



Conscious Life presents

# TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

## Anxiety and trauma

**Guest: Amber Benziger**

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### **[00:00:10] Jaia Bristow**

Hello, and welcome back to this Trauma Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am delighted to be welcoming Amber Benziger. Welcome, Amber.

### **Amber Benziger**

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I'm super excited to have you on board. So Amber you as well as being a licensed psychotherapist and anxiety coach, you're the owner of Vitality Behavioral Health, where you specialize in anxiety disorders, burnout prevention, and trauma therapy.

And you're also the creator of the Anxiety Lab, a one of a kind membership service helping all women manage and cope with anxiety through education, compassion, and community.

### **Amber Benziger**

Absolutely. Yeah.

### **Jaia Bristow**

So, first of all, thank you so much for the work you do and for supporting these communities. And I'm curious if you can tell us a bit more about this work and the relationship between anxiety and trauma.

### **Amber Benziger**

Yeah, so it just kind of became a natural thing for me as my career advanced. Being a therapist, I just started kind of gravitating more toward trauma work based on the settings that I was in. And then I started to see a lot of women struggling with anxiety or even struggling to identify what that feeling or that emotion was, and then how not to be overcome by it.

**[00:01:36]**

And when it came to that relationship with trauma and anxiety it was kind of like, do you have one because of the other? Do you have the other because of one? How does that work out, that chicken or the egg type of reference?

And for everyone, trauma can look different. And people with anxiety are more predisposed to those emotional complications that result from trauma. So, yes, anxiety can come as a result of trauma.

Like, if you have an anxiety disorder that can be exasperated by your trauma. Think about it, if you have a panic disorder and you're having panic attacks a lot, and then you have to go to the hospital, you feel like, oh, my gosh, am I dying? Am I having a heart attack?

That can be a traumatic experience.

**Jaia Bristow**

Of course.

**Amber Benziger**

And then if you have some type of trauma, whether that's, like, little T or big T, where we kind of break things down in trauma. So, like, little T for little trauma would be that one time in a car accident. You could have anxiety and fear around driving.

Say there was like, a big T, big trauma in a repetitive event, like an abusive childhood, that could lead to fear and anxiety in relationships, how you attach to others, trusting. So we see a lot of them. We see a lot of hand in hand with trauma and anxiety, it shows frequently.

**Jaia Bristow**

That makes a lot of sense and at Conscious Life here, we hosted the Anxiety Super Conference, which you were also a guest on, and gave some fantastic tips on managing anxiety in general.

And I've heard the terms big T and small T trauma quite a few times. And it's interesting the way that you define them as sort of big T being the sort of repetitive trauma and small T being sort of one-off traumas. And yeah, it makes total sense that anxiety and trauma are linked. Like you say, the chicken and egg, what comes first? And in some ways, it doesn't really matter, right?

We know that they sort of feed off each other the same way chickens keep laying eggs and keep hatching into chickens. I think the same can be true of anxiety and trauma.

The more trauma we have, especially if we have intersecting trauma, multiple layers of trauma, the more that can bring about feelings of anxiety. And then if we have anxious and panic disorders or anxiety and depression or other mental health conditions, that will mean we're more prone to our trauma being activated.

**[00:04:08] Amber Benziger**

Absolutely.

**Jaia Bristow**

I'm curious also in this world of trauma and psychotherapy, we hear a lot about trauma responses. So do you want to talk to us a bit about what are trauma responses and how is that related to anxiety?

Is anxiety a trauma response, for example? Are they different? Because also anxiety is another broad word, which is why we did a whole conference on it. So maybe it's worth talking a little bit about what we're meaning by anxiety, how anxiety can manifest and how anxiety can manifest those trauma responses.

**Amber Benziger**

Absolutely. So, yes, those have become such buzzwords and I think it's great that we have these platforms, social media, these type of conferences that people can learn on the internet.

