



EPISODE NO. 348

My Romance With Anxiety

Hey, do you have anxiety? If so, you are not alone. I've been having a romance with mine for years and that's what we're talking about in today's episode. So let's dive in.

Welcome to the School of Self Image where personal development meets style. Here's your hostess, Master Life Coach, Tonya Leigh.

Hello, my beautiful friends. How are you doing? I am sitting in a bed in Lake Tahoe listening to the waves lightly crashing on the shore after a morning of pickleball. I recently wrote a list and I highly recommend that you do this, but it was a list of all of the things that bring me joy because I do think many times we can get in the quest for more that we just don't stop and appreciate what we already have that we love and enjoy. And the things on my list were so simple. It was literally things like I'm doing right now.

I'm with my bestie Brooke for her birthday and our families are together. And so just being with the people that you love, playing games, laughing, enjoying good food, good books, good conversation, really is the simple things. And I find that the more I just focus on those little things that bring me joy, life just feels so much more elegant and just full of joie de vivre. And even still, I have anxiety. So if you are experiencing the anxiety, my friend, know that you are not alone. And that's what I want to talk about in

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this episode. But before I do, I have something very exciting that I want to share with you.

So back in 2020, when the world was first hearing about the pandemic and things were shutting down, I created probably some of the best work I've ever created. It was called a week of calm. And we had 25,000 people go through this week where I shared specific strategies to create more calm and ease in your life. And to this day, I get emails from people saying what an impact that this week had on them and everything that they learned and how they keep applying it to their lives to create extraordinary results. And I was meeting with my team recently and I was sharing with them how I've been feeling a little bit unsettled and how I'm craving more calm in my life. And I told them, I'm like, I'm going to go through week of calm again myself. And then I was like, why not go through it together as a community? Because I have to constantly revisit my own work. I have to constantly practice everything that I teach to continue to not only evolve my self image, but sometimes it's just to find a little bit of calm in the chaos.

I don't know about you, but it just seems like the world is expanding at exponential rates. Everything from the technology that we're being exposed to, to the amount of information that we're exposed to, to the options that we have, to the media that we have. And with all of that, it's almost like our nervous systems don't know how to handle it. And if we don't have specific strategies and techniques to calm down our nervous system, we are going to not only create health issues for ourselves, but it's going to be very difficult to create what we want in our lives. And that's what I'm here to help people do. I want to help you create what you want. And if you are in a constant state of stress and worry and unease, it is going to be very difficult to do so. Trust me, I know. In fact, I'm going to talk about my romance with anxiety during this episode. So if you want to learn powerful tools and techniques to find your inner calm, no matter what's going on outside of you.

If you want to worry less and create more, if you want to stop spending your time fearing the worst case scenario and feeling paralyzed by your fear, then you want to join us for the week of calm. We're calling this a virtual mini retreat and you do not want to miss it. I promise you it will be worth it. And here's the best news. It is absolutely free. We are not charging anything for this week because quite frankly, I want to get this work out to as many people as possible. I want to help you and whoever is craving that sense of serenity, that feeling of being grounded, that feeling of calm. I want to show you how to create that for yourself. All you have to do is go to schoolofselfimage.com forward slash calm and read all about it and sign up to join us.

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And I'd appreciate it if you would invite your family and your friends and you can do it together. I cannot wait to see you at the week of calm.

Now let's talk about my romance with anxiety. It hasn't always been a romance by the way. In fact, for many years I feared it. I hated it. And yet it was always there. And I understand why we all have our traumas from childhood. I don't think anyone escapes life unscathed. I think we all experience some level of maybe family dysfunction. Maybe there's dysfunction in your immediate surroundings. But at some point during our lives, we experience trauma. And for many of us, it's during childhood. And so just to give you all a little backstory about me, because I know some of you may have just discovered this podcast and you don't know a lot about me, but I grew up in the deep, deep south in the Bible belt and I grew up in a Pentecostal holiness church. And every Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night, and then every night of the week during a revival, the message was that Jesus was coming back and there was going to be a rapture and everybody that had not repented of their sins were going to go to hell. You're going to be left behind. And so I remember so vividly as a child, walking around in our little trailer that we lived in and looking for my parents and I would call their names, mom.

I didn't call them mom. It was mama and daddy. Diddy actually, because I had a southern accent. Diddy and mama. And I would just be screaming their names. And I would just be screaming their names. And I would names and they wouldn't answer. And my brother wouldn't answer. And I remember having like panic attacks. I feel it viscerally in my body right now as I'm talking about it. And you know, I was probably seven or eight years old and all I could think was, Oh my goodness, I've been left behind. I didn't make it. I didn't make the cut. And I would be full of terror and I would run and I run outside and I call their names and inevitably one of them would, you know, shout from the garden that they were there and I could just fill my nervous system. Okay, I'm okay. I made it another day. But this was always in the back of my mind that this could happen in any second.

