



#007 - Coping With Anxiety - Tips and Discussion with Michael Simmonds

SPEAKERS

Michael Simmonds, Andrew Travers

Andrew 00:00

Hello, everybody, and welcome to in the loop podcast with Andrew. And today we've got Michael, Michael Simmonds who you've heard from before in a previous episode. And today, he's actually going to come and talk a little bit more on the topic of anxiety. Hello, Michael, how you doing?

Michael 00:22

I'm doing very well. Thanks, Andrew, how are you?

Andrew 00:24

Not too bad. It's one of these things where we're close to Christmas and a little bit of a stress overload for some people going on. And for others, obviously, they're feeling a bit anxious because they've just been put into a higher level of lockdown, or some sort of restrictions, shall we say? And for others, their Christmas plans have been ruined a bit, because they can't go and see somebody, which obviously is important at this time of year. From your side, can you just give us a little bit more of an introduction into the topic of anxiety? A bit of background and your thoughts on the topic?

Michael 00:58

Yes, thanks for that. I think your summary was a pretty good one. Indeed, the atmosphere in the last few weeks, at least for me seems to be a little bit thicker, in confusion, and I would almost say fear as well. But anyway, let's start by defining what we're talking about here about defining anxiety briefly.

The way we're using the word anxiety here, it's been defined as an ongoing worry, or an ongoing fear that something unfortunate might happen in the future.

We tend to feel anxiety as well, when we feel that we don't have full control over what might happen. And I'm going to refer to myself now. I mean, the types of symptoms that are typically associated with anxiety, at least for me, a bad feeling, in the pit of my stomach, almost like a sickly feeling, which can get quite intense sometimes and there's also a sense of nervousness about it as well.

There may even be other feelings, which are attached to the main anxiety feelings like helplessness, that is not within our control to do something about the situation despair, overwhelmed with having to cope with it as well. So behind anxiety, that could be a whole package of different types of symptoms.

Now, in a so-called normal time, and my assumption here is that we're in anything but a normal time, feeling some level of anxiety is very healthy, you know.



For example, if I've got a project deadline, which is coming up next week, and maybe that project is competing with a bunch of other priorities, it can be very healthy, for me to have a little bit of anxiety to stimulate me taking the necessary action to make sure the project is handed in on time.

I think what's special about the current environment, though, is, first of all, it's the duration of it. I mean, this, this COVID has been going on for something like roughly nine months now. And it's also the scale of it as well.

There seem to be so many people, which are being touched by it in one way or in another. I think for a lot of people, it's about the fear of having basic needs not being met. The basic needs of stable salary, basic needs of a stable job, basic needs of good health. Then on top of that, I think there are a host of individual needs, which are much more fragmented, which still being unravelled, the longer this situation goes on.

I guess in summary, I think there are important reasons why a number of us are feeling some level of anxiety, even, I would say people that would consider themselves to be normally resilient. I think it's totally understandable.

Andrew 03:49

How are we coping with anxiety? Is it something that you know, we can cope with? Or is it because of past problems and other things, which creates a level of anxiety? We then just bury it? And of course, that could then be a problem later?

Michael 04:04

Yeah, so there's a lot packaged in your question, and it's a great, question.

So you know, obviously, the way that we deal with anxiety is very individual. So the way that one person deals with it is can be different than another. I am going to make some generalisations here, though, to bring a point forward.

So as I've mentioned, anxiety, I think, is a healthy mechanism, which stimulus stimulates us to take action to stop something bad from happening in the future. The issue though, comes in when we take action, and we still feel our system in a high state of alert.

But at least in that case, we're aware that there's something there that isn't sitting right with us, and we can make a conscious decision whether to do something about it or not. The other scenario, though, which I think is common, is that we're not aware that the anxiety is there. And we're not aware of it because we intend to avoid the unpleasant feeling. And why not, because it's unpleasant to carry around with us. And the way that we do this avoiding is I mean, typically, we either soothe our pain, or we numb it.

For example, we over consume alcohol, we reach for the wine when we get back from work, or we listen excessively to music, or we work a lot, or we intellectualise or ruminate a lot. We play computer games, watch TV, we eat, go shopping as well. There's whole bunch of ways that we do this.

My own favourite and this was quite revealing to me is keeping busy with work a number of years ago.

I even developed some kind of addiction to a computer game. It's quite interesting, looking back and seeing how angry I used to get that the pixels on the screen.



The point here is, it doesn't mean that all of these activities I've mentioned are evil. And in fact, some of these are very healthy, and useful, like eating, for example, or going shopping, and giving ourselves a bit of what we need now like listening to music etc. They all help keep us going in everyday life. So it's not about stopping to do these things completely.

Andrew 06:18

So with regards to obviously the example you gave there, Michael, people playing computer games far too much, staying up late, not sleeping. What are you seeing or feeling as the issues?

Michael 06:33

In general, there's a tendency to almost become hypnotised by our participation in these events. The word hypnotised I'm using very deliberately, because it gives the sense that we're participating in an unconscious way.