But I also think we have to be careful about the way that we're utilizing these words because it can really cause more distress. So yeah, anxiety in its simplest form, we all have it, right? It's an emotion that we fear. It's that overwhelming sense of oh my gosh, is something going to happen? That impending doom, right? Like we all have that. It's kind of what keeps us safe. It's a natural response that our body has.

So for a lot of us, we're having some type of anxiousness every day. A boss says, hey, we have an unexpected meeting. Oh my gosh, what's going to happen? You know what I mean? There's that anxiety but it usually dissipates very quickly. Right?

But for someone who has an anxiety disorder, that is where the threat is, either it could be real, but it also just could be perceived. We could start to perceive everything as a threat and it could feel very overwhelming, very unsafe all the time, or a majority of the time where it starts to impact the way that we show up in the way that we're living.

And that is kind of the anxiety that we're talking about here, right? So when we talk about a trauma response in the most basic general way, it's how we show up in that emotional way for that traumatic event, our emotional response.

So it's both immediate, which is more predictable, right? Like we can be in shock, we can be in denial. Say a loved one dies or we're in a horrific accident, we could be in shock.

But then there are those more long term effects, like physical effects like flashbacks or migraines that people get, or emotional responses, right?

We can have that long term anxiety where it could lead us to not wanting to leave the house. It could lead to some type of phobia. It could lead to fear or trust issues with other people, strained relationships, mood swings. So in that way you can see anxiety kind of show up as a trauma response if you want to say.

**[00:07:05] Jaia Bristow**

That makes sense and I really appreciate that definition of anxiety as a bit like we were talking about small T and big T trauma. It sounds like small A and big A anxiety, right?

Anxiety can be just an emotion and a natural part of a human experience to feel anxious. It's like you say sometimes something at work, something in a relationship, something in life, we miss a train or we're running late, not even we miss the train, we're running late for the train. We'll bring about a natural sense of anxiety and that's not something to be worried about.

Not to say that other types of anxiety are something to be worried about, but it will have a different impact. There's the sort of anxiety which everyone experiences to some degree and then there's sort of more like anxiety disorders as you're talking about, which are much more linked to trauma.

And so in the same way, what I'm hearing you say is in the same way that sort of we know trauma is created a lot by our holding environment, right? We can have traumatic events, whether big events or small events, and those can cause and create trauma or not, right?

It's not the event itself that causes the trauma. It's the holding environment. And it sounds like there's a similar link with anxiety, where there's these big anxiety disorders which are linked to trauma. Where we have trauma, the anxiety will be exacerbated and it can cause an anxiety disorder which will have a much bigger impact on our day to day life than the sort of small A anxiety, which I'm now going to call it, which is just a sort of normal human response.

**Amber Benziger**

Yeah, absolutely. I think we don't realize how much trauma like that big T especially can affect our brain activity, right. Stress impacts our brain.

We are trying to cope and we're trying to figure that out. So stress impacts like the amygdala and that impacts our emotional processing. It impacts our memory and hippocampus, it impacts the prefrontal cortex. And that is where, like cognitive behaviors, like problem solving, decision making.

So again, it's like, should I do this? Should I not do this? So in all those types of situations, if we had some type of trauma that impacted the way that our brain is functioning, again we're more predisposed to feeling anxious and that could turn into an anxiety disorder. So we see them again, very layered.

**Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And I'm really glad you brought in the element of stress, right. Because I think we couldn't be having this conversation about trauma and anxiety without also talking about stress. Because stress is, like you say, it impacts all these different parts of our brain, it impacts our messaging between our brain and our body, so therefore it can also impact our physical health.

It has such an impact and is totally linked with anxiety. We gave all these examples about a boss or running late for a train or relationships or whatever, but the main thing is the stress.

We feel stress and our response to stress is anxiety. And we know that trauma causes stress to the body. So then of course, trauma is going to cause that anxiety and we know that when anxiety

happens, that sort of dysregulates the nervous system and that in turn can then create or perpetuate or reinforce trauma patterns.