I remember even what was that 1999 our preacher was like professing or predicting. That's the word I'm looking for. He was predicting that the rapture was going to take place on the evening of December 31st, 1999 right before 2k rolled in. And I remember just bracing myself and I was an adult then, but I still had that underlying fear of like, maybe this could happen. I'm a little skeptical, but maybe it can. And so I share this with you because I want you to understand that I understand anxiety. I've had it ever since I was a little, little child. And the way I like to think about anxiety is it's like this general like nervousness and unease and worry about something, usually the future.

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And for a lot of us, it's something that we felt a lot as a child. And so we practiced it a lot unknowingly and probably rightfully so because our brain was trying to protect us from some unknown risk that could happen. And so we know this feeling really well and it's just become a part of how we operate. And yet for so many years, I fought this emotion and I made it mean that something was wrong and I needed to fix it and I needed to resist it and I needed to deny it and ignore it. And it didn't go away. If anything, it got worse.

All that fighting and resisting anxiety just made it worse. And one day I realized that I needed to romance it. I needed to surrender to it. I needed to fall into the mystery of it. To romance means to court or to woo. And if you think of romance in terms of literature, it involves usually a mysterious or adventurous or spiritual story. And that definitely feels like my relationship with anxiety. It's very mysterious. It's definitely been an adventure, but it's been a spiritual journey more than anything else. It's been a spiritual journey more than anything else. You see, anxiety is just an emotion that thinks it is serving you and protecting you. And for many of us, it has. It kept us on the lookout. It kept us safe. As long as we're looking around for what could go wrong and then we're preparing for it, then we're protecting ourselves.

But the downside is running your life off of anxiety fuel is going to wear down your system. It is going to make you a basket case. It is going to make life less enjoyable. And yet here it is, friends, we still have anxiety. And what I can tell you is even to this day with all of the tools that I have and how I practice them religiously, I still have anxiety. And guess what? Nothing has gone wrong. I'm going to repeat that. Nothing's gone wrong. And I will tell you that is the number one thought that helps me to make peace with my anxiety and therefore lessened its effect on me. Because for those of you who have a lot of anxiety, if you're like I was, you probably see it as a problem, right? And seeing it as a problem makes you want to hurry up and fix it. And you may end up having a lot of compound thoughts on top of the already anxious thoughts.

So let's say, for example, you're feeling anxious one day and you look into that beautiful brain of yours and it's telling you things like you're not going to be able to pay your bills. You're not going to be able to keep this lifestyle up. You're going to lose your job. It's like projecting the worst case scenario, right? Into the future, whatever it is. And so you start to feel anxiety. And then you're feeling this feeling of anxiety. And then you're telling yourself, oh, I shouldn't feel this. This isn't good. I need to fix this. This means something's gone wrong. And if you're in the self-help world and the law of attraction world, then you start telling yourself things like I'm going to track back things into my life. So I can't think a negative thought. I can't feel a negative feeling

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because I'm going to vibrate that back to me. And so then we start being in a hurry to change our emotional state, which only causes it to stick around longer. And when I finally understood this, when I finally started making anxiety just a normal thing, nothing to resist, nothing to fight, and not seeing it as a problem, I promise you all it lessened its grip on me. And even to this day, I can wake up on a normal, beautiful day.

Lord knows I could be in a lavender field in Provence where I shouldn't have a worry in the world and I might have some anxiety. But the difference is I don't freak out about it. I almost laugh at it that my brain is still so scared in the midst of the most beautiful of situations. And I also extend myself so much love and grace because understandably so. I literally thought that everybody that I love was going to be wiped away from me as a child at any moment, every day of the week. I was always in fear of being left behind. So it makes sense why I'm having anxiety, even as an adult. It was a very ingrained emotion in me. And it makes sense why you have anxiety.

A lot of times we think, oh, if you've got a good job and a home and you've got healthy kids and you've got a car and you have food, you shouldn't have anxiety. So then we start feeling guilty that we have anxiety because we tell ourselves we shouldn't. And so that just makes the anxiety even worse. If you're having anxiety, there's a reason why. So don't judge it. Don't be mean to yourself. Give yourself so much love and compassion and grace. It's one of my favorite words, my friends, grace. Give yourself some grace. So I want to share some of the things that I personally do to romance my own anxiety and feel free to try them, see how they work for you. But they've been very effective for me and they're probably not uncommon to you as well. You probably know that these things help, but I just want to share with you how I've implemented them into my life.

