

# Stress and Anxiety Podcast Episode 6

## *Podcast 6 – Taking the long view – 24 minutes*

So in this sixth podcast, we're going to stand back and think about some of the bigger picture issues that can help you to get some perspective on the stress and anxiety you might currently be experiencing. As with the previous podcasts, this podcast is not designed to address highly anxiety provoking or majorly traumatic experiences, and if you are experiencing these, then please do contact the University Counselling Service and/or your College doctor or GP in the first instance. Rather, this podcast aims to provide a space for pausing and reflecting on what really matters to you right now and what you think might matter to you in the future. In this way, when those inevitable, more day to day worries and difficulties in life crop up, rather than feeling dragged down into more of a knee-jerk reaction, you might gradually be able to make a more conscious choice as to how you want to respond.

So some of the questions we'll be asking in this podcast include

'What gives you joy?'

'Who do you want to be, now and in the future?'

'What do you want to spend your time on earth doing?' and

'What do you think will give you the most satisfaction when you look back on your life in a few decades' time?'

We'll be thinking about how you can consciously schedule your time each day and organise your daily, weekly, monthly, and possibly even annual schedule to reflect your priorities.

And we'll also be thinking about how to establish new habits by starting small and giving yourself regular rewards, and ensuring that you make enough time for emotions, and for reflecting on what matters most to you on a regular basis.

But first, let's try one final breathing exercise if you'd like to – this time, the eponymously named '3-4-5' breathing where you breathe in for three seconds, hold for four seconds, and breathe out for five seconds. Remember to repeat this sequence 10-12 times, and feel free to pause the podcast now if you'd like to give this a try [demonstrate].

*What gives you joy?*

Let's start with that first question – 'What gives you joy?'. It's a question that many people don't ask themselves, and we can easily lose track of this as we hurtle through the busyness of everyday life with its multiple demands, worries, stresses, and strains. But what is it that you really value and enjoy? Is it time with friends or family, helping others, achieving a short or long-term goal, learning new things, learning about new places and cultures, helping to save the planet, contributing to a political or social cause, spending time in nature, excelling at something you love to do, or maybe something else? What would you say really matters to you, deep down? Or to put it another way, what would you feel you'd really missed out on if, when you were 80, you hadn't managed to fit this in?

For many students, getting to Oxford has been a goal for as long as they can remember. Often, it's been a personal ambition, but sometimes, it's been somebody else's goal. You might want to think back in your own life as to whether getting to Oxford was something that you really wanted to do, or whether this was someone else's ambition for you that you learned to take on as your own. Have you found yourself here when it's not really, in your heart of hearts, where you want to be, and is it leading you to try and do things to impress others, when it's putting a huge strain on you personally? And did getting to Oxford eclipse a more fundamental desire or aim in your life? Either way, if you find it hard to answer this question about what it is that gives you joy (and perhaps surprisingly, many of us do), you might want to ask yourself what you really loved doing as a child. This is about thinking – not what it was that your parents, teachers, or significant others in your life wanted you to do, but rather what your favourite activity was. What was your favourite toy or game? What, if you were left to your own devices, did you most enjoy playing with or make believing?

Now if your answer to this question was, say, 'Lego!', then I'm not for a moment suggesting that you devote the rest of your life to this particular pass-time (though you might want to get yourself a small box to play with from time to time, if it gives you pleasure – why not?!). And of course, we can't spend our entire time just doing what we enjoy, as there are bound to be some things that we have to do in our lives which we might find less enjoyable or more routine. But answering these fundamental questions of 'What gives me joy?' and 'What did I like doing as a child?' or reflecting on why this was can start to give us a sense of what we might want to prioritise in our lives right now and perhaps also in the future – albeit most likely via different means. So if your answer to what you enjoyed about lego was, for example, the sense of creating something or of building something, of problem solving, or of working out a logical way to make use of resources, then what might that tell you about other activities you might want to engage in now and in the future, that might give you similar rewards?

