



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

Identity and anxiety in the workplace

Guest: Lauren Lofton

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[00:00:10] Jaia Bristow

Hello and welcome back to the Anxiety Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am delighted to be welcoming Lauren Lofton, welcome.

Lauren Lofton

Thank you so much, Jaia. It's so good to be here with you today.

Jaia Bristow

Thank you so much for joining us. I'm excited about the conversation we're going to be having all about identity and how personal identities can bring up a lot of anxiety.

So do you want to start by sharing a bit about your experience, both maybe personally and professionally around how anxiety and personal identity intersects for you?

Lauren Lofton

Yeah, happy to do that. I'm a person living with complex PTSD and a survivor of multiple forms of violence. And so I have anxiety myself.

And so when I talk about anxiety in a workplace context, there's no way for it to not be personal for me as well. Because that is my lived experience and figuring out how to navigate all the different ways that shows up and then all the different ways that people in the workplace either have space for each other or don't.

And so a lot of my work has been around diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in the workplace. And I don't think that we can have a conversation about DIB without having a conversation about disability access and how it connects to anxiety.

And oftentimes I think anxiety gets minimized. It's also quite different to have a disability, to actually have complex PTSD than it is to experience day to day anxiety that might not interfere with your daily life.

So those things are different even though some of the same tools are applicable for people. And oftentimes disability gets put last in the conversation and anxiety gets pushed to the side as though everyone has that, and it's not the same when you have a disability and it's not the same when you have PTSD and anxiety that relates to that condition.

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So a lot of what I do is just awareness work, starting the conversation and saying it's important to not put disability last in DIB conversations and also to talk about where's the intersection with the rest of our identities?

So if you're a person of color and also you're navigating anxiety, that is going to be really different than if you are not a person of color and you're navigating anxiety. Again, you will have some overlap. That's the beauty of the world is there's so many ways that we have connection points, ways that we are the same across our differences. And those differences still count.

So to be a queer person, to be a trans person, that also intersects with my identities around disability. So whether or not people have more patience or space for me looks different depending on both my actual identities and then my perceived identity. So it depends on what people think my identities are versus what they actually are.

Jaia Bristow

We have a whole day on this conference dedicated to trauma and anxiety and the relationship between the two. And what I'm really hearing when you talk about cPTSD, that there's that link there. And of course, there's also a huge link between trauma and personal identities around not just disability, but some of the other identities you were speaking about. And people who belong to oppressed and marginalized groups have more trauma.

And I spoke a bit about this with Dr Patrice Douglas, where we talked about racial trauma and anxiety. I touch upon these topics with Roxy Manning, where we talk about anxiety about speaking up and advocating for ourselves or others.

And so I think it's really interesting because I touched upon this a tiny bit with Roxy, but we didn't get the chance to get into it, about focusing on the workplace and that kind of anxiety of belonging and what do I say? What do I share? What do I not share? Can I be myself in the workplace? Can I not be myself? So it makes sense, the anxiety you're speaking to here.

Lauren Lofton

Yeah and I think it's become really popularized in workplaces, especially that word belonging, that used to be a part of the best practice term for diversity, equity, inclusion. Equity also used to be equality and then shifted to equity because we don't actually want equal conditions, we want equitable conditions that make it possible for those of us that have barriers to access to have those barriers removed.

So there's been a lot of shifts in these best practice terms. And I think belonging got tacked on in a way without quite the careful consideration that it deserves.

So it's popular to say, be yourself, be your authentic self at work. You belong here. Show up. You don't have to mask. You don't have to put on a show here. And the reality is a lot of workplaces are not ready for you to not put on some kind of a show, especially as it comes to our mental health and as it comes specifically to our anxiety.

Don't talk about the things that make you nervous, it might make somebody else nervous. Don't cause anyone else to feel uncomfortable. And so it's not possible for me as a person that is queer,

that's trans, that's a mixed black person, that's multiracial, that's a person of color, that has a disability to be my full, authentic self and not have it call up discomfort for people who are not a part of those communities. It's actually impossible for me to do that without masking.

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And so either the workplace has to be bold and brave enough to say, okay, there's some discomfort in this conversation, how do we make space for these brave conversations? How do we make space for the kind of open hearted leadership that makes it possible for people from historically marginalized identities to be ourselves in the workspace?

Because we have so much good, so much focus goes to the ways that we have experienced marginalization, but we're so incredible at accessing our joy and being able to figure out resilience strategies for overcoming things.

And so the focus starts to be on, I think, the way that we're limited the ways that the world limits us versus the ways that we just shine right through. The ways that we bring our gifts and we bring our gifts despite the generational trauma, despite our own individual traumas and the things that we have survived. We figure out all these strategies for thriving and we don't get to fully share them when we're masking at work.

And that is unfortunately, what a lot of people have to do just to survive the workplace. And I think to try to strive toward advancement in roles or just not getting in trouble. Because though you're entitled to reasonable accommodations in the workplace, if you have a disability condition it can be quite difficult to get... There are many challenges in terms of the questions that might be posed. Invasive questions to prove that you need an accommodation in the workplace. So the messaging doesn't match often when people get to the workspace.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And I think there's something around what you were saying around belonging has been added and that equality has been changed to equity, which I'm glad you gave that definition of equity, by the way. So thank you for that.

