



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

Leadership and achievement anxiety

Guest: Morra Aarons-Mele

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

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

Today I'm speaking with Morra Aarons-Mele, a self-described mostly happy, successful person. She also identifies as an extremely anxious overachiever.

To normalize anxiety and help others manage theirs, Aarons-Mele launched and hosts *The Anxious Achiever* podcast for LinkedIn Presents, which was a 2020 Webby Awards honoree and is a Top 10 management podcast.

She's passionate about helping people rethink the relationship between their mental health and their leadership. In addition to her work on anxiety, Aarons-Mele founded an award-winning social impact agency, Women Online, and created its database of female influencers called The Mission List.

She was named 2020 Entrepreneur of the Year at the Iris Awards, created to recognize excellence in digital parenting media.

Morra Aarons-Mele, thank you so much for being with us today.

Morra Aarons-Mele

Hi, Meagen. It's good to be here.

Meagen Gibson

So how does anxiety show specifically for us at work?

Morra Aarons-Mele

Well, it's a little bit like snowflakes. It's different for every person because we all have a way that anxiety might manifest for us. But there are some really broadly recognizable ways that anxiety shows up for us at work.

I think email is a really big one. Yes, right.

Meagen Gibson

I'm nodding.

[00:01:37] Morra Aarons-Mele

Why do we act out our anxiety on email? What? Think about it. You're in an email chain, you're new in your job, you really want to be impressive, you want to sound smart, you're a little anxious about this.

So when someone poses a question, you reply. You want to be seen as enthusiastic and ambitious, so you're in there, but you're really acting out of anxiety replying to those emails, not necessarily strategically or because it's really important.

You may get an email from your boss that says, "Can we talk at ten?". You may get that the night before. You may not sleep the night before because your brain is going to all these places. I'm like, oh my God, I'm in trouble. What's going on? And that innocuous email may mean nothing, but you don't know.

So we enact our anxiety because we're human and we want to please and we're relational creatures, through the channels with which we communicate at work. And it's email and it's Slack and it's meetings and all of that stuff. And so we're always pinging off each other's own anxieties and showing up with our own.

Meagen Gibson

I can speak, I'm making an anxiety conference, and people may not expect this, but it comes with some anxiety. And I've noticed that we have so many ways to communicate now, whether it's WhatsApp and Slack and email and there's so many ways for people to communicate with you.

And one of the ways that anxiety shows up for me at work, if it helps anybody else, is just that other people's emergencies become my urgencies. And so everybody's whipping each other up and figuring out when to take a breather, when the emergency might resolve itself, when do I need to respond? When do I need to not react? Those kinds of navigational things are really hard to figure out, especially as you said, when you put it in the context of if you just started at a job or if you're new in your career, those kinds of things.

Morra Aarons-Mele

Another really common way is through micromanaging. And so I always use this example because it's easy for us to complain about our bosses and our managers and say like, why doesn't she trust me? I'm going to get this project done.

And the truth is, she probably trusts you. She knows you're going to do a good job, but she's anxious herself. And so one way that she can enact and feel like she's controlling is by checking in on you all the time. It's not you, it's her.

Meagen Gibson

And if it is you, you'll know it, you'll be told, typically, won't you?

So if we shift into leadership roles, how do you define leadership anxiety specifically? And I think we just touched on one, but what are some other ways that it shows up?

[00:04:29] Morra Aarons-Mele

Again, leadership anxiety comes with the job, to be honest. Anxiety is partially leadership because your job as a leader is to look around the corner. It's to think about the future. It's to scenario plan. That's kind of the definition of anxiety. Whether you choose to imbue it with a lot of fear or not is your choice.

But I think that as leaders, as people with responsibilities on our shoulders who also care for and are in charge of other people, anxiety comes with the job. And leadership anxiety is really that pressure that comes with you, and it can be your personal anxieties. Am I good enough? Am I an imposter? When are they going to find me out that I don't belong here? Did I sound stupid in that meeting? All of that?

And it can be much larger questions of, is my best employee going to quit? Am I making the wrong decisions? Is the business going to go broke? Where is the world going? It's something that we carry with us and we act it out.

Meagen Gibson

I relate so much to your anxious over achiever kind of moniker because those are largely the people that get rewarded, are people with the superpowers of anxiety in the workplace because we are just trying to organize and anticipate our way to success all the time.

And the place that gets rewarded the most is in the workplace. At home everybody sees that as nagging and controlling. We don't get raises for that at home. And so I totally relate to that.