If your answer to the question about what you enjoyed doing as a kid was something like ‘football’ or ‘hockey’, then what was it about playing or watching football or hockey that you think you enjoyed? The team spirit, the competition, acquiring and perfecting a particular skill, the sense of camaraderie? If you said, ‘Being with friends’, Was it the sense of emotional intimacy, or of feeling supported and connected that you liked, or was it having people to hang out with and do fun things with, or feeling you mattered to others, feeling you could give something to others? You get the idea. So you might want to take a moment to pause this podcast now and answer those key questions for yourself – ‘What gives me joy?’ and ‘What did I love doing as a child?’, ‘Why?’, and ‘What could I do now to get a similar sense of satisfaction and contentment?’. Now, you could argue that what you liked doing as a child is different from what you like doing these days, and that’s fine, but sometimes, reflecting on some of our earlier experiences in life, perhaps before other people’s expectations and trying to meet them became more predominant, can be a useful place to start. And if, in doing this exercise, you find yourself reflecting that it wasn’t your goal to come to Oxford but somebody else’s, then what might you be able to do to make the most of your time here, now that you’re here, and how might you learn to focus on developing your own goals for whatever comes next in your life?

*Who do you want to be, now and in the future?*

How about that second question, ‘Who do you want to be, now and in the future?’. Note that the question isn’t, ‘What do you want to be?’, or ‘What do you want to do?’, but rather, ‘Who do you want to be?’. There’s a subtle difference, because although your future career path, professional identity, and the various activities that you’d like to undertake in future might all be important to you, there’s also the wider question of what sort of human being you want to be. What are your values in life? How can you be authentically yourself and how do you want others to see you? These two things might be the same or they might be different – again, it can be helpful to reflect on that if they are. Do values such as kindness, compassion, and fairness matter to you? Do you want to make a contribution to society, to excel academically, or to realise your career ambitions? Do you want to travel or are you more of a home bird? Do you want to prioritise your hobbies and relationships, family and friends, or to focus on making money, achieving a particular lifestyle, or getting to the top of your profession? There are no right or wrong answers here and everyone will have their own responses, which might also gradually evolve and get reinvented over time. You might not know what your values are, and that’s okay too, but the important thing is to try and work out what matters to you right now and then, if you can, to begin to reflect on what you think might matter to you in the longer term. Then it’s a matter of keeping this in mind as you plan your daily, weekly, monthly, and possibly even annual activities. Your values might include anything from contributing to social justice to providing a certain level of

income or lifestyle for yourself and your family, from learning as much as you can about what it means to be a human being via the arts and humanities, to making a scientific, medical, or social scientific breakthrough, or from prioritising the people you love to contributing with kindness to your local community. Again, you might want to pause this podcast now to make a list of what you consider your current values to be and to think about what sort of person you are currently, and what kind of character traits and values you would like to have in future.

*What do you want to spend your time on earth doing? What do you think will give you the most satisfaction when you look back on your life in a few years' time?*

How about those questions, 'What do you want to spend your time on earth doing?', and 'What do you think will give you the most satisfaction when you look back on your life in a few years' time?'. Are there particular places on earth that you want to see or particular experiences in life that you'd like to have? What would you really mind missing out on if you looked back in ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or even fifty years' time and found that experience absent? Do you have a bucket list and if so, what's on it? This might be anything from doing the Three Peaks Challenge to volunteering in a refugee camp, from becoming a parent to being Prime Minister, or from going to Antarctica to learning to knit. You might want to learn to speak a particular language or to play a certain musical instrument. Or maybe you've always wanted to learn to ride a horse or try skydiving. What's on the list is up to you - it's a personal wish list, so you might want to devote some time to thinking about this, too.