I think same, there's hype words these days, like diversity, inclusivity, like all these things. I hear them. I offer diversity and inclusivity consultancy work, but I actually hate that phrase, like diversity and inclusivity, because I see it just used there.

And people often don't take the time to think about, what is it they're actually saying? What is it they actually mean? And what are they actually willing to do to create a diverse and inclusive space where people can belong and where there is equity and all these type words? It's like easy marketing in some ways at times, but are people actually doing the work?

And it's interesting as well, you're talking about once you're in a workplace, but there's of course also the barriers to getting to a workplace.

So for people with disabilities, for people from marginalized groups, as you say, it can make people uncomfortable. And so there's masking not just when you're at work, and again, it depends. I've often been very fortunate in my workspaces, and I've chosen often workspaces and jobs where I could be fully myself, but that's not the case for everyone.

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So there's masking during, but there's also interview processes and writing your CV, and how much do you disclose? And how is the person going to... We all have unconscious and conscious biases so of course, a lot of us who are from oppressed and marginalized groups have to face those in a way that other people don't own.

So I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit more around the barriers to even getting into a workplace for certain people.

Lauren Lofton

Absolutely. I think part of it is the switch that we're seeing right now in the stage of the pandemic that we're in. And I'm going to say stage that we're in rather than pandemic being over because we're continuing to be impacted on a large scale. And specifically, the disability community is more impacted than folks that don't have disabilities.

And so wanting to also honor differences in our community. So when I speak to complex PTSD, that is different than a physical disability. There are disabilities that we can't physically hide and so when you have a non visible disability, in some ways it may create more access to the workspace because that unconscious bias that would get directed at you just the moment that they visibly visually see you doesn't happen in the same way.

And I think it creates quite a lot of anxiety for people with non visible disabilities to hide what can't be seen. And then a lot of fear of being found out. It operates in some ways like imposter syndrome can as well. Just this fear that I'm going to be found out. It's even, do you check a box when you're doing your interview application that says, 'I identify as a person with a disability'?

Because if you check the box, that's saying, I've disclosed this to the employer, they chose to hire me, they chose to hire me meaning that they believe that I could fulfill my job duties with my disability condition with appropriate, reasonable accommodations. And if there is an employment issue later, you can say, look, I checked the box. I disclosed, they knew, they thought I could do this job, and now they don't want to accommodate me.

It can provide some additional protection that otherwise might not be available. But when you check the box, that means someone's going to see that you checked the box. And so for many years I didn't check the box because I was so fearful that it meant that I wouldn't be hired.

And I graduated from law school in 2009, which was during the economic collapse and Great Recession so it was really scary because there were so few jobs. And I had worked at so many nonprofits where they would shutter after I was there for 6 months. My resume just looked like swiss cheese.

And so there was this sense of desperation of, I have to get a job, I have to pay my rent, I have to figure out how to move forward in my career even while the economy is collapsing around me. And I have to figure out how to just overcompensate enough that people won't know that I have a disability.

So that is how I operated in the workplace for many years and just at my own expense. And it took a long time to go, oh, what would really help me is some work from home days or working a four day a week schedule instead of a five day a week schedule.

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But in the industry that I was in, which was the nonprofit world predominantly, I have also worked in higher education and a bit in private industry, but mostly in nonprofit world, I think that there's a huge pressure to overwork, to martyr yourself for a cause and almost the competitiveness of who's working the longest hours, who's serving the most clients, who cares the most about the mission and the values.

And it just did not feel safe to do anything other than overcompensate. But I had the great fortune of working with community organizers. It was sort of a hybrid clinic program for people that were facing Eviction, so Eviction, Defense and Prevention, and a lot of triaging clients. I was running a clinic, and I had an executive director that said, you're in tears by Tuesday, every Tuesday right now. And that doesn't seem good for anyone. What if we modified your schedule?

And I hadn't identified as having a disability, I hadn't disclosed. But she knew that I was anxious and she knew that I wasn't okay every Tuesday when I was crying at my desk. And so she offered me an accommodation that really shifted things for me and showed me how different it could be to have a schedule that made more sense for my brain and for my body.

And I was still running this clinic at a high level in a way that it had never been run before. Our numbers, grant deliverable wise, we exceeded them for the first time ever when I was running that clinic. So I was outperforming.

And I think because people who have anxiety and who have disabilities can be ultra compensators, it means that people don't think that we need disability accommodations and we may not even think that we need disability accommodations.

And when I started in the interview process, certainly, when you're talking about those barriers when you come in, I didn't really get screened for that. And that's oftentimes something that happens with employers where they don't say, are there stairs to access the space you're going to be interviewing? How many stairs? How many steps is it between entering the front door and getting to an elevator, if there's an elevator? Where are the bathrooms located? And then are the gender inclusive bathrooms also?

