

Ep #422: Anxiety Ahead of Time



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With Your Host

Brooke Castillo

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You are listening to *The Life Coach School Podcast* with Brooke Castillo, episode 422.

Welcome to *The Life Coach School Podcast*, where it's all about real clients, real problems and real coaching. And now your host, Master Coach Instructor, Brooke Castillo.

Hello, my friends. I am out on a walk again and I'm actually in Alabama. Birmingham, Alabama with my son and about eight other chosen family kids. We're all staying at an Airbnb together. Very fun. Very exciting.

Christian just played in a two-ball tournament yesterday. Amazing to watch. He played so well. He missed the cut by one because they double-bogeyed the last hole, which was a bummer. But still such a fun time with everyone.

And so I'm out here, I'm about to fly back today, but I'm out here on this gorgeous trail. This beautiful trail, it's so green here, so beautiful here. And I thought, hey, what a perfect place for me to record a podcast.

And one of the things I've been talking to a lot of people about and obviously dealing with myself my whole life is anxiety. And not just anxiety, but acting on anxiety or better said, not acting on anxiety.

And the way I want to present this to you, especially those of you who have a lot of anxiety is there is anxiety ahead of time and anxiety after. And I'll explain what that means, but those of you who have chronic anxiety will know exactly what I mean.

When you are creating a lot of unnecessary anxiety in your life, it doesn't really matter what you choose to be anxious about. It's almost like your brain wants to identify something and then attach to it. So anxiety ahead of time is really worrying about something that could happen, and anticipating the anxiety about it.

And you're actually feeling it because you're anticipating something could go wrong, or you'll do something you don't want to do, or the situation will

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be out of your control. Whatever it is, you start thinking about it ahead of time and you start building up your own anxiety.

And this is something that happens, literally to those of us who are anxiety producers, sort of like anxiety manufacturers. It's almost like our brain gets up and says, "Okay, time to go to work, time to create anxiety. That's our job today." And so it is helpful for it to have a reason.

And so it doesn't matter what it is, it will start attaching to something in the near or far future to create thoughts about that will create a story about that will actually produce anxiety. Now, if you know this is what your brain loves to do, you will be able to observe it without getting too attached to it, and without acting on the anxiety that it produces.

One of the things that I have found personally is that it's really challenging to just stop it from actually producing the vibration or the emotion of anxiety. And anxiety is like a cover emotion. It's almost humming in the background instead of actually feeling genuine emotion. It's like this emotion on top of regular emotion.

So if you feel that, if you're aware of that, if you pay attention to that, you can observe your brain manufacturing thoughts. Think about like a manufacturing line in a production warehouse, and imagine that your brain, there's just thought after thought after thought after thought, with the goal of producing anxiety.

So for example, if you are maybe anticipating a speech you're going to give, or you're anticipating a date you're going to go on, or dinner that you're going to attend with friends, or maybe you're a life coach and it's your first launch, or it's an important phone call. Your brain will be like, that's the perfect raw ingredient for me to produce anxiety. There's so much potential there for fear and anxiety and thoughts that freak us out.

And so it'll start going, "Well, you're not going to know what to say, and you're probably going to embarrass yourself, and what are you going to wear? Have you even thought about that? And what if you're not able to get there on time?"

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I mean, just thought after thought after thought after thought. And for those of you who maybe don't experience anxiety, it may seem kind of silly. It's just irrational and you could just stop your brain from doing it. And you can. It just takes a lot of effort.

So one of the things that I want to recommend for those of you who are dealing with this is to just get really good at watching your brain do this without engaging with action. When we get into trouble and we start taking action from that anxiety, that's when we start having negative effects from it.

If we're able to just watch it, if we're able to see what it's doing and experience anxiety, then you aren't going to have any negative effect from it. You're just going to notice it. And this is what I have gotten very good at.

I kind of tell my brain, "Oh, your opinion is noted, I see what you're saying here. I understand that you want to freak me out." And one of my friends, it's really funny, he was telling me, he's like - I was explaining to him how our brains are very primitive and how our brains are really just trying to keep us alive at the basic level.

And so our brain doesn't want us to leave the cave. And so he just calls them cave thoughts. He's like, "Oh, cave thoughts." And when you are seeing your brain having cave thoughts, you can just be like, oh, that's from the primitive brain, it's just freaking out, that's its job is to help us survive. It's not a big deal. It's just old-school thinking. Cave thought, which I think is amazing.

