovely essential oils on felt inside it. And so if I'm going into a stressful situation, I will wear this and the scent will help me to just reduce my anxiety levels a little bit. And so we use senses like that. And that's one way of working with really distressing events.

Another one is the TIP skills, which I'm going to come to after I tell you about the fourth way of dealing with a problem, which is to do nothing or make it worse. Use no skills. And that is a choice. And I think you have to acknowledge that that is a choice for everyone.

So you can solve the problem using either emotion regulation or interpersonal effectiveness type skills. You can change how you feel by using emotion regulation and some distress tolerance skills if it's very intense. You can tolerate the problem by using distress tolerance skills and just keeping yourself from making everything worse because of the level of distress you're in, or you can not use any skills at all or possibly make the problem worse.

And I think when we sit with the ways that we solve problems, especially emotional problems in our lives, it probably does fit into one of those categories. And we've probably all used every single one of those at some point to differing levels of effect and differing levels of success.

And DBT skills really are just to help having more options. So when you come to a problem, you're resourced with lots of different things that you could do, and hopefully a community of people who you can just drop a message into a group chat to say, I need a bit of skills coaching right now. This is the situation and what I'm feeling. Does anyone have a suggestion on what might be useful?

And actually in the community that I work with, often somebody will be like, well, I think maybe this skill or maybe that skill. And you'll have a couple of suggestions for a starting point relatively quickly so that you can then make your own choices.

Jaia Bristow

And so this whole, not dealing with the problem and potentially making it worse. Tell me more about that. Why would someone, is that something you're suggesting people can consciously choose to do? Or is that just something that people sometimes do and falls in the category of the different ways that we do solve problems or not solve problems, as it were?

[00:32:34] Dr Sophia Graham

I think when we don't have the resources to do something else, it's often what we do. We do nothing or make it worse because we don't have another option.

And sometimes we have just a feeling of really big willfulness, we feel like this problem was not of our making. We did not create this problem so we don't feel like we should be responsible for making it better.

And lots of people end up just in that like, do nothing or make it worse place, either because they don't have the skills to make a different choice or because it's too hard to make a different choice or because they're sitting in willfulness. They're just not able in that moment to move towards something that would be more effective for them.

And yeah, I think we can consciously choose to, and often we do for a while. Because often it has to get to the point where it's really unavoidable before you start taking it seriously and decide to do something different.

And of course, you can change strategies so you can be in that doing nothing, making it worse, making it worse, making it worse and then you notice and you're like, I keep making this problem worse, I keep not doing anything useful about this problem. Actually, I want to do something different about this problem and I'm going to start.

Jaia Bristow

Okay. And you said that you had some more skills that you wanted to share with us and that you were going to get to. Do you want to share some of those with us?

Dr Sophia Graham

My favorite skill for helping with intense anxiety or panic is what DBT calls the TIP skills. And that's temperature, intense exercise, or I call it movement really, pace breathing and paired muscle relaxation. And these are taught as a unit, and they're all about your body.

So our brain sends lots of messages to our body, and our body sends lots of messages to our brain. And it's really so bidirectional. And the TIP skills use that to allow us to reduce emotional activation by changing something in our body.

And so we're sending the messages into our midbrain and into our amygdala, oh, it's okay, it's all okay. Everything is not a disaster right now. I know it feels like a disaster, but it's really not. So it's allowing our brain to send some of those lovely inhibitory neurochemicals, those calming neurochemicals to those parts of our brain that are activated to just give us less activation in that moment.

And my favorite of them is the temperature skill, because it's so damn simple and so wildly effective for most people. And the temperature skill is literally putting your face up to your temple in a bowl of water that is colder than room temperature and keeping it there for 30 seconds. And it's more effective the colder it is, usually, the more effective it is.

And the reason that we do this is because it brings on a divers reflex, so our heart rate slows, our blood pressure drops, it brings the blood into the center of our body, and all of our body just calms down. And our emotions calm down really quickly, but only for a very short period.

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And I will say you shouldn't do this if you have a heart condition or if you have any kind of blood pressure condition because it can make you faint.