And then oftentimes there will be even barriers to access where there's a literal gatekeeper to bathrooms. So there's security guards that both are gatekeeping for gender, but also many of the bathrooms that are gender neutral or single stall, which are for those folks that have disability needs, including physical disability needs where they may need the large single stall. And I've even found the bathrooms locked to police the gender such that you can't just press the button if you were using a wheelchair or using a cane. It makes it impossible to actually just open the door for yourself.

And so I've discovered that actually because of my gender, where today I'm presenting in a very feminine fashion, sometimes I present in a very masculine fashion. It really depends. And so sometimes I've had security guards just give me whatever key they just guess at my gender. And sometimes the key doesn't work because they've guessed differently than the bathroom that I'm going to select for myself.

And I've also discovered when I go to open a door, I can't because it's locked because they're policing gender. At the same time as they police gender, they police disability. And this is part of how our struggles really are so bound up in one another.

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And not being asked, if you need more time if there's a writing sample or a task that you have to complete as a part of the preprocess. Oftentimes they give you these homework assignments that you have to do under timed conditions before you even get to the interview.

So something that I did when I was in a position to hire, so grateful to have had the opportunity to be in leadership positions, is making sure in every email that goes out to interviewees, disclosing what's the access to the building like.

And that includes bathrooms. That includes how many steps, what elevator to take. If the elevator isn't working, guess what? There's actually an alternative. There's a service elevator. It's going to be frustrating. You might have to go around the corner. We will have a person accompany you. Here's who can help you with that. And making sure that if they need any additional time for any written exercises, we grant them that time.

So I had someone who was experiencing a temporary disability. She had broken both of her wrists and it was not going to be possible for her to complete the timed assignment with two broken wrists, so she needed more time.

She's also an incredible young woman of color who is now in law school. I'm so proud of her. She's at UC Berkeley now making her way through. And at the time she needed more time and she still outperformed everybody with her response.

So she just needed the additional time. And then she needed additional time for the first 6 months or so that she was in the position because her hands were still impacted by the broken wrists. She wasn't in casts anymore, but she was in braces and had to wear them for a lot of hours.

And so a lot of what I did with her as just a young person that was experiencing a temporary disability in the workspace was saying, I don't have an expectation that you keep up at the pace that you are setting for yourself. And let's talk about the pace that you're setting for yourself. What else do you need? And also we can use voice to type, do you need somebody else to support this task?

And just really encouraging her to set up a practice for herself so that when she experiences any disability situation in the work space in the future, she knows how to self-advocate, she knows how to find her own limits, she also knows how to say, I've got it, thank you.

So if somebody's being maybe overly concerned, I definitely aired more on the side of overly concerned. I think seeing a young woman of color with a disability condition who was ultra confident, I had a lot of resonance. I saw a lot of things that I had encountered. And so really wanting to make sure that she was okay and that she had all the support she deserved.

And so she also learned how to say, I got it. And I learned how to believe her and go, oh yeah, okay, we can do this. We can do this together. I've got to believe her. And sometimes she was wrong and she didn't have it. And that's part of the learning curve.

And so she had to be humble enough to say, I thought I could do it. I'm not going to hit that deadline. And then I could go, thank you for telling me. Let's figure out how to meet the deadline together and really be in solidarity together in the workspace.

[00:19:30] Jaia Bristow

There's so much in what you just said. And I think some of the key elements I'm really hearing, one is the differentiation between visible and invisible. So that comes up in disability, people who have visible and invisible disabilities.

But that also shows up in other marginalized identities. So race is often more visible than sexual orientation. Or gender can be more visible depending on the gender and other times, like in your case, it's less visible or people make wrong assumptions.

And so I think there's something really important to be said around visible and invisible in the world and especially in the workplace.

Another thing I really picked up from what you are saying is how so often either invisible disabilities or especially if they're more around mental health, that we live in a society that doesn't support that. That doesn't naturally make accommodations. We're much more likely to make accommodations for someone with two broken wrists than someone with cPTSD or anxiety or all these other things.

And I remember once going into a workspace and I had a panic attack there because I was just so stressed. And my boss sent me home, but it didn't feel like it was making an accommodation and it wasn't like, go look after yourself. It was like, you're clearly incompetent today. Go away. That was the messaging I received.

And I don't think that was actually that boss' intention, but a lot of it was my own internalized ideas around what was acceptable and what wasn't acceptable in the workplace. And again, like you were saying, about how much I can show and how much I couldn't show.

And then just really hearing how when people do make accommodations and when you're given that permission and support, like the example you gave about your boss who was like, every Tuesday, you're in tears, how can we support you? What changes can we make? I think it's so important for people to hear that actually, especially employers to hear, that that actually increases productivity rather than decreases productivity.

And we've seen during the pandemic how many accommodations actually are possible that for so long employers and companies were saying, no, you can't work from home, you need to be in the office, or no, we can't adjust in this way or that. And actually, people can adjust.

And so hopefully that's one of the things that will, I hope, stay to some degree in people's consciousness. That when someone asks for an accommodation, or even if they don't ask, that things are offered much more, and that it's seen as, how do we make this situation beneficial for everyone?

And there's also, as you said, often people who either, whether they have disabilities or whether they're from other marginalized groups or whether they have intersections of identity, will be overcompensators because they've spent their whole life trying to work hard to prove themselves. And I know I'm definitely one of those people.