I was like, oh my gosh, I'm totally going to steal that. So notice your brain telling you and anticipating trouble, anticipating "danger," anticipating embarrassment or humiliation. When you watch your brain do this and you watch the feeling that it produces, I have found it to actually be fascinating at how I can get so worked up over something that will most likely never happen.

And my body will have a visceral reaction to thoughts that I'm creating, and it makes me truly understand the power of our own thinking ahead of time.

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Now, if we feel that emotion and we're not paying attention, it is likely that we will do a few different things.

One of which is buffering to not feel that anxiety. We're manufacturing it, we're producing it, we are the ones creating the thoughts that are making us feel that way, and then we are also taking action to not feel it, to escape it, to get away from it.

So if you're not aware, you just feel irritable and kind of frustrated and like crawling out of your own skin maybe. And you'll want to dampen that vibration. One of the ways many of us have dampened that vibration is by eating, overeating a lot of food to create kind of a dullness in our body so that vibration doesn't ring as loud.

The example that I've used before is like an empty crystal glass. When you ding on the side of it and it's empty, it gives a very loud vibration. If you fill it up with snacks, it's a much duller vibration, and that has been my experience. Many of my clients' experiences with overeating is that it dulls the vibration of anxiety.

So I remember thinking about this and wondering, okay, so that's actually quite genius that we do that, that in an attempt to protect ourselves, we are dulling our own vibrations because it's uncomfortable. And if we can notice that we're doing that, notice that that's our experience, then we can ask ourselves, okay, so what is it about that vibration that seems to be so intolerable?

What is it about the body experiencing anxiety that makes us want to crawl out of our skin and get agitated and get irritated? And as I was doing this, it was kind of like a meditation. As I was doing this, I realized that when you experience it on purpose, it is really not that big of a deal.

It's when it's in the background, it's when you're not paying attention to it, when it's not something that you're noticing on purpose that it almost unconsciously just keeps punching you in the face. And then when you are present and conscious and paying attention to you, it's much less of a big deal.

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You almost have the same experience of anxiety when you pay attention to it and feel it as you do when you buffer it. Another thing that you might be tempted to do is to act it out. So for example, if you are going to an event let's say, you may be tempted to cancel. You may be tempted to call a friend and have them deal with your anxiety too.

Maybe start talking about how I don't want to go to this event anyway because I don't like this person and I don't want to talk to them, and they make me feel this way, and all of a sudden you're gossiping about the event that you're planning on going to.

Or maybe you start procrastinating on that speech you're supposed to give because you're not wanting to think about it because it's freaking you out. Lots of things. I mean, what is it that you do when you're anxious ahead of time? How do you deal with that anxiety? How do you act it out?

If you are someone who is anxious in relationships, you may start telling a story about the other person and weaving a story about how they're somehow mistreating you, or they're somehow ignoring you, or they're somehow not following through on something they said they would do. And it's all made up in your own mind.

You're not even creating something that's based in reality. You're creating something because you're manufacturing anxiety. That is the goal of your brain at this moment. And so I know I've done this before, I've created entire stories about how other people were going to mistreat me or were mistreating me.

Or another thing that I do is I manufacture stories about how people are hurt or harmed or I'm never going to see them again. So for example, if I'm in a relationship with someone I'm dating and they haven't called me back or something, I'm like, "Okay great, this isn't going to work out. This person doesn't want to talk to me."

Maybe they're just in a movie, or in their car, or at work. And my brain is just producing stories. Or if it's my kids and I haven't heard from them and I called them, they haven't called me back, I'm sure they've found some

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harm, that they are injured in some way, or maybe even dead. My brain just goes, goes, goes there.

And now I kind of notice it and I'm like, "Okay girl, you're just having anxiety." And I will tell you that that one statement is a lifesaver for me. Just telling myself, "Oh no, this is just you having anxiety right now. Your brain is manufacturing anxiety. This isn't real life. This isn't actually happening. You have no evidence, no C-line evidence that your child is harmed or that this person is blatantly ignoring you. So just notice that your brain is producing stories. You're having anxiety right now."

This will immediately calm me down. Immediately. And I'll be able to just hum, this is what I call it, just hum with anxiety, and produce thoughts that are most likely untrue and be in the space of non-action, non-reaction to that anxiety.

And it can be as simple as that. It's the difference between trying to get rid of the anxiety by buffering or acting it out or reacting, versus just allowing it to be there, and just going throughout your day and noticing that you're creating the thoughts and just being with it.