Jaia Bristow

That's good to know.

Dr Sophia Graham

Maybe not for everybody.

But, it rapidly drops your emotions, and then it gives you a chance to do something else. So it gives you that break from intensity and overwhelming emotion, and then you can choose to do something next.

Jaia Bristow

And so it's a really good skill, it sounds like, for those moments, that you were saying, of intense crisis or anxiety or panic, or if you can fill a panic attack coming on or if everything's really overwhelming right now and you can just dunk your head in some cold water and it just gives you that extra moment you need between your racing thoughts and your racing heart and that kind of feeling of overwhelm.

And again, that kind of groundless feeling that often comes with anxiety. To just give you that extra breath, it sounds like. And it brings everything back down so that you can get that extra fraction of a second to just think rationally amidst all the crazy, swirling thoughts.

Dr Sophia Graham

Yeah. It can help you move towards wise mind. But actually, for me, it gives me like 10 to 15 minutes of much more calm.

So I used this skill once. I was cycling to my friend's place, and I had to make a really important phone call for her. And I fell off my bike and got the handlebars in my chest, had a massive bruise, bent the handlebars of this bike, actually, it was horrible. By the time I got to her place, I was like, hyperventilating. I was in pain. I was super anxious and really just so much emotion.

And I was just like, there's no way I can make this really important phone call. There's just no way. And I was like, maybe the TIP skill would work. Maybe I should try it.

So I put my face in water, and I had to take a breath partway through, put my face in water again, and I went from crying and hyperventilating to really calm and able to cope with my various grazes in less than a minute. I was sold. That was the first time I tried the skill when I actually had big emotions. But I was sold because it reduced my pain level as well as reducing the intensity of the emotions.

Jaia Bristow

Amazing. Okay. So actually, it's not quite what I was thinking about. And so it sounds like it comes in handy more to just give you a good few minutes of calmness and to help ease the trauma of an

event. It's very intense. Like an accident is a pretty intense and traumatic event and can really create all this anxiety.

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I think there's been a lot of links in what you've been sharing around trauma and anxiety. And I think that that's really interesting as well.

I totally get now why you said at the beginning that the first thing you do with your clients is get them to introspect, because with all the skills you share, they're all fantastic and all the different categories of skills, but if you don't have that kind of self awareness and that introspection, then you can't choose. So I get why that's so important as a starting point.

Dr Sophia Graham

Yeah. And that this skill is one of those where you don't actually have to know what's going on for you. In the middle of a really intense crisis you can just dunk your head in water and it gives you 10 minutes. It gives me 10 minutes. I think it gives most people 10 to 15 minutes of reduced activation. Unless you go straight back to thinking about the distressing thing.

If you're like, moving your brain straight back to the distressing thing, it is going to get up again. But if you're able to give yourself that moment of pause and then choose another thing, whether that's something that's self-soothing, maybe it's putting a weighted blanket across your chest, or maybe it's touching part of your body that feels soothing to you, like massaging a part of your body, putting some lotion on your hands, something that says to your mind, I have compassion for myself. I have compassion for this distress. It just helps so much.

Jaia Bristow

I can imagine. And I love that word compassion. I think that that's so crucial. Like if you bring in a sense of compassion rather than a sense of beating yourself up over the anxiety, and that's why, I can't remember which of the skills you were talking about. Oh, yeah, that's right. When you were talking about distraction is actually quite a useful skill, within reason, but useful skill.

And I think it's so important to mention that because so often people will use it as a coping mechanism and then notice that they've been using it as a coping mechanism and then beat themselves up for using the coping mechanisms.

So to give people permission to just, it's okay that you need self-soothe. I also play games on my phone. That is one that I 100% do as well. And again, I noticed because when I'm doing better, I try to delete all the games off my phone because if not, I can get distracted for hours. But sometimes when I'm going through a really difficult anxiety phase, it's really soothing.

And I do it sometimes as well if I've been away from busy cities for a long time and I come back in and I'm waiting at a bus stop and there's all these people around me, or train station it's even worse. And there's all these people and it's busy. And so I put headphones on and I look at my phone and I play a game on my phone, and I play not a game with a time limit or anything like that, but a really soothing, very relaxed game where you just mix the color. Nice, gentle things.