And when we do this, what we're actually doing is we're training our brain, that avoiding is beneficial, which then ironically, provokes our system to make the anxiety even stronger. We do even more avoiding and end up in this kind of vicious cycle, where the anxiety becomes worse, making it even more difficult to face up to the situation.

If we look at the implications of this mechanism in today's environment, you know, I think to have our systems regularly jolted into a high state of alert. First of all, it's not a quality of life, that most people will choose for themselves.

There are health implications as well, just one of which is that, you know, anxiety tends to dial our immune system down, which is exactly the opposite of what we would wish for at this moment.

I think in summary, you know, we, we need to find a different response in us, rather than accepting that these feelings and behaviours are becoming part of some sort of a new normal in our lives.

Andrew 07:59

And from that side, if we're going to respond to it, what can we do about that?

Michael 08:06

Well, that's the big question, isn't it and the starting point in all of this, I think, is to disconnect from this cycle that I've mentioned, and to act with more awareness. Now in practice, you know, what this means is carving out time for ourselves, so that we can learn and identify more about our individual mechanism.

In general, I encourage people to see these challenges as an opportunity to learn about ourselves and to develop, not just for resolving the issue in the short term, but also for the longer term as well.

In other words, if we can increase our internal competencies, we can lower our tendency to feel anxious, not just in this situation, but for other situations that will come up in the future as well. In other words, we've become more resilient.

Andrew 08:57

You've touched on the words becoming a bit more resilient and we've got to do these things. What tips would you share to help you do these things? To be a little bit more resilient? To put it bluntly!



Michael 09:17

Indeed, indeed. I think the first comment to make here is this is where the rubber hits the road, or some expression like that, right?

Firstly, there's a lot of useful information, I think out on the Internet. If you're prepared to do a bit of sifting through the information, there's a lot of interesting advice that you can get from there.

Anything that I'm going to share here is purely based on my own personal experience. A few things that I found useful. I share these in case they may be of use to other people as well.

Tip number one, if you're still wondering, if avoiding is an issue for you, a very simple experiment to do, is to sit in a quiet room, no distractions for between five and 10 minutes. Just put the attention on yourself and what's going on inside yourself. If over that time, there's an uncomfortable feeling that starts to grow, might be an indication that there's some avoidance going on there.

Repeat the experiment one or two times and then see if you're motivated to want to take some action on it.

Tip number two grounding exercises. Grounding exercises help to calm us down and to feel safe. The reason these exercises can be useful is because behind anxiety is a nervous system, that at some point in the past, typically, in the first few years of life, was frozen, in a high state of alert.

It's almost as if we're living with an inherent tendency to experience the world around us as not being safe. When we then find ourselves in situations such as COVID, which seem to confirm to us that our environment really isn't safe, our response becomes exaggerated because of what was in our system, you know, from the past already.

Grounding exercises helped to train our nervous system that actually we are safe. They help to calm us down. One very simple example of this, you can find other ones out on the Internet is the starting point is to breathe and our breathing.

You need to in a very conscious way, breathe in and out. Because often when we feel anxious, we are breathing and it becomes restricted. We're not actually taking in enough air. The trick is to consciously breathe, particularly if we can do it from our stomach region. Then we allow the outward breaths to be a little bit longer than the inward breath. That's the first step, the second step is to focus our attention on our body because our body is a relatively solid, stable structure. Our bodies are also always in the present moment, which is unlike the mind of an anxious person, which tends to extrapolate thoughts into the future, and to imagine the worst possible outcomes. Part of what this exercise is doing is it's bringing us into the present moment so that we're not imagining the worst.

Specifically, how do we do this? Well, we can simply make a scan an internal scan, from the top of our head, down to the lower part of our body, in order to find a place in us that we easily connect with. In other words, a place that feels safe, there may be some parts of our body that we connect with, which don't feel safe. Those are probably places where we stored some old traumas.

The trick is to find a place that does feel safe. A simple example could be a finger. You know, fingers tend to be relatively trauma free regions.



Andrew 13:18

Yeah, unless you played rugby, and you've broken a few.

Michael 13:22

Well, indeed, so a great example. For you, then maybe the finger isn't the right location. So again, it's the ones which bring back happy memories. not breaking the finger, right?

Andrew 13:35

Yes, the ones I didn't break.

Michael 13:38

Yeah. I think in my actually, in my own case, I also broke a couple of fingers playing. Anyway, we digress.

Let's go to tip number three use of tension release exercises, which you will find a registered trademark on the internet called TRE. These are a set of simple exercises, I think there are seven of them in total and they are pretty much designed for any body shape, and also a number of physical restrictions that can be carried out in very small spaces as well. Definitely something that can be done in the home.

What these exercises do is they provoke an intentional tremor in some of the muscles in our body, but they do it in a very controlled way.

What these tremors are doing is they're unwinding patterns of tension, which are buried in the muscles that have accumulated over the years and these tremors are actually similar to the tremors that you that you might have seen in animals when they've survived a stressful event.