You won't not have it. You still will. The anxiety will still be there. You just won't be anxious about your anxiety. You won't be upset or scared about your anxiety. And you won't escalate it. You won't make it so intolerable that you have to take some action.

So for example, if I start thinking something's wrong with my kid and I don't recognize that it's just my brain, I might start calling all of their friends and calling their teachers and calling the dorm and trying to hunt them down, and repeatedly calling their phone and trying to locate their phone through my phone system or something like that.

In a way that might interrupt them or disturb their life in a way that's completely unnecessary because I've escalated my own thinking by not paying attention and being conscious of it. Even if I have what I think is some intuitive feeling about something, like, maybe something isn't going right, I can still handle that in a very calm way.

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I can still try and find out where my kid is in a way that isn't being produced by anxiety. And so just notice how you're feeling. Do you feel like a low-grade anxiety, or are you feeling escalated anxiety? And if it feels escalated, don't take any action and just sit back and observe yourself for a minute.

Calm yourself down, tell yourself I'm having anxiety. Now let's talk about - that was anxiety ahead of time, acting on anxiety ahead of time. And there's also anxiety during. But if you think about it, it's always either right before or right after the event you're imagining. So I'm not even going to talk about that. I'm going to talk about anxiety afterwards.

And I remember this used to happen to me a lot when I was overdrinking Chardonnay. I used to wake up and just beat myself up for anything that had happened the night before. It didn't even matter. I would make up a story about how terrible it was.

And it wasn't ever really terrible. I would make up stories in my own mind that were tragic and beat myself up, and then feel like I needed to call all these people and apologize to them. And a few times I did that and they were all like, "What are you talking about? What is even happening?"

And you can relate to this if you have anxiety. I would just roll over scenarios in my mind and make them mean things that they didn't mean. So I would be like, "Oh my gosh, I totally hurt that person's feelings, or I said this thing that was totally inappropriate, or I was too loud at their house, or I was too quiet, or I didn't talk enough."

It doesn't even matter. My brain would pick something from the past and just torture me with it and produce so much anxiety around it. And I would find this so challenging to deal with that I oftentimes would just start eating first thing in the morning to deal with it, or I would have to call someone that this "story" was involved with and try and make amends to them somehow, in a way that's even worse than the story I was telling.

And so I started waking up and just saying, "Oh, this is anxiety. You're having anxiety and your brain is telling a story to compound it. That is what

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is happening right now. This is not what your brain is telling you it is. This is just your brain manufacturing anxiety.”

And the way that I actually figured this out, it was so fascinating because there was a situation where I thought something had gone terribly wrong. I called the person, they were like, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, that is not what happened, it’s totally fine, nobody was upset, relax.” And so I was like, oh, and I felt like after that I should have been completely relieved and gone on with my day.

But what I noticed was my brain just switched topics. Instead of obsessing over that incident the night before, it just started obsessing about another incident the night before. And that’s when I was kind of like, huh, wait a minute, I’m onto you.

It’s like, you’ve just proven my story wrong. This is my brain talking. You’ve just proven my story wrong about this thing, but don’t worry, I have 20 more stories that I can produce for you to continue to feel anxiety at this level. And I went uh-uh, this is not normal, this is not what I want to be doing, and this is not useful.

And so I just watched it, and I just watched it obsess. I watched it make up stories. And I saw the similarities between the first story and the second story, and how my brain was literally trying to be clever to keep me in a state of heightened anxiety, to keep me in a state of danger.

Now, this is what I’ve told myself to make my relationship with my brain so much better. My brain is literally programmed for survival. And if my brain thinks that there is danger, it wants me to be on alert for it so we can all survive together, me and my brain.

And it doesn’t understand that I now have a prefrontal cortex, that we are now not living in caves, that we are safe, and that things that are happening within the group of people that I am spending time with is not life or death anymore.

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And by understanding that, it's like I have compassion for how mean my brain is. My brain isn't trying to be mean to me because it doesn't like me or it hates me or something. My brain is simply trying to literally keep me alive in the best way its little primitive neurons know how.

And so by watching that from that perspective and just thinking, "Oh, you're having anxiety, your brain thinks you're about to die, your brain thinks you're in harm's way," it calms me down and it helps me. The other thing that it does is it increases my self-awareness. My ability to understand myself, to understand my brain by watching it do what it does.

Not only that, it helps me with my clients, with my students. So those of you who are like this, who have clients, by watching your own self, you'll be able to understand this in such a deeper way for yourself. And it can be so helpful as you're going through your life, as you're going through your job.