**[00:10:48] Jaia Bristow**

So what are some things we can do to break this chicken and egg cycle between anxiety and trauma?

**Amber Benziger**

Yeah, so I think, obviously I'm a therapist, so I think therapy is super impactful in these ways, right? A lot of times we are struggling and sitting in silence. Trauma can be extremely debilitating.

So there's that fear of if I go to trauma therapy, am I going to be retraumatized? Am I going to have to talk about something that I'm not ready for? And there are so many different types of therapies and treatments. Somewhere you're not even really having to go back and process step by step about what happened in that traumatic experience like EMDR or brainspotting.

There's CBT and DBT and there's all these letters. But I think the most important thing is to find a therapist that specializes in what you're going through. So really talking to that person and saying that this is what is going on, this is where I'm trying to go. Do you have experience working with trauma? Do you have experience working with people who have experienced something similar to me and feeling comfortable?

And I think that therapeutic relationship is one of the most important parts about trauma therapy because this is your most vulnerable state, this is your most vulnerable thing that you're dealing with, it's distressing and it's something that... It's hurting.

So you want to feel like you have that compassion, that support and that safe space to do it, right? Because obviously when we're in that trauma, we're not feeling safe.

So we want to make sure that in that therapeutic relationship, whatever you choose, how you choose to go about it, that you are feeling safe. And I think that's one of the most important things.

And when it comes to do I treat my anxiety or do I treat my trauma first? Well, from a professional stance, you want to treat that most distressing thing, right? So what are you coming in for?

And a lot of times we don't know that, maybe, I think I'm coming in for this anxiety and it's really like, oh, once I get down to it, it's like, hey, I have this traumatic experience that maybe I need to process and work through.

So I think that's why it's important to be open about where you are and what's going on and open to that therapeutic process.

**Jaia Bristow**

Yeah, I think that's really important. And I really hear what you're saying, that there's all these different modalities and choosing the right modality that resonates for the type of work we're going through or that resonates with us as an individual is super important.

**[00:13:50]**

But equally as important, if not more important, is choosing the right practitioner or therapist. Someone who's attune to what we're going through, someone who has either some experience personally or through their practice of working with these kinds of topics.

And as you say, part of the process is we don't always know what's going to come up as we go in. There has to be this trust in the process.

And at the same time, it helps if we know that there's someone sort of more in line in what we're doing and that we trust. And because we know that for trauma healing to happen, we need a safe and supportive environment.

And that if we don't have that, that's when we run the risk of being retraumatized. So we need to trust the therapist, we need to trust the practitioner we're working with so that we can open up.

So that if the process brings stuff up, it's not retraumatizing. It feels safe, we feel held. We feel like we can regulate our nervous system in those moments with the support of the person we're working with.

So I think that's really, really important to find the right person to be aligned and for practitioners listening, I think it's okay to know one's own limits, right? To say these are some areas that I have worked with that I can support. And hey, if you're coming to me with this thing, I haven't actually worked there before.

I know many through this work and my personal life, many therapists. And for example, I know someone who was sort of like trans and nonbinary who wanted to work and they were like, I really support you and I'm open to that. And I still have a long way on my journey of learning about this.

And so I don't think I'm the right person for you, but here are some recommendations and I think that that's really good. Rather than being like, oh, I want to be supportive, I want to be an ally, for example, and then going in and actually potentially retraumatizing the person, not through ill will, but just through lack of understanding of that specific type of trauma dynamic.

And it's true with gender stuff, it's true with racial stuff, it's true with all these different things a lot of the time.

### **Amber Benziger**

Yeah, absolutely and I think it's so important, again, like we talked about before in this day and age where we see a lot of people showing up on the internet and talking openly about mental health and trauma.

And I think that's great for destigmatization, but at the same time we need to make sure that the people that we're going to are trained to handle these things, like real life training.