And that's why I think sometimes also it can take a while for you to recognize that that's what's going on, because the exact behavior that can be anxious provoking or anxious exacerbating is the kind that gets you success in the work world.

Morra Aarons-Mele

100%. Overwork, perfectionism.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Complete and total lack of boundaries.

Morra Aarons-Mele

"Call me anytime. I live for this job".

Meagen Gibson

We have an international team literally all over the world. And one of my biggest pieces of work in the last 6 months has been just creating and maintaining boundaries, because my team's awake in Asia while I'm sleeping. And so it's very easy when I wake up at 2 in the morning to think about all the things I didn't finish thinking about during the day to interact with them. And I've been like, no, I will not do it. My value as a person is not determined by my ability to be available all the time.

[00:07:13] Morra Aarons-Mele

But you're also modeling good behavior for your team, because part of being a leader is modeling behavior. And by you protecting your boundaries, you are sending the signal, explicit signal that it's okay for them to protect their boundaries, too.

And I think that is one of the healthiest and best things that leaders can do, is understanding what they need, modeling great behavior, mentally healthy behavior so that their team can be healthy, too.

Meagen Gibson

It's a great point. I actually called out one of my team members this weekend. The UK team was on holiday, they have different holidays than the US, obviously they're in a different country. And they had a 4 day holiday and one of them was working on Saturday and I was like, that doesn't look like holiday behavior. Could you maybe sign off? Go away. Although I was seeing it on Saturday so who am I to talk?

All right, so let's shift into the talk of hybrid work because the people who had the opportunity and were privileged enough to do so were able to do remote work and shift the way that they worked. Lots of people, first responders, lots of people who were needed in ways that could not be done remotely did not have that opportunity or privilege.

But in shifting back, those of us who did have the opportunity to work from home are now having to deal with hybrid situations or this kind of nefarious, are we in? Are we out? We're asked to come back, but it's optional. That's also going to stir up a lot of anxiety as well in the workplace.

Morra Aarons-Mele

Oh, 100%. Is it optional? I hear that a lot. I'm not sure it's optional.

Meagen Gibson

Being volun-told to come back to the office.

Morra Aarons-Mele

We had bad habits and poor boundaries before the pandemic, most of us. I can't tell you how many people I've spoken with before the pandemic who have said, I forgot that I had boundaries. I forgot that actually answering emails until 10 at night is really difficult for me. And that just became normal.

So I think that we have to remember that it's up to us to change, and we had bad habits before the pandemic. A lot of people felt like they had to be present. FaceTime was a really big thing, and the pandemic hasn't erased that, especially now that we're coming back.

I think that the most important thing, and again, it's all about modeling, that leaders can do right now is set healthy new norms and talk about this stuff. Is optional really optional? Yes. Thus, I will, as the leader, not come in every day. These are my hours. Slack gets shut off at a certain time.

These are times because work has been totally rewritten, that we have the opportunity to write new rules and create new norms. And I really encourage people to do that.

[00:10:13] Meagen Gibson

Especially I know I struggle a lot because I still work from home, and so I'm always at work. The feeling is that I'm always at work. How do you clock out of your house? Thankfully, I have my own dedicated space, and it's about I leave that space, I close the door, and I've clocked out.

Morra Aarons-Mele

That's really important. I think if you can, delineating space, again, that's a boundary. A boundary is intangible, but it's something that makes us feel uncomfortable. It's a signal that our body is sending us, that things are not exactly right. And when we understand the boundary, we can set limits.

So the boundary may be that I'm always distracted because I'm working at home and I'm trying to be with my kids at dinner, but my laptop is over there, and I'm distracted, and that makes me really upset. It doesn't make me feel like a good parent.

So, okay, what's the limit? The limit can be I'm shutting the office door and turning out the light, and there's no device near me.

Meagen Gibson

Everybody, with all those modes of communication, if you've got either notifications on or even the sound on, on your devices, I think that was one of the first pandemic heated conversations we shall call it, that I had with my spouse was, you have got to turn the volume off on your computer. I can't take hearing your notifications from across the house. It's enough to manage mine. Can we both be respectful of the audible alarm systems in our homes and just the calls for our attention at work?

Morra Aarons-Mele

Yes.