And even if you don't have coaching clients, even if you're just talking to your friends or being with your friends around this, it's a perspective that might be able to help you if they're experiencing anxiety.

So for example, if you're hanging out with someone and they're obsessing about something they think they did a week ago or the night before, whatever, is you can hold that space, you can be in the space of, huh, it seems to me like you're just having anxiety. It seems to me like your brain is just producing anxiety.

And I'm telling you, just that one sentence, just that one approach can be life-altering. To be able to witness it from that perspective can be so powerful. So it's not just something that you would benefit from, the self-awareness and consciousness of your own mind. It's also something you can help other people with.

And one last thing I want to offer about this because I think it matters is that one of the gifts of coaching and self-coaching is a truer understanding of the human experience. An increase in empathy for what it is like to be human and to have a human brain.

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And when you see someone acting out of fear, acting out of anxiety, and maybe you think they're acting crazy or irrational or rude, if you can step back and look at that from a place of compassion, empathy, and understanding because you've done your own self-awareness work, it will change your experience of the world.

And there will be times in your life where you will react irrationally. You will react from your brain doing what brains do, producing anxiety that is unnecessary. And maybe from that place, you'll snap at someone, or yell at someone, or say something you don't mean, or buffer in a way that impedes your goals and your life.

And instead of reacting on top of reacting, and getting mad at yourself, and beating yourself up for doing that, or reacting and beating up the other person mentally for what they're doing, maybe you can just stop and step back and be like, okay human brains, human brains freaking out because they think they're in danger. Human brains freaking out because they're primitive.

And there's not enough pause, there's not enough awareness, and there's not enough use of that prefrontal cortex to act in a mature way at this moment. So not only will you be able to manage yourself and control your emotions and yourself so much more, but you'll also have more compassion when you can't and when other people can't.

And for me, that has been a huge difference in my life. To be able to understand the brain's desire to react is innocent, it's protective, it's based on survival genuinely changed my life. And as a woman who has a hyperactive anxious brain that likes to produce high amounts of anxiety, and my work that I've done on myself and my ability to be able to manage it has really helped me help thousands of people.

And so if you are someone that has this, I'm actually happy for you. I know that sounds insane, but I'm happy for myself that I am someone - I believe that many of us who experienced trauma when we were children have a brain that's hypervigilant for danger. And we can be appreciative of that.

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Our young brains were exposed to things that were scary and you did extra vigilance. And as our brains were developing, we developed in a way that overproduced vigilance, let's say. And it's just our brain trying to take care of us and protect us. And it's now a developed brain, it developed in that way that is still trying to protect us. It's actually a beautiful thing.

And I know that some of you with hyper-anxiety, who have been diagnosed with high anxiety feel like there's something really wrong with you and feel like maybe there's a defect or an unworthiness about you because you're that way. And I just want to offer that is absolutely not the case.

Regardless of why your brain is doing this, there's nothing wrong with you. It's just what you're dealing with right now. And it can actually be something that makes you even more empathetic and compassionate and caring towards yourself and towards others.

And the last thing that I want to add about anxiety is my thoughts and my opinion on medication. I am someone who is a believer in doing whatever it takes to have the highest quality of life, and I have had many students and clients and friends who have taken medication in a way that has changed their life for the positive, that has been amazing for them, that has helped them function.

And so if this is something you are having trouble functioning with, that you're not able to get control of, you're not able to stay in that observer position or that awareness position, you're constantly reacting from your anxiety and then having anxiety based on your reaction, that is something that I have seen to be very useful and helpful to many people.

And it's definitely worth having a conversation with your healthcare provider or a psychiatrist that you've had a session with to see if that may be something to help you temporarily so you can manage your anxiety, or maybe even always something that you will take that will help you.

And I know there's lots of controversial opinions about this and I'm not saying my opinion is the right one. I'm just saying from my 20 years of

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experience of dealing with people's emotional health, it has been truly a game-changing solution for some people that has helped them.

And for many other people, they haven't wanted or needed it, and they've been able to get a hold of it in other ways. So please don't let anyone tell you what is right for you. I believe in your wisdom and your ability to make those decisions for yourself and to see if it's useful or not.

What I absolutely know for sure is that anxiety should not be driving your life. Anxiety should not be determining your actions or your inaction. It's something that we can notice and manage at its more mild forms, or deal with at a different level if we're non-functioning about it.

Alright my friends, have a beautiful week. Keep an eye on that anxiety. Keep an eye on that storytelling. I'll talk to you soon. Bye.

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