Of course, it's not that you have to achieve right now all the things that you've said in answering these questions, but you might want to start thinking about how you can begin to prioritise your time and energy in order to make at least a small step towards one of them each day, each week, each term, and each year, however small those steps might be. What you think you are going to find most rewarding in life is likely to change over time, and people often reassess their priorities when something major happens in life – for example, if they have children or when a loved one dies. So asking yourself these questions might also be something you decide to do on a regular basis, whether that's every weekend or once a year on an annual holiday.

You might find this exercise helps when you find yourself getting anxious or stressed about something, as asking yourself, 'Does this matter in terms of my bigger picture priorities in life?' or 'Is devoting headspace, time, and mental energy to this going to contribute to my longer term goals?' can be helpful questions at moments like these. If the answer to these questions is no, then why waste time worrying or getting stressed?

*Scheduling – organising your daily, weekly, monthly, or annual routine to reflect your priorities*

Next, let's think about scheduling. This is fundamentally about working out what works for you in terms of what to do when, perhaps organising broad blocks of time with regular breaks, and ensuring that you schedule things that need doing but which might not be top priority – such as answering non-urgent messages or emails, life admin, shopping, washing, cleaning, or social media – to times when you have less mental energy or physical energy and prioritising things that really matter to you for times when you can really focus on them. Now it might be, for example, that you feel that social media is a really important part of your life, in which case, you might decide to prioritise that and schedule looking at your social media at a time when you can really focus.

First, then, make sure that you schedule in regular activities that meet your priorities. So, if you feel that spending time with people you find interesting is important to you, then you might decide that from 10.00-10.30am each morning, say, you're going for a daily walk or a coffee and each day or each week, you're going to invite a different person you'd like to get to know better. Or if you value reflection and creating a calm environment for yourself to wind down, you might decide that from 9.00-9.15pm each evening, you're going to journal and do some breathing exercises. If you feel exercise and time in nature matter to you, then maybe each Saturday afternoon, you're going to get on a bus with a couple of friends or a walking group and head out of Oxford into the countryside to visit a different Cotswold town or village. Or if getting into a particular career is important to you, maybe once a week on a Wednesday evening, say, you might decide you're going to spend an hour doing careers related activities such as Career Weaver on the Careers' Service website, or to look for internships. You might decide to volunteer at a food bank because social justice and helping your local community matter to you, or you might want to get some experience to help you get into this particular field. Perhaps you're going to schedule one weekend a month to have a slightly longer break – maybe you could get away for a weekend and go hiking or camping, or schedule yourself a home spa or an afternoon on the sofa with a magazine or podcast you enjoy? Perhaps you'd enjoy a cooking weekend, or doing some baking or knitting? Or how about a weekend of board games with friends and a cinema trip? Maybe you could take a weekend to read a novel on your world literature list, or go to a concert? And what about something to aim for in the longer term – maybe a particular event you'd like to go to, or spending part of the summer volunteering on a charitable project, or taking a few days' holiday out of Oxford? You get the idea – it doesn't really matter what they are, but the main thing is to schedule in some short, medium, and long-term things to look forward to.

Whilst scheduling your time might be beneficial to your mental health, do make sure you don't micro-manage yourself or try to pack too much in – and if you find that you consistently do either of these things, then you might want to ask yourself why you are being so strict with yourself, or what it is that you might be trying to avoid doing, thinking about, or feeling by being constantly overloaded, anxious, or stressed. The idea is really to have blocks of time, of whatever duration works for you, so that you can make good use of your time. So try to ensure that at least once a day and for a longer period of time once a week, you schedule in what we might term some 'structured unstructured playtime' – that is, that you earmark a specific block of time which you have deliberately set aside and scheduled into your diary, but which you've left unstructured, so that within reason, you can do whatever it is you feel like doing once you get to it. So, whether it's 10 minutes in the morning or evening or a morning off once a week, you know you've got some time to daydream, exercise, have a soak in the bath, make a favourite snack, read a good book, listen to some music, or whatever it is that you feel like doing at the time.