And I remember when I was living with my family at one point during the pandemic, and I had to explain to them, if you see me on my phone and I'm not doing something that you're expecting me to

be doing, it's not that I'm trying to be difficult or that I'm ignoring the task. It's that I'm feeling so overwhelmed with the task that I need to regulate myself first, and then I will do said task.

[00:42:58]

And again, for people who don't have that kind of anxiety and don't have that knowledge, it's really good for the people who do have anxiety to have that kind of understanding so that they can then communicate that to their loved ones and the people around them.

Dr Sophia Graham

Yeah. And help them to help resource you because I think co-regulation is important, but relying on it isn't great. But also, only relying on self-regulation is not very helpful, so there needs to be some balance. And sharing your needs with other people is so super helpful.

Jaia Bristow

And whilst we're on that topic, is there anything else that you would like to add around living with or being in a relationship with, or being close to and supporting a loved one who has anxiety for people who don't necessarily have anxiety?

Dr Sophia Graham

I think it's really helpful to have an understanding, not just of anxiety in general, because anxiety presents in so many different ways. Some people might have anxiety around all of the events of the world. These big picture, don't say gay law in Florida or the horrendous stuff that's happening in the US around the attack on reproductive freedom. Big picture overwhelming stuff.

Or it could be social anxiety about the next interaction with your mom. Or it could be anticipatory anxiety about that exam that you've got next week. Or it could be panic attacks related to the possibility of seeing a spider or encountering a dog or whatever it might be.

There's so many different ways of presenting and so many different ways of having support or the kinds of support that you need will be really different depending on how anxiety shows up for you.

So I think it really is about the person who has anxiety noticing what it is that goes on for them, and maybe saying, if you notice that I'm on my phone more than usual, I'd really like it if you'd let me know, because that's a really important sign that I'm feeling more than usual and that I might need to do something about it.

Or if you notice that I'm doing whatever behavior it is for you and whatever thing it is for you that usually gets in the way of the life you'd prefer to be leading and means you're avoiding the anxiety that you're feeling, it's really helpful to flag that to loved ones, because then they can help you to notice more often at an earlier point when that's beginning to happen for you.

And also to share what are the things that you find co-regulating? So is it that you find going for a walk together co-regulating? Or is that just so overwhelming, especially if you're in a city? Is it that you find being given time on your own really helpful? Or is it that you want more connected time or being checked in on more?

[00:46:00]

I know somebody who really likes to get text messages from people that love them, and if they don't get a text message from somebody on a day that they're feeling super anxious, then that will send them spinning into, well, everybody doesn't care about me, they don't like me, I'm not important in their lives.

So it's really helpful to be clear on specifically what it is that person is experiencing and what that person needs. And to really work hard to avoid judgment and to move towards compassion.

Jaia Bristow

100%. And I think that avoiding judgment and moving towards compassion, if everyone could do a bit more of that, we'd live in a much nicer world, definitely.

And I really appreciate what you're saying about figuring out what works specifically to that person. Because in the same way you've talked about your friend who feels very anxious when they don't receive messages, I know lots of friends, when they're going through a rough time, they feel really anxious when they do receive messages because they feel like everyone...

They need people to know that if they don't reply... Because then when they go through that, they just basically switch off their phone and don't look at it for 3 days. And then when they finally do look at it, they have even more messages of people following up on the previous ones.

So they need their loved ones to know that if someone sends a message and they don't get a response, to just wait until they finally do, rather than keep following up and chasing for messages. Where sometimes we have that thing of, oh, I know my friend is going through a hard time, so I want to check up on them.

But it's like, who is that really benefiting? And maybe it is benefiting your friend, but find that out from your friend what would be beneficial to them, rather than assuming based on what would be beneficial for you. So often we project our own insecurities and desires onto other people.

Dr Sophia Graham

Yeah. It's that old adage of, do unto others as you would have others do unto you. No, do not. Do unto others as they would prefer.