Meagen Gibson

Sorry I didn't mean to interrupt you. So I know I experienced this. I was a teacher part time at a college here in town before the pandemic hit. And I did both virtual and in person classes. And I experienced this where a lot of students had a hesitation to turn their cameras on on Zoom. That was happening before the pandemic hit.

But then we were all in the pandemic, and it was like there was no, I would give students the courtesy of, whatever, if you don't want to be on camera today, I'm glad you're here. But pandemic hit, a lot of us who work, we start working from home, and then all of a sudden there's these standards of like, no, you've got to be on camera.

And it's a different type of anxiety, isn't it? Because we didn't have somebody looking at our face while we were working before. And now we're having to be in these meetings where we're literally staring into a camera face to face, being looked at and examined while we're being asked to present or while we're being quizzed about the numbers for the quarterly report or what have you.

[00:13:02] Morra Aarons-Mele

Yeah, we're performing, and it's very, of course, we're self conscious. We're human. And so I think that it's really challenging because when you're on Zoom, you are performing. And so if you're a skilled performer, you know that part of the gig is having your body language down, having your expressions down so that the audience will be with you. You practice.

But for those of us on Zoom every day, we're not performers. We're trying to get our work done and we're distracted because we're thinking, how do I look? Do I sound okay? Is the dog going to bark? Is the doorbell going to ring? And it makes us anxious. And also it can really drain us. It's not restorative to be talking into this tiny screen all day.

Meagen Gibson

I think a lot of us were taken back and surprised by how draining it was. Because, frankly, from between you and I, and everyone at the conference, I'm wearing shorts. I get to do business on the top, party on the bottom, and nobody knows the better.

So we thought, oh, I'm not actually at work, so it's more or less like I've got my slippers on. There's a level of comfort that I can achieve here. But then at the end of the day, if I've done three or four interviews like this and five meetings on Zoom, I am wiped and I didn't leave my house, and we were all kind of confused, like, why is this happening?

Morra Aarons-Mele

I know because basically, I have lights on. You've been under lights performing for hours. And I think the thing that really confused me also as someone who's worked remotely for 16 years, was this sort of unwritten rule when the pandemic started that we were going to be on Zoom. What happened at the conference call? They worked before.

And so I really encouraged people to create a ratio of Zoom or whatever your platform is, to audio. Because audio is great, you can listen with your whole self, you don't have to perform.

And so think about it, can I do all my internal meetings on audio and save the performing on Zoom for external facing meetings? I have a friend also, who said that she gave herself permission to be casual on certain amount of Zooms today because it just took off that extra pressure. She wasn't doing her hair.

So I think thinking about what I like to do is I actually, every night I look at my next day and I plan my day around my Zooms. Not the work. It's so sad, actually, not the work that I have to get done anymore, but the amount of Zooms I have to be on.

Meagen Gibson

And the energetic output it takes to be performing, as you said. And I really like that you just validated that. Because you're absolutely right, it is totally performance.

And you've given me a tip that I'm going to be able to take away because I do have these forward, outward facing Zoom interviews I'm recording, and then I have just team meetings with the team around the world, and those could easily be audio meetings. I think everybody would be glad if they were audio meetings, not just me. Especially on the days where I have them very early to meet the

needs of everybody on the team. And I feel like I've got to be camera ready at 8am which is a lot for a girl with naturally curly hair who needs an air dry.

[00:16:33] Morra Aarons-Mele

Yeah, no kidding. And again, as the leader, you set the tone. So you could have, these team meetings are casual. You can move, I think integrating movement, walk and talks are very popular. I love a good walk and talk, but there's a reason for that. By moving your body, you're calming down your parasympathetic nervous system. You're sort of breathing.

The other thing is that physically posturally, when we are on camera in this confined space, our muscles are tight, we're hunching, we're not breathing well, and that actually sends a signal to our body, uh-oh there's something bad around the corner. I need to be anxious.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And I can tell you from experience, when I'm in a team meeting, it's a totally different experience than when I'm doing one of these interviews. I sweat during these interviews. That's a totally vulnerable thing. I'm going to admit to people that I sweat during these interviews.

And I'm actually not anxious or nervous, I'm actually very excited to speak with you, I'm prepared, but there's that level of performance. It ratchets up your parasympathetic nervous system, as you said. And because I'm performing, there's just a level of, I've actually noticed that my Apple Watch records more activity on interview days. I meet my exercise goals without leaving the house on interview days because my heart rate is so much faster.

Morra Aarons-Mele

Wow. That's a good thing. Let's be honest. You want to be on point for this conference.