And so, again, actually, it's useful having someone on your team, having someone who is disabled or who has severe anxiety and stuff, doesn't necessarily mean they'll be incapable. And again, it's about finding the right accommodations and finding the right job depending on your situation.

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There are certain jobs I would never apply for because I know that they just would be a really bad fit for me and who I am in terms of my identities, my mental health, my neurodivergence, my chronic, invisible disabilities and health stuff. This job is a great job for me. I get to work from home, I get to have interesting conversations with people. This is fantastic, but there's plenty that aren't.

So I really wanted to just bring all of that in, and thank you for sharing everything you have. And ask a little bit about the work you do and the inspirations for that work.

Lauren Lofton

Absolutely. I founded a small practice called Transform Belonging, and it's about transforming belonging at work. And I do sometimes provide support for organizations and companies at a larger scale, organizational effectiveness, executive leadership coaching. I also provide coaching for individual people who are on their work life journey. So they're trying to figure out where can I be happiest and happiest. I think I want to quit my job. I don't think I can stay here. What do I want to do with myself?

And then all of the anxiety that comes with that, because changing a job is one of the most stressful things you can do. So is moving, that's also sometimes a thing that comes with changing jobs. So is buying a house. Well, they take a look, meaning they, the folks at large and in charge of mortgages and whatnot. They look at how long have you been employed somewhere and what's your income.

And so all of these big, life changing, pivotal big things get connected also to our jobs. Our access to resources impacts everything else that we're doing, even for renting. They want to know, how long have you been with a particular employer?

So we talk about what would be the impact if you left your job? Are you situated to leave your job? Why do you want to leave your job? Because it might be that if they're so fearful to ask for an accommodation, they think they have to leave their job. And actually what the person needs is support for self-advocacy around asking for an accommodation.

It might be that they really don't like their job and it's this journey of like, okay, well, what is it that you don't like? What aspects do you like? And then trying to help them identify, where do they want to go toward? Not just running away from something, but really purposefully, intentionally finding their way towards something that feels like a good fit.

And I think, especially for Gen Z millennials, we did not have a lot of support in our high school or college years around identifying things like neurodivergence. I find that younger generations tend to be better at just knowing that terminology, being able to apply it to themselves, being able to self-advocate using words that we didn't have language for when I was a young adult.

Nobody asked me, do you want a desk job? Is that really going to be in your best interests? No one had talked to me about, well, you have complex PTSD, let's talk about how that starts to impact you if you're working 40 hours a week, 50, 60. What if you work more than 60? What happens then?

No one said to me, oh, well, only 2% of attorneys have a disability. Are you sure you want to be an attorney? Instead, it was, well, what's the thing that makes the most sense for you to do at this point in your life? And it was like, well, you can be a social worker or you could be a lawyer. And that was presented as, here's these two paths. Which one would you like to do? Pick one, get going.

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And now I think that there's so much choice. There's social media influencers, there's podcasting where you can podcast and actually have it be a profession. There's all sorts of options that I think were not presented. It was like, well, you either go to a trade school or you go to college. When you're done with college, you do some kind of a grad program. And if you want to be a professional and make a decent income, you have to get some kind of a license.

And then you go about your 9 to 5 job where you go to an office every day, because that's the industry standard. And I think it's incredible that the industry standard has been just really shaken up. But it also means that so many people in their late 30s into mid 40s are having a bit of a midlife work crisis right now.

And the pandemic, I think, has really exasperated the crisis that people are having, that may have been coming anyway. And I think it's also created a great opportunity. So people all of a sudden are like, oh, if I could do anything, like anything in the world, what would I want to do? And just letting themselves play. Because it's not something that I feel like our generation was given space to do, was play.

Instead, it was get it done. How do you support yourself? And this is just how it is. Even things like having to hide tattoos in the workspace, not having colorful hair. I'm wearing a septum ring right now, for many years that would have never been considered an acceptable professional look. And I think that so many things have shifted.

I'm wearing a shirt that's a bright color with geometric designs and not just white, black or gray or navy, which tends to be the uniform of attorneys specifically.

So I think it's been really amazing to just watch people figure out that they have space to build the life that they want for themselves and to really make sure that wherever they're spending that much time every week, there's some joy there. And there's some measure of emotional and psychological safety in terms of wherever our anxiety might be.

Jaia Bristow

And you talk as well about different people who influence your work, or can you talk a bit about different people who have influenced your work?

Lauren Lofton

Yes. I think the two biggest ones are Adrienne Maree Brown and Brene Brown. So two Browns, different people. Adrienne Maree Brown does quite a lot of work in the transformative justice world and also in the professional facilitation world.

So much of what I do around facilitating conversations, whether that's restorative justice circles, mediation practice, it might be running a staff meeting, even just facilitating conversations in more of an internal way versus external, large facilitations in conference spaces where we're doing adult education in real time and having people engage with one another. Quite a lot of that is in parallel with the work that Adrienne Maree Brown does.