### *Establishing new habits - start small*

Remember that building new habits which are sustainable takes time – and that includes the habit of learning to react more calmly and with less anxiety or stress to things that you might find usually make you feel agitated or worried. So schedule your new habit - whatever it is you want to do differently - for at least 3 weeks, or maybe longer, depending on what it is and how you get on with it, in order to make it really sustainable. Starting small – even with doing something for 5 minutes a day to begin with – is the way to go, as is linking new habits to existing ones. So if the first thing you do when you get up in the morning is to put the kettle on, then you might decide to link doing 5 minutes exercise to when you are waiting for it to boil. Or if you always clean your teeth last thing before getting into bed at night, then you might decide that that's when you'll do 5 minutes of de-stressing breathing exercises. And in addition to starting small and linking the new habit that you'd like to develop to existing habits, do make sure that you give yourself an extra reward each time for any progress that you make towards establishing and maintaining your new habits, as this helps to reinforce them. Hopefully, you're going to give yourself a small reward once a day anyway, just for being you, whether that's reading a couple of pages of that novel you've been wanting to read for ages, standing in the sunshine in the courtyard with a cup of tea, or setting aside 5 minutes to message an old friend. But if you take a small step towards reaching your goal, then give yourself an extra reward in addition to this, to celebrate your progress. It's not about pushing yourself really hard or punishing yourself if you don't manage to do something towards your goals – that really doesn't work in the long term – but rather, it's about giving yourself something extra even if you don't quite make it, and congratulating yourself just for having a go. Try not to use your phone or

any other screen-based activity as your reward, however, and do try not to start or end the day with your phone or screen, either. Whilst screen-time isn't inherently bad and some people find it relaxing, time away from screens to process emotions is really important, as focussing on a screen can really impact your brain's ability to process emotions. Some people like to finish the day with some yoga stretches or by doing 5 minutes of breathing exercises, others enjoy preparing calmly for sleep with prayer or meditation. Whatever it is, even if it means finishing whatever you are doing in the evening 5 minutes earlier to give yourself this special reward, it's usually worth making the time.

### *Make time for emotions*

Do also try to make time for emotions each day. People often talk about 'distracting themselves' as a way of dealing with difficult feelings, and, whilst this can sometimes be helpful for very brief periods, such as when we feel at risk, we know that pushing negative emotions away all the time or repressing them on a regular basis can often lead to them returning with additional force in the future, and can eventually result in mental health difficulties, such as low mood or depression. People also often talk about wanting to avoid 'overthinking', or feeling that they want to 'be productive', but these, too, can be ways of avoiding really reflecting on how we are feeling when life gets difficult. In many ways, what matters is not the amount of time you spend thinking about something, but the way in which you think about it. And when it comes to so called 'productivity', whilst there are times when putting the hours in can be important – as the old adage goes, 'The muse has to find you at your desk' – what also matters is making intellectual connections and having ideas – in other words, being creative. After all, you're not an industrial process, but a human being, so creativity really matters.

If there's something that your mind needs to think about, then making at least some time each day when this can come to the surface can also be helpful. Sometimes, an anxiety or stress reaction or leading a very hectic, stressful, or anxiety provoking lifestyle can be a way of avoiding thinking about something difficult, and if you feel that this might apply to you, then do consider contacting the University Counselling Service or your GP or College doctor to talk it through. Some people find journalling helpful, keeping a kind of worries and stress diary during the week, then seeing at the end of the week how much of what they were anxious or agitated about is still bothering them. Rather than thinking in a persecutory manner, 'Why is this happening to me now?!', it can be more helpful as a temporary measure to focus on the question, 'How can I improve this situation at the moment?'. But once the crisis has passed, it's still really important to reflect on any recurrent patterns that you might notice about your experiences, perhaps talking things through with a friend or getting some therapeutic help, if you find this difficult on your own.