Jaia Bristow

I think it's a much better version.

Dr Sophia Graham

And tell them what they would like. Tell them what you would like, too.

I know that my partner often needs more alone time than I do. And so if they're going through a hard time, letting them know that I'm completely cool with them having time away from me is really helpful. And for me, knowing that after I come out of a difficult therapy session that I can have a cuddle, is really helpful. And it's cool that those are different. It's human.

[00:48:30] Jaia Bristow

It's human. And it's all about clear communication and connecting to the human in front of you and finding out what works. And so I love that.

So coming back to the DBT skills a little bit before we come to an end, it sounds like there's a lot of different skills. And you've given us a little bit of a taster and given us a bit of an overview and an intro to all these skills. But if I was like, okay, this sounds interesting. I want to explore more. How would I go about doing that?

Dr Sophia Graham

So I think it's really helpful for people to find groups that fit with maybe some of their identities or with providers that feel like they're going to be a good fit.

So I'm a great fit for people who are queer and also people who are not neurotypical. So folks who are autistic, ADHD, OCD, people who've been diagnosed with personality disorders, all those kinds of groups. And I work a lot with sex workers, too. All those kinds of groups are my cup of tea, I guess. And folks who have any of those identities are likely to fit in really well in the groups that I run.

I think it's really helpful to find a group that fits with who you are, because I think an awful lot of DBT groups are run by people who've never been poor, people who've not experienced a bunch of discrimination or oppression. And the examples from their lives just aren't so relatable to people who have.

And I've certainly moved around some of the DBT skills and changed some of the language in the skills from what they originally were, to fit better with the sorts of folks that I work with and to have examples from our lives that are relatable.

So I run groups, and I run a couple of different kinds of groups. So I run groups that are specifically on, say, distress tolerance skills or emotion regulation skills. But I also run a group which is looking at self consent, which is bringing some of the dialectical behavior therapy skills, but some of the stuff that I'm doing to look at how much am I with what I want from me in my life? How much am I following the cues in my body and following those through into the decisions that I'm making?

And I think a lot of that work is really effective for anxiety, because I think a lot of anxiety comes up when there's a disconnect between what we actually want to be doing and what we actually are doing in our lives. So I think that's super helpful.

And I also have a course called Calming the Chaos, which is specifically for relationships. So for folks in relationships with housemates or with lovers or friends who want to work on stuff together. And it's building a bunch of these DBT skills across different things, specifically for relationships.

So I think it works really well with social anxiety and anticipatory anxiety in particular. But we have done some work on overwhelming emotion, too.

So I run a bunch of stuff, but I think it's also helpful to know that you can find dialectical behavior therapy skills groups in lots of different places. There are a bunch of online options, and you can look locally to you for a DBT skills group. And I think even if they're run by people who aren't a good fit for you, actually you can still learn a lot from the skills.

[00:52:27] Jaia Bristow

And so give us a little bit of a rundown about how, for example, if I joined one of your groups, how does it actually work? What are some of the other skills that we learn other than dunking our heads in the bucket of cold water?

Dr Sophia Graham

So what happens is we meet up and we talk about the thing that we learned last week, whatever that might be. And talk through how it went and how people practiced it and what happened for them.

And then we'll learn a new skill. And that skill could be one of lots of different ones. But I guess one of the skills that I will often teach is mindfulness of current thoughts. And that's going to be familiar to anyone that's done mindfulness work.

But in dialectical behavior therapy, what we do is we talk about the fact that our thoughts don't necessarily mean anything about us. We all have thoughts, and sometimes we have really disturbing thoughts, and sometimes we have really sticky thoughts. And sometimes we have repetitive thoughts or loud thoughts.

And just because we have a thought, doesn't mean anything about who we are. It doesn't mean we have to act on it. It doesn't mean we have to do any particular behavior. Even if it's a really disturbing and really unwanted thought, it's not necessarily a reflection on our values or who we are. It's just a bunch of electrical things going through our mind that we're interpreting.

And so I'm thinking about when I get on a train, every single time, you know those hammers next to the window that break glass in case of emergency? Every time I walk past it, I have the thought I really want to get that hammer and smash that window. Every single time.