And everything that she talks about in terms of emergence, being able to be with what is here in the moment. How do we tend to everyone in this space, including folks that have caused harm? We don't

want to just take a restorative approach, which is returning the person that's experienced the harm back to where they were before they experienced the harm back to that position. Instead, we want to transform all of the underlying conditions so that that kind of harm wouldn't occur again.

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We want to transform the conditions not just for the person that experienced the harm, but for the person that may have engaged in harm doing, which we're all capable of engaging in harm doing, just like we all have biases, we all have implicit biases. Same kind of concept.

And Adrienne does this incredible job of bringing in a really intersectional analysis. Shout out to Kimberlé Crenshaw who's a black woman in the legal sector who coined that term. So all those different ways that we've been talking about that our identities come into play. So Adrienne Maree Brown brings that in, and in terms of transformative justice practices.

And Brene Brown talks a lot about courageous and bold leadership and what it is to have an undefended heart in the workspace and in our leadership.

So I've been quite influenced by this idea of what is it like if we get more courageous with each other and more honest with each other instead of masking, instead of hiding and pushing things away? And what strength do we get when we talk about the impact of trauma and how we move through our trauma?

So Brene Brown has all these incredible resources where she names ways that workspaces say they want something, and then that's not how they're showing up to the conversation. And that's not how they're showing up in the day to day.

She talks about this concept of armored leadership where you have to get it done, and so really putting up all these protective walls, which means we can't empathize with each other. And empathy is so needed. That's needed in every interaction and everything that we do. And it's definitely needed for folks that are experiencing anxiety.

So I don't know if you saw, I clutched my heart when you said that you got sent home, like you're useless today. I just went, oh. My whole heart sank when I heard that. Because what you didn't get offered was empathy in that moment, and being seen in that moment and just being able to go, hi, what can I do to support you? What do you need?

And that could have been offering you a tea, going and getting you a cold glass of water, letting you sit for as long as you need it to sit. You don't have to leave the office if you're having a panic attack. And in fact, that might be worse.

So Brene Brown talks quite a lot about the difference between empathy and sympathy. And I think for those of us who experience anxiety, oftentimes we get sympathy, sometimes we don't even get that. But we get sympathy, "Oh, poor you. Oh, can't do the thing today", instead of empathy.

I know what it's like to come to work and to feel like you can't get through the day. I don't know what it's like to have a panic attack. I do know what it's like to be completely overwhelmed. What helps you when you're overwhelmed? And see if the person can name it. And sometimes we can. It depends on how activated we are.

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So I talk quite a lot in my work, in terms of trauma informed services, activation versus triggers. So the word trigger or triggered has been overused quite a lot. And so people will use it quite casually, like "I'm triggered", when really they're just saying they're uncomfortable or they don't like something, which is not the same thing as, for instance, a full blown panic attack.

And though full blown panic attacks can look different for different people. Some people that means they're getting under an object in order to feel safe. Like I need to crawl under a desk right now. It might be hyperventilating. So really dysregulated breathing, maybe sweating, turning more flushed or red or pink.

There's all sorts of indicators. And some people will heavily dissociate and don't necessarily present like they're having a panic attack. So some folks might go, well, you look just fine because you're not sweating or having difficulty breathing or hiding under a desk. But that doesn't have to be the case to be experiencing a panic attack. That can look different.

And also experiencing a high level that you're actually in a panic attack, your heart is racing, any of those things, not the same thing as feeling more mild discomfort or slight annoyance.

So I talk about it really as a spectrum and on one end, you might be mildly activated. And then there's more intensely activated medium. You can think of it as like a 0 to 10 scale. 0 meaning completely calm, nothing's wrong at all, everything in your nervous system feels regulated. Up to a 10, you are in a full panic, you are in that fight, flight, freeze, maybe please mode.

So sometimes when I'm experiencing panic, what that looks like is severe people pleasing and people don't necessarily get the fawning. And so people don't necessarily clock that as an anxiety response and it definitely is an anxiety response. And it's the fourth that gets left off often.

So I even used to not think that that applied to me. I was like, well, I'm not running away, I don't want to fight anybody and I'm not frozen, but I was fawning all of the time. And so the trauma response of, let me over explain, whatever you need, yes, I've got it, I can do it whenever and however you need it. That is actually both an anxiety, and it can be a trauma response.

So being able to name those things and then saying, okay, if you notice that somebody that you work with is actually all the way in a full 10, the first thing is just their nervous system has to get calmed down because we can't access our upstairs brains when our nervous system is completely offline, we cannot do it. So that's cold water, sit down, breathing a quiet space.

And then once the person's able to physically regulate more and maybe drop down to something that's between a 6 and an 8, in terms of activation, that's where they may be able to name what do they need?

But at first it might just be this person is not going to be able to tell you what they need right now because the whole system is offline. So things that you can do, like say, you're welcome to be in this space. I'm going to leave a few things. I'm going to come back and check in on you.

And then leaving Kleenex, cold water, warm tea, any number of comforting objects, and then leaving and then coming back and actually checking in. And if the person has calmed down enough, being

able to say, do you know what might help you right now? And then leading with that. And that is empathy and action really.