And obviously I do some coaching and I believe that coaching can be beneficial. But when it comes to certain topics and certain techniques, we study them, there are certifications, there's continued education and I think that is really important.

**[00:16:11]**

So make sure that you know. Hey, you say that you specialize in trauma. What does that mean? That's not an off putting question.

And if the person is like, wow, then we should think about that, right? Because we should be able to say like, no, I feel confident in my work and this is why and this is how I've studied it and this is how I've utilized it, evidence based or not, being able to show this is what I do and why I do it and how it makes sense.

I think that's so important, especially because going into those types of situations there's a lot of anxiety. So we need to be careful about that and supportive through that.

It's okay if you're feeling nervous, if you're feeling anxious about taking that step in your journey with healing your trauma. I think that's really real. And for those beginning times, I feel like I spend a lot at the beginning of just trying to stop those racing thoughts, right, just around the fear of having it.

So I think it's really important to just remember that it's not easy and taking those steps to move forward and processing is really brave.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I think that's so important to remember. Like you say, the fact that everyone is talking about trauma these days is really important because it gives a language to people that they might not have had access to otherwise it destigmatizes mental health and these are brilliant things.

And yet because someone has a post with hashtag trauma, doesn't mean that they're a trauma expert. It also means that people... There is nothing wrong with self diagnosis in certain contexts and it's an important first step often for diagnoses.

And at the same time, there's a lot of risk of people seeing these terms all over and using them very casually without fully understanding what they mean.

So again, it's not criticizing anyone or anything, it's just saying beware, do your homework. Like listen to people who know what they're talking about and make sure you find someone that you can trust so that the process can work.

### **Amber Benziger**

Absolutely.

### **Jaia Bristow**

And you were talking about these racing thoughts and this anxiety, even in this situation. So I'm wondering if you could say a bit more about what do we do when we're having these sorts of racing thoughts, these ruminating thoughts, these anxiety messages in our head, these loops that are difficult to break and that can yeah. What do we do?

**[00:19:07] Amber Benziger**

Yeah, so there's a couple of interventions that you can just do on your own. We talk a lot about grounding techniques. So what does that mean? It really means, like, grounding yourself in the moment and utilizing your senses is one of the easiest ways because you have that right there in your body.

So you can clench your fist really tight and release and focus on how that feels. If you're able to go to the bathroom or if you're at home or if you're in the grocery store and you're walking by the freezer section, you can utilize the cold, whether that's ice or cold water, to kind of focus on how that feels in your body.

And that's going to allow you to break that cycle of rumination because you're focusing on the cold, to then ask yourself and I think that's one of the next things of questioning instead of like, what's wrong with me? Right?

Because a lot of times when we're feeling anxious, we're like, what's wrong with me? Here I go again. Instead of like, what do I need right now? Or what's coming up for me? Do I need a break?

Do I need some support? Do I need to call somebody? Do I need to take a minute? Do I need to switch environments? Like walk outside or whatever that is? So kind of asking yourself in those moments like, what you need?

Music is a really great tool if you have pop on your AirPods and listen to a playlist. Music is really transformational. It can kind of transform you to somewhere else.

Maybe it's a favorite song, maybe it's a time period when the song came out. So it kind of helps you break that monotony of the ruminating thoughts. And then, one of my favorites is always journaling.

So kind of getting it out. If we're having this loop, like, what is happening? Can we get it out on paper? Especially if there's no one right in front of us and we're able to talk to.

So being able to get it out and utilize our own narrative and then sometimes even reading it back and being like, did this make sense? Is this actually a fact? Or is this my anxiety talking to me?

**Jaia Bristow**

That makes sense and I like that there's these different... You have this sort of step by step with different processes.

So number one is just doing something to sort of not quite shock your brain out of it but basically that, the cold can be very helpful or I know using your senses, using your physical senses.

So whether it's the cold or the 54321 meditation exercises where you name five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste, I think, or something like that. I sometimes get the order wrong or whatever it is, something that just snaps you out of it.