Jaia Bristow

I'm sure you're not the only one. In fact, I know for a fact you're not the only one who thinks that.

Dr Sophia Graham

I think just imagine what that would sound like. How would the hammer feel in my hand? It would be amazing.

And so I have this repetitive thought every single time I go past that. It does not mean that I am a vandal. It does not mean I have ever or will ever actually do that. It doesn't mean anything about me. It's just a thought. And that's true of all of our thoughts. So, we talk about how we can be mindful of our thoughts without getting too involved in them.

And there are a bunch of different ways, actually. So for 60 seconds, you can make a note of whether the thoughts are about the past or the future or the present. Or you can just notice them and put them on balloons and set them off into the thing. Or you can think about them as leaves on a stream. There are lots of different techniques, and lots of people will be really familiar with those.

But I think the starting point of recognizing these thoughts, even really intrusive ones, even really disturbing ones, do not necessarily mean anything about you. And they can just be, without you having to react, and giving yourself that.

[00:55:46]

So that's one of the things that we would teach, and then we'd try it out and see if it works for you. Because for some people, this is revolutionary. And for some people, this is like, no, it just made my thoughts race more strongly, and it's not for me right now. And that's okay.

Jaia Bristow

Interesting. And is there a specific number of these DBT skills? Are they unlimited? Obviously, within each example you've given, you've said that there's lots of different skills within that or lots of different ways of doing that.

For example, the mindfulness of thoughts, you talked about letting go of thoughts afterwards, that there's different visualizations you can do for that.

You've talked about, I guess there's limited ways you can dunk your head in a bucket of cold water. And there's all these different categories, and within each of these different categories there's the tips where you talk about the temperature, and I'm sure there's other ways of regulating your temperature, for example, other than cold water on your face.

So how many of these kinds of skills and within each of these categories, how many different methodologies? I'm curious to know more about that.

Dr Sophia Graham

Yeah. Each of the modules has a different number of skills. So there's a mindfulness module in DBT, and that has like 7 core skills, but there are lots of ways of doing them.

So the 'WHAT' skills are 'Observe', 'Describe' and 'Participate'. So literally observe what's happening around you, and you can observe your thoughts or you can observe something that's happening in the world, sound, sight, whatever it might be.

'Describe' is putting words to that. So adding language, observing without words, I find it so hard, so useful, so hard. Adding words, I'm great at that. I add words to everything.

And then 'Participate' is like throwing yourself into something and just doing that, doing what's effective in the moment.

So there are 7 mindfulness skills, and that's really straightforward.

Jaia Bristow

How many modules are there?

Dr Sophia Graham

4 modules. So there's mindfulness, emotion regulation, distress tolerance and interpersonal effectiveness. And the others have a variable number of skills. But I usually teach distress tolerance over about 6 or 7 weeks. Emotion regulation, I'll teach over about 8 weeks. Interpersonal effectiveness, I'll teach over about 6 weeks.

[00:58:15]

And all of them have a mindfulness part because that interoception, that noticing what's going on, is a starting point. You can't do anything unless you notice a moment of choice. If you don't know, you've got a choice, you're just going to carry on.

So that mindfulness part actually is kind of the foundation for everything.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. Well, thank you for taking so much time to explain all of this to us, to offer some of the skills, to share your own experiences. I really appreciated our conversation today.

Sophia, can you tell us how people can find out more about you and your work and how they can join your groups?

Dr Sophia Graham

So you can find me on loveuncommon.com and that front page of my site has, I suppose the group that I've been running, that I run twice a month and have been running for a while now, Calming the Chaos.

But you can also find links to the dialectical behavior therapy skills groups and to my self-consent work which is, I guess, my love project right now. It's the thing that I'm most enthusiastic about and the thing that has been so important to shifting my own relationship with myself.

Look me up on my website you can find me on [Twitter](#) as well and you'll see the links in the description.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time today. It's been another fantastic conversation. Thank you for joining us.

Dr Sophia Graham

I enjoyed talking to you as always.