[00:36:52] Jaia Bristow

I really appreciate that you talk about the scale, because I think, like you say, sometimes everything just gets lumped in under one word. And actually there's different symptoms, different experiences, and there's definitely different intensities of anxiety or distress.

And I really like what you're talking about, about how to support someone with anxiety. That sometimes saying, how can I support you? What do you need is? Is right. But if someone's in too much of a, and in this case I am going to use the word triggered state because I'm talking about people who are up around 9-10, then actually that's just going to create more, they don't know.

And I've been in that situation, I've been in total panic and people are like, what do you need? How can I help? And they're feeling frantic and it actually makes things worse.

And I remember there was one time in particular where that was happening and there was lots of people around me and everything was feeling really overwhelming. And then my friend just cleared everyone away and was just like, give her space, for starters. And then just went and, she knows me so well and she's been with me through many different, both physical and mental crises, so she just got me water and was like, do you need food? Do you need water? Very specific questions.

Some things she didn't even ask me, she just gave me. So she just handed me a bottle of water and was like, okay, this is the plan. Everyone, we're going to this restaurant because she needs to eat food. Here are her dietary requirements. She's going to be fine. Can everyone just give her space. And just cleared everyone away.

And then once I calmed down because I had space, I had water, I knew that there was a plan. People weren't asking me questions. Then it was like, okay, what do you need? Like you say. So it really does work. It's not just hypothetical what you're talking about.

And sometimes it doesn't take much either. Like sometimes it's not about having, in this case, okay, fine, it was someone who knew me well, but sometimes it's not about having, you don't need to know someone really well to be able to attune to them and to just give them a comforting environment and to just hold space for their emotions rather than trying to fix them or repress them or get rid of the person or their emotions.

And I think this can be applied to oneself as well as to others. When we have these intense emotions, sometimes it's just a case of, okay, whether you need to crawl under a desk. For me, it always was bathroom stalls when I had panic attacks. And partly that was for hiding from people, but there was also something about, I'd put the lid off the toilet down and I'd be able to sit and there was the walls and it felt like my space. I needed a small, enclosed, safe space.

So it's like giving yourself the space and then just allowing even, panic attacks are horrible, and it's always worse for me if I'm in a public space where I can't do that. So it's the same when you're talking about how to support someone else, we can do it for oneself as well. It's giving us a space.

And then once we've calmed down, asking ourselves, what do we actually need right now? Do we need to call into bed and send an apology text to any plans we have and just cancel everything? Do

we actually need support? Can we text or call a friend and get some emotional support? Do we need to... And this conference offers so many different methods of how to deal with anxiety.

[00:40:04]

But I really like what you're talking about, about the scale and how to get you from 10 down, and then maybe it's doing some breathing exercises, maybe it's trying to solve a problem that arose, maybe it's something else.

Dr Sophia Graham and I talk about DBT, and I love DBT skills because there are different categories and then within each category there's different ways of doing it.

So I'm mindful of time, but there's still a lot more I want to ask you. So maybe we can talk a little bit about, let's start with talking a little bit about Tema Okun's work, who I know that you wanted to bring in their work, specifically around anxiety in the workplace.

Lauren Lofton

Definitely another huge influence in terms of my work. And Tema Okun wrote this piece on white supremacy, how do I want to call it? White supremacy not just in the workplace, but just white supremacy, facets of it, like how it can show up.

And that is everything from perfectionism to rigidity. There's only one right way to do something. There's a whole list. And in that list, there's also an antidote for every single one of what you can think of as a poison. And the poison is in the water. It's in the water, it's in the air that we breathe, the poison of white supremacy culture.

And that's something that has really come out of our historical context of colonization and specifically in the United States where I'm situated, history of child slavery and everything that came along with that about who's good, who's bad, how does that show up? And a lot of that is also related to labor and labor practices. What are the expectations at work and who's held them? And then who is policing that way of showing up in the world?

Anyone can participate in these facets in the workspace, no matter what your identities are, we can replicate these behaviors. So it's taking a look at those and saying, okay, where is this showing up for me? And how might I show up differently?

And one of the things that's really beautiful is that while it wasn't written specifically with disability community in mind, if you go through the different facets, you'll see the ways that it also provides support. All the antidotes provide support for folks with disabilities and neurodivergence.

So if we embrace that, 'either or thinking', 'both and', and 'win win thinking', it doesn't have to be one way or another. We can embrace multitudes, multiple truths, multiple ways of seeing and perceiving things. That's also going to support people with neurodivergence.

So it's an incredible document. It's not super long, so it's something that I would encourage people to look up, hopefully we can have that in the show notes, and to read through and to really think about how is that showing up in my workplace? How does that show up for me? How does that show up in my personal life? And then asking yourself, what would it be like to try to embrace an antidote instead?

[00:43:15] Jaia Bristow

And do you remember any of the antidotes that were offered? So, for example, with perfectionism, was it like perfectionism was a poison and there was a specific antidote?

Lauren Lofton

Yes. So there's quite a few of them. So there's perfectionism showing up in the workplace and that is mistakes are viewed as a problem and they reflect poorly upon you as an individual. As opposed to having more of a community way of seeing things and knowing that mistakes are inevitable. So how do we support each other when we make mistakes? That's part of our common humanity, and part of that is developing a culture of appreciation for one another.