Meagen Gibson

I do, yeah.

Morra Aarons-Mele

Anxiety is actually a really good thing because that's how we get things done. And if you can channel that into, I am 100% here for Morra, and I've got my energy and my heart is beating, but that's okay. Great.

The challenge is acknowledging that there is a beginning and an end to that state. That a whole day of that is really exhausting. And you need to plan accordingly. And building in recovery time around the performance so that you're not anxious all the time.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I'm so glad that you contextualized it like that. You're totally right. If I spent my whole day in this elevated state, worried about our interview, and then afterwards couldn't come down from that state that I had produced in order to perform, that would definitely be a problem. I would have trouble sleeping. I wouldn't be able to eat quite well. It all compounds on itself and turns into exacerbated continuing problems.

[00:19:14]

So one last thing that I wanted to talk through, because I think all of us deal with this and it's worldwide, but a lot of times we're trying to conduct ourselves at work in a normal way, and the news of the outside world is interfering with our ability to focus. And it's creating anxiety because it's supposed to.

There are devastating things happening in the world on a daily basis, and they're creating the response they're supposed to. You're supposed to be upset by the things that are happening, but we do have jobs to keep and families to feed and things to do in the midst of all of that.

And so I wanted to ask you if you have tips around that and what you would suggest to people that are struggling with that?

Morra Aarons-Mele

Yeah. It's hard because so many of us are digitally connected for work so the news is coming in. And if you're like me and you work in social media, checking Twitter is part of your job. So then you might be checking Twitter for a client, and then all of a sudden you see a devastating news report, and it's really hard.

My ultimate advice is try to limit your news consumption during the day, but recognizing that that's not always possible. And you may get hit with a news alert on your phone that just blows you. It's to just develop a practice, and it really is a practice, of acknowledging the weight of the news that you just got, but also saying, you know what? I can't do anything about this right now. I need to show up at this meeting, so I'm going to send a prayer, breathe whatever makes you feel like you're helpful to other people, but also present with yourself and just say, now is not the time.

And it's okay to do that. I think a lot of us are feeling increasingly like we are taking on all the weight of the world. And of course we want to help, but it's okay to say I really need to be present for this meeting, and I'm not going to absorb that right now.

Oh, sorry.

Meagen Gibson

Go ahead.

Morra Aarons-Mele

It's also okay when something really devastating happens and you're on a meeting to say, I think we're all shaken right now. Do we need to take a moment? Do we want to talk about it? Do we want to reschedule? I think understanding the humanity and vulnerability is, again, a leadership quality.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And it can be hard, too, if you have a family, knowing that compartmentalization, the acknowledgement of what's going on might not be able to happen for a while. It's not just, I've got to get through this meeting, it's, I've got to get through my day, and then I have to pick up my kids and really be present for them. And we're holding at bay this heaviness that seeps in and doesn't allow us to be fully present.

[00:22:26]

And it's about the self-management of that and the delay of it, and yet the feeling like you have to watch or you have to listen or you have to consume in order to not turn away. And I think that there's a balance there that we can find.

Morra Aarons-Mele

Yeah. You want to bear witness, but you don't need to bear witness in the moment.

And the other thing that I've been trying to practice is real distress tolerance skills building and when I do have that 20 minutes alone, if I ever do with three kids, literally sitting with the feelings and sitting with the grief and looking at it and saying the words and acknowledging it so that I am processing it, I'm not just stuffing it inside.

Meagen Gibson

Because if you don't, in my experience, if you just push it away because there's not time to feel that thing, then you don't actually get to tune into all of the things.

Because most things that happen don't give you just one feeling. They might give you anger and sadness and remorse that you can't do more or empathy if you've been in a situation like that before, or God forbid, re-traumatization if it's an activating event.

So there's so many feelings that can go into one thing or witnessing one thing that to sit and just allow yourself, gift yourself the grace of the time of 20 minutes, whatever it is that you can spare, to acknowledge all the feelings that have come up so that you can then be present again in your life. And perhaps write a list of action items for later if that helps you out.

Morra Aarons-Mele

Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

This has been fantastic. I've really enjoyed speaking with you. How can people find out more about you and your work and your podcast?

Morra Aarons-Mele

Well, they can listen to my podcast. It's called *The Anxious Achiever*, and you can get it wherever you get your podcasts, and I would really love that.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Alright, thank you so much for being with us.

Morra Aarons-Mele

Thanks, Meagen.