This can help you to reflect on what might need to change about the way you are currently approaching the challenges you are facing, or if there might be other aspects of your life that might need attention or change. Just setting 10 minutes aside each day to go for a walk, stare into space, or daydream in the bath or shower can be helpful in enabling the default mode network in your brain to operate, helping you to process emotions and come up with creative ideas. This network in your brain can only function properly when you are in a 'flow state', doing something you find really absorbing and enjoyable, rather than when you are concentrating on external, goal-oriented tasks, such as writing an essay or getting to the next level on a game. Put another way, this is to do with your unconscious mind letting your conscious mind know about what it is you might need to pay attention to emotionally. So it's important to try and start the day in as relaxed a state of mind as possible as we wake from sleep, rather than immediately looking at our phone or at a screen. Similarly, try not to end the day on your phone or screen, but rather, come off at least an hour before bedtime and do something else to wind down. You might even want to try a digital detox every so often – just a short one to start off with if you find this difficult, building up to a longer time period bit by bit – or maybe you could try switching off some notifications or messages for a little while, if you find they distract you or make you feel anxious or stressed, especially first thing in the morning or last thing at night.

Above all, when you feel anxious or stressed, try to treat yourself with compassion. And try to remember that, whilst we might not be able to change our genetics or basic biology, by recognising the impact of our previous negative experiences on our minds and giving ourselves other, hopefully more helpful, experiences, including accessing appropriate therapeutic help if need be, we can, at least to some extent, give ourselves choices as to how we react in future.

So, as we come to the end of this podcast series, what's your personal action plan going to be?

If you haven't done so already, might it be helpful to make a list of the kinds of stresses and anxieties you experience and what you feel their underlying provenance could be, so that you can start to try to separate out what belongs where? Might it be worth making a list of your current macro-stressors, to reflect on the impact that they might be having on you, and to treat yourself with more compassion in reviewing what you are currently expecting of yourself? How about drawing up an itinerary of your present micro-stressors – those small irritations that you can change, and to have a think about how you might go about gradually reducing these, given all the other things with which you might currently feel you have to contend? Or devoting an hour or two to reflecting on how you see your overall priorities in life right now – perhaps while going for a gentle walk in the park, having a soak

in the bath, taking a train journey, or even just going to the Botanic Gardens or wandering round a museum or art gallery, and seeing what comes into your mind when you are in a slightly dream-like state?

How are you going to prioritise the basics of eating, sleeping, exercise, hobbies and relaxation, and enough socialising for you, and then fit sufficient work in around these life priorities to reach a reasonable standard?

What small changes would you like to start making in your life, and how are you going to link them to existing habits? Above all, what is the reward going to be for persevering with them in order to make these new habits sustainable? What are you going to start with, and when?

Might it be valuable to spend some time reflecting on who you are in your quieter moments, when you're alone, not trying to impress others, gain their attention or admiration, or be someone you're not? What many people find causes them stress and anxiety is when the discrepancy between who they are on the outside – that is, how they are with, and for, other people - and who they are on the inside – that is, their own particular values and beliefs and authentic self – gets too wide. As Mahatma Gandhi pointed out, 'True happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are the same thing'. How might you start to align your personal values with what you say and do each day, and how can you start to think about what this might mean for you in the longer term?

And finally, when you're feeling anxious or stressed, might it be helpful to think about a small child, how you would respond to that child if they were feeling worried or upset, and what you might say or do? Hopefully, you wouldn't shout at them or criticise them, or tell them their feelings didn't matter, let alone tell them to shut up, reprimand them, or hurt them. Perhaps you would try to take their emotions in and reflect on them, say something kind to them, and try to digest their feelings and put them into words for them to help them to contain their emotions, or maybe you would offer them some words of reassurance or encouragement, or give them a hug. Now try talking to that little person inside yourself in the same way, mentally picking them up and giving them a metaphorical hug, thinking of the person they might want to become one day when they grow up.

I hope you have found this series of podcasts helpful.