And when we provide feedback, having a culture of feedback to start with that makes it safer to say how you're being impacted by things where things might need to change. That definitely supports those of us with anxiety and those of us with disability conditions. Being able to say, hey, this isn't working, or hey, you made an assumption and said this thing and it was really hurtful actually, could you not frame it that way in the future? Being able to provide that feedback as an antidote to that perfectionism.

And then there's a sense of urgency. And I like to call this a false sense of urgency. So we're rushing, rushing, rushing, rushing, even when there is no need to be in a rush. Or we have created deadlines that might not actually relate to say, a service deliverable a contract, the thing that you need to do.

So is it, do we need to have it done by this date, or is it your preference to have it done by this date? And for those of us that need accommodation, deadlines are a huge thing. So how do we make our deadlines in the workspace if they're unreasonable? Also, if they're set for a time frame for people who don't have disabilities and it could be adjusted and maybe, you know what? We're going to slow this whole thing down and this can take an additional week, and that's okay. And if you can't get there, we have a team to support you.

I had a friend that had a disability, that was also an attorney, so there's a very low percentage of us, but also as an attorney and had not disclosed his disability condition, and he had missed some very important deadlines. And he was actually terminated because he kept missing these deadlines because he was so afraid to ask for help and to disclose.

But really, if he had the support of somebody else to help manage his calendar and help meet all of those deadlines, I think that he could have been quite successful because he was really good at his job in a number of other ways.

So sometimes there is a real sense of urgency for attorneys. We have real deadlines, we have statutes of limitations where you can't file if you miss the deadline. It's considered a part of our professional competency to not miss major deadlines. And it does mean that we need to have some support and we need to be able to slow down and use that teamwork kind of effort to get things done.

The other qualities include defensiveness, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, it's only real if it's written down. That only one right way that we already talked about, paternalism and then there's this kind of power hoarding, and fear of open conflict are two of the really big ones as well.

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So I think when we start to take a look at these, what does it mean to have a place where our work space is conflict positive? Knowing that conflict is inevitable and when it arises it's an opportunity to change things.

And so, I think when we can start to view the world in that way it takes some of the fear out, because part of what we're afraid of is, I have to be perfect or I am the only one that's experiencing this in this moment. So deeply isolating. And there really may be quite a number of people that are experiencing anxiety in your workspace and we're just not talking about it.

And so being able to have an open conversation and being able to say, for instance, to a person that's in a leadership position, you keep setting deadlines that mean that everyone is working more than 40 hours a week and everyone is miserable by Friday. Maybe everybody's crying at their desk by Friday because you like to turn things in sooner for deliverables than they actually due.

Maybe because they're having their own anxiety. Actually, they're like, I have to present to the board, I need to show that I'm doing a good job. I want to show that not only are we hitting all of our deliverables, we're doing it early and often. And so their own striving for perfectionism, their own high standards for themselves might be causing them to set a whole standard in the workspace for everyone else that's causing a huge amount of anxiety when it's really not necessary.

And that's part of that individualism as well. So trying to come to a community spirit. Like, how is everyone in this workspace impacted? It doesn't have to just be the bigger the better and the faster and the more we produce, the more value there is.

Jaia Bristow

Exactly. I've worked in production for over 10 years, and I've worked both in TV production and events production. And they're very different because events production, the deadlines are real. If you're putting on a festival and you've advertised it and you've got thousands of people coming at a certain date, you need everything ready by that certain date.

But with TV production, you have deadlines but there's such a long turnaround between when the deadlines are and when the show's actually being released that there's plenty of room. And so when I used to work in TV production we always had this catchphrase of, 'It's only TV'.

When we were approaching a deadline and we weren't going to meet it and everyone was stressed, someone would just be like, 'Guys, it's only TV'. The worst that's going to happen is we're going to miss a deadline by a few days. We're still going to have the show with the channels or with the people in time. It's okay.

And then in events production, when people would get stressed, there was just this community feel that would happen because no one was pointing the finger and blaming each other because there was no space for that.

It was like, we need to get this done by this date so everyone would just pull in and would band together, and everyone was totally knackered by the end of it, but we all felt really good because we'd achieved something tangible and we'd come in with that support of everyone just like, what do you need? Okay. You clearly need a break right now. And people making tea for everyone and

someone else just like, all right, how are we going to do that? And then someone would come and go and get the music, and we'd all pull all nighters, but we'd make it happen.

[00:50:12]

And so those things come to mind when you share about that.

Lauren Lofton

I just love that you developed a phrase. There was a way to make everything stop.

Jaia Bristow

Exactly.

And I still have that on my wall. I don't work on TV anymore, but I keep this as a reminder so that when things get too stressful. I don't know if it will be the right way around on the camera, but when things get too stressful, I've got that reminder on my wall. And that's what that phrase means to me. It's no longer actual TV that I work in, but it's that kind of, it's okay, take a moment. It's not life or death. It's just whatever it is, it's okay.