**[00:21:44]**

Then once you're snapped out of it, this idea that it's like questioning, not going back into criticizing yourself and the inner critic of like, what have I done wrong? What's happening here? Why is this happening? What's wrong with me? This always happens.

Not going into story and criticism, but instead just taking a beat and taking on the role of a kind, supportive parent rather than a critical voice and being like, okay, what's needed in this moment and giving yourself options?

Do I need to go and just lie down and take a break? Do I need to go for a walk? Do I need to journal right now and let it out? Do I need to call a friend or send a voice message to release?

And then, once we figured out what we need and we're sort of a bit calmer, then to help metabolize the whole process and have more clarity and understanding, like you say, there's journaling and journaling can take on many different forms.

I think we talked about this on the Anxiety Super Conference and for me, I love sending voice messages. Voice messages are my form of journaling and my dear friends are used to receiving 10, 15, 20 minutes long voice messages from me and I'm used to receiving the same from them. So it's all good.

I don't go to everyone. We have a mutual understanding, right? And I think those are some modalities that are super supportive. There's lots more that I've talked about on the Anxiety Super Conference.

So again, I keep mentioning that, that people can access that if they want to know more about this particular topic.

And I really appreciate that you bring this in because again, because we talked about a lot of people with trauma have anxiety and so a lot of us get into these thought processes and it can be so hard to break the loop.

So having these really practical tools at hand that one can do on one's own is really supportive.

And then we can talk to our therapists, for example, because we just talked about therapy. Once you find a good therapist who is aligned with us, we can talk to them about what's come up and start processing and going more into the roots, into the understanding, into the trauma piece, I guess after sort of breaking the anxiety pattern.

And talking of therapists and going into the trauma piece. When you work with trauma and anxiety, you've just given quite a good specific pattern for people to do on their own.

But in your therapeutic practice, do you have a sort of specific way of working with trauma and anxiety? Do you treat them together or one and then the other? What's your process?

**[00:24:22] Amber Benziger**

I usually am very specific to the client, right? So what is the most distressing? A lot of times, people are coming, and we think that we're coming for this one thing, and once we talk it through, it's actually like, oh, wait, I want to focus on this.

So I think it's really important to build that relationship with the client, help them not feel as distressed in that moment. What is dysregulating you right now? So we can kind of form this base, so then we can get to those underlying things. And that's usually my flow of how I work with my clients.

**Jaia Bristow**

That makes sense. Starting with what's present right now and then trusting the process to see what comes up, what needs to be looked at, what needs to be unpacked, rather than, hi, today I want to work on the trauma, if I was abandoned as a child, for example, it's like, okay, well, where do you even start with that?

And I think it's always important in these types of processes to start with what's present right now. Because if we again, you've talked about it, we've talked about it. The trusting the process, your own body and mind will have, in the same way that we get activated so easily in life when we have trauma and when we have anxiety, if we come in with what's dysregulated right now and attended at that then the other things will naturally flow and will be looked at and peeled back like onions in their own time and as needed.

**Amber Benziger**

Right, absolutely.

**Jaia Bristow**

Amber, this is really interesting, and I think for people who want to find out more about you and your work, and especially your work with anxiety and trauma together and your projects, how can they do that?

**Amber Benziger**

Yeah, so I have my therapy practice in New Jersey for any New Jersey residents in the states where you can reach me. And then if you are looking to, like I said, work with anxiety in a community setting, in a membership where you can learn skills and you can have support and there's a lot of compassion.

I have the Anxiety Lab, and you can learn about all the services that I offer, talks, workshops, my therapy, and my membership on my website, [ambervsanxiety.com](http://ambervsanxiety.com).

**Jaia Bristow**

Amber versus anxiety. I love it, that's a great name for a website. Thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it.

**[00:26:45] Amber Benziger**

Thank you so much for having me, I had a great time.