Again, you can go out on YouTube and you can see some examples of this. One example that some people might be able to identify with is a cat that's been frightened. Maybe you've seen a cat that's been frightened by a dog and then after it has gone away, the cat shakes. That shaking action is actually a very healthy response.

Because what the cat is doing is it's shaking off the excess energy from that event, and that all of a sudden, the cat will run away, and it'll be fine. It'll stop shaking. Now, in principle, you know, the same thing happens in humans as well. But with humans, we tend to hold back on the shaking because we think that we shouldn't be shaking, or that something's wrong with us.

Actually, what we're doing is we're holding this excess, this residual energy inside us, whereas it would be healthier, just to allow the shaking to take place. That's basically what these exercises is doing are doing is they're intentionally, in a very controlled way, shaking off some of the daily stresses and also some of the baggage material that we've accumulated from the past.

Andrew 15:59

Obviously, that's self-help, which we then know that even if we put this information out, and if we gave this to 100 people, probably only 10 would only action them. So how do we move from the self-help way of trying to handle the situation? How does a professional approach help the person in all of this?

Michael 16:23

Very good question.



I think, you know, this is where a lot of discipline, or the word discipline comes to comes to mind. You know, despite our best efforts and maybe the best efforts of other people that have good intentions towards us as well, we still may not be able to regularly break out of this cycle that I've mentioned earlier.

You know, either I think we're not able to see the cycle just because we're too close to it, we're in the box, or we get sucked into the cycle, because well, it's there and designed to protect us and make us feel safe.

In cases like this, it can be helpful to look for external support, particularly if you know, it's with somebody that shares a similar personal experience, which may be related to your anxiety.

Now, there are several types of support that people can seek out there. Obviously, what I'm going to say is speaking from the perspective of a coach. I think for coaching, there are three things I'd like to highlight. The first thing is, I think coaching is about providing, I would say a supportive environment that helps to shine a light on people's inner experience. This can be a really important enabler, allowing people to learn about their individual mechanism of how they deal with anxiety, because at the end of the day, even though we generalise, we do it in a very individual way.

Ideally, this should also lead to a build-up of resilience, so that when we encounter anxiety in the future, you know, it's either softened, or we don't experience them. I think the second point is that coaching is very good. I find putting someone's challenge into a bigger context of their life. In other words, it's not only about the anxiety, you know, anxiety is obviously one element, which is very important in the now. But it's one element of a much bigger picture of that person's life.

I think I help remind somebody about their bigger picture, or to help them figure it out, if they haven't already been able to do that which can be very motivating, and also very empowering.

Thirdly, the last point, I think it's about cultivating connection, cultivating connection to ourselves and to our surroundings as well. For example, by distilling out important values or untapped strengths, or learning how to effectively leverage our strengths, to work through challenges.

I think the reason that this theme of connection is so important in the context of anxiety is because if you think that the picture which has emerged about the origin of anxiety. It's related to a disconnection or a rupture, in the connection that we have with the surroundings around us, that we're supporting us.

Typically, this happens within the first few years of life and can even happen before we're born. The point is that if disconnection was the cause of anxiety, then reconnection can be an important part of the of the solution and moving forward.

Andrew 19:39

And from your side, you've talked about the coaching in general, what about if it's coaching with you? How do people connect with you?

Michael 19:50

I think for some people, it's important that they feel the coach can relate to their personal experience. So, I tend to work with people from professional backgrounds, which, because I've spent a number of years in industry myself. I've also had to juggle work life with family life and I've got three sons.



Of course, you've gathered now from one or two of my comments that I personally had to work through, issues of anxiety and turning it into a, you could almost say a more friendly travel companion.

Andrew 20:24

It's one of those things, it's like, loneliness. People don't admit it, but they suffer from it and they can quietly improve their life by reaching out to somebody, I think that is a fantastic thing. You're sensible enough, Michael, to know that. If you can't help, you won't help. Which is equally important in what you're doing as a coach.

Michael 20:48

Yeah, absolutely, I mean, if people are motivated to or curious to, to explore my coaching further, they can feel free to reach me on my email, which is simmondscoaching@gmail.com and they can also give me a quick telephone call for a one on one discussion to see if they think it's worthwhile to go into more detail in a separate session.

Andrew 21:28

Okay good, and you'll be coming up with a new website in 2021, so obviously, you will keep the old gmail account active.

Michael 21:36

Absolutely, yes to be honest, I haven't needed a website up until now, but it's in construction, and should be out in the next month or two.

Andrew 21:43

Brilliant, well, thank you very much, Michael, for turning up. And please, everybody who's listening, if you do want to get in touch, you've got the information in the show notes as well as a resource link. I look forward to speaking with you again in a few months time.

Michael 22:07

Exactly, cheers and have a good day. Bye.

Key words to help member search:

TRE exercises, coaching, life, healthy, resilient, avoiding, grounding exercises, situation, anxious,