Lauren Lofton

It's a positive affirmation that you're using to remind yourself. And that's one of our tools with anxiety, is there a phrase like, you are worthwhile? You deserve to be in this space. It's going to work out. It will get resolved. Whatever it might be.

So appreciating that your whole team was able to have that together. And in that moment, that could be a crisis where everybody is headed toward that 9 or that 10 on the panic scale. Instead, that brings everyone down a notch right away.

Jaia Bristow

And just hearing that, everyone knew what that meant. It was like we'd all just stop what we were doing, someone would make some tea. It was like, okay, it's fine. And we'd go back to our work without that sense of urgency, which is so paralyzing and so unproductive.

I'd really love to ask you very briefly, because people can find out more about this in Roxy Manning's talk, but about how to ask for accommodations. Because we've established that they can be super supportive, but sometimes it can be anxiety inducing just asking.

And you've given examples of people in your life you know, or people who are ready to quit a job before they're ready to ask for an accommodation. So we don't have much time, but if you could just say a few words about that.

Lauren Lofton

Yeah, absolutely. So in workspaces that have formal HR, sometimes there's small businesses where your executive director might also essentially be your HR. So it depends on the structure of your organization. But if there is a Human Resources Department and there's a person that's there, that's part of their job duty to help support people that need a reasonable accommodation.

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There's typically forms that are associated with that, so you can ask what the process is and they should tell you, here's the form, here's how you ask and here's the documentation that you need to provide.

You should be able to also then speak to your provider. So if you don't have a provider, that's another challenge. If you don't have a mental health provider that can verify your diagnosis, sometimes your primary care physician can help support with that, and then they can write a letter that includes the key phrases that are needed to go to HR in order to get the reasonable accommodation process moving forward.

It is important to take a look at what you're asking for. So the key in reasonable accommodation is the word reasonable. And unfortunately, our ideas of what's reasonable can really differ from one another. And employers sometimes don't think that something is reasonable for your job duties that you might think is reasonable.

So I think that's the real sticking point, is figuring out what does your employer think is reasonable, because what you don't want is to submit an accommodation request and then have them go, oh, well, then you can't do this job because we can't actually reasonably accommodate you.

So I think it's helpful to seek legal support if you're concerned about getting a reasonable accommodation and you're not sure how that might go. And to really know what is the key phrasing to use, what can you do if they say, well, we have follow up questions for your doctor, and the questions might be inappropriate, maybe just because they don't know. Hopefully your HR representative does not do that and it can happen.

And there can also be pressure if anyone has had a hard time, let's say they're on a performance improvement plan or something where because something's been going on with their anxiety, with their disability condition, well, they've used this many sick days, and if you're not able to show up, maybe they've gotten onto a performance improvement plan and the reasonable accommodation is to triage that in part, to say this isn't a performance issue, this is a disability issue.

And with the accommodation, it's important to come off of this improvement plan with the new standards. So it can be useful to check in with an attorney that specializes in employment law and in disability rights work, about how to do your reasonable accommodation process so you're not alone.

There are nonprofit legal aid organizations that specifically support people with disabilities and support people experiencing workplace discrimination or harassment based on disability conditions.

So it depends on how friendly the workspace is. If the workspace is like, whatever you need, we've got you. We just need you to fill out this form. Great. You want two work from home days, that's totally feasible. Not a problem.

When you start having some of the informal conversations about what your needs might look like, if they show up with a can do attitude and are like, yes, how do we support you? Maybe even before you've disclosed that there's a disability condition just talking about, I think it could be helpful if... and then putting your feelers out there. How does my boss respond? That gives you a lot of information. You might not always need to go get an attorney and have that level of support.

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But if you have a really hostile employer or it's a really large organization or company where you're lost in a sea of other people, it can be really useful to have that additional support.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. And I really appreciate you bringing in all the legal side. And then if people are dealing more with the anxiety of just speaking up and advocating for themselves, then I recommend people check out my interview with Roxy Manning, which is called Anxiety about Speaking Up, and that's exactly what we talk about.

Thank you so much for your time today, Lauren. I really appreciate it. I think this has been a fascinating conversation. How can people find out more about you and your work?

Lauren Lofton

Thank you for asking. It was wonderful to be in conversation with you today. It is always a pleasure.

And people can find out more about me by going to transformbelonging.com and there they will find an intake form if they have an interest, there's a contact section, and then there's also a special section on supporting nonbinary people in the workspace right now.

So you'll see a little rainbow at the top of publications where you can sign up for a newsletter and then just get access to that document that gives quite a number of tips as well.

And then there's more information like that, all of my publications and work is also available on the website. So if folks are interested, I've done quite a lot of writing policies in the workplace. I am a primary author for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Racial Justice legal aid toolkit. So if people are interested in reading that, the full document is also available. And it includes quite a number of things on disability, including invisible disability conditions. So people are welcome to read more there and then to email me if they are interested in services.

Jaia Bristow

Amazing, thank you. And Tema Okun's document you were talking about before can be found at whitesupremacyculture.info.

Thank you for all of those resources and thanks again for your time today.

Lauren Lofton

Thank you.