So the first thing is let it be, let it be there. Don't try to get rid of it. Don't try to immediately change it. Instead, I want you to be fascinated with it. You think about a romance, you are interested, you're curious about this mysterious emotion that you just seem to have often. And the moment you invite in fascination and curiosity, you can get to understand yourself on such an intimate level. And in order to do that, you have to let it just be. And then the next thing is once you understand that I'm having some anxiety right now, just take some deep breaths.

Because what happens is when you're having a lot of anxiety and you're resisting it, and if you check in with yourself, you'll probably notice that you are not breathing or you're breathing, but probably very shallow. And that can increase stress on the body. It can decrease oxygen in the cells, increases stress in the body. And all the while, your

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sympathetic nervous system is overloaded. And it's probably pumping out cortisol because it thinks we are in fight or flight. We need to prepare ourselves. Something dangerous is about to happen because the brain only knows two things, the words you speak and the images you hold. And so if you're sitting there and you're thinking anxious thoughts and you're holding anxious images, your body is freaking out. And so you need to signal to your body and your brain that it's okay right now. And the best way to do that is to take nice deep breaths.

When I'm having anxiety, this is literally what I do. I don't try to change anxiety. I'm just like, deep breath in, and exhale, deep breath out. And I will do a series of like 10 breaths. And then I tell myself in this moment, all is okay. And I look around and I remind myself I'm safe in this moment. In this moment, all is okay. And that just allows my body to take a pause and to notice that I'm okay right now. There's no immediate danger in this moment. And with that, my body begins to relax a little bit. And I begin to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, which is the part of the nervous system that's responsible for rest and relaxation and rejuvenation. And we want to turn that system on more often than our sympathetic.

We want to save our sympathetic nervous systems for when something really is going wrong, which is usually not that often, believe it or not. But our brain tries to convince us it's all the time. And so that's what I love to do. Let it be what it is. Take some nice deep breaths and remind myself in this moment, all is okay. I am safe. And then I like to get moving. Exercise, movement, whatever you want to call it is so good for those of us who struggle with anxiety. Exercise releases endorphins, which boost your mood. And it also reduces stress related hormones. But I think there's something else to this. I was listening to this Buddhist monk the other day, and he was talking about how our ancestors didn't really experience depression because they were always on the move. They were always having to produce and to work. And I don't know that that's true. And on some level, maybe they did have anxiety because they were, you know, really being threatened every single day, especially if you think of our ancestors from back in the cave days.

But when I think of my grandmother, because she's like my reference point, she died when she was 95. And her whole life was pretty hard. She was a sharecropper. She had 10 kids. And she had to focus on survival. I remember having conversations with her about her life and her describing what it was like having 10 kids and working and providing for all of those kids because her husband was disabled. So it was all on her. And she talked about how she would wake up at 5am. And all the kids too, they'd have to get up, they have to go to work, have to go out in the fields, they'd work, then the

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kids would go to school. She would continue to work and then she would come home and cook for the whole family. And she would be so exhausted that she'd just go to bed. And I remember asking her if she ever had depression. And she told me she didn't have time. She was like, I didn't have time to be depressed. Because after I had my daughter, I struggled with postpartum. And I remember having that conversation with her. We called her ma. I was like, ma, did you ever have depression? She was like, girl, I didn't have time for depression. And I'm not downplaying depression, you all. It is a real legit thing.

But my point is, I wonder sometimes if our lack of movement, all of the time that we have to just sit around and ponder and be in our heads so much has contributed to our anxiety. And then on top of that, we are consuming things all day, every day. And unless we put a filter up, we are probably consuming things that create a lot of anxiety because that's the way a lot of the media is built. It's built to capture our attention. And guess what captures attention? Any threat. The brain is always looking for threats that we need to safeguard ourselves from. And so these headlines are like clickbait to capture our brain's attention to say, look out, this could happen to you. And so we're consuming a lot of information that's also contributing to our anxiety. And so I've just noticed the other benefit of exercising is any moment I'm playing pickleball or I'm in a yoga class or I'm out for a walk, I'm not sitting around consuming junk.

I also think that there's something to be said that the brain and the body relaxes when it knows it's being cared for. I'm going to repeat that. This is so good. The brain and the body relaxes when it knows it's being cared for. When you are not taking care of yourself, when you're not eating well, when you're not moving, when you're not tending to your bodily needs, the brain knows this. And because the brain is wired to detect danger, it sees that as a danger. And so I was going to say another way that I manage my anxiety is through self-care. I feel less anxious when I'm eating certain foods. Sugar can make me feel very anxious. Drinking too much also can make me feel very anxious. On the other hand, eating what I call sexy foods, foods that are alive and vibrant and colorful and clean and natural.

When I'm consuming those foods, I have noticed that I am less anxious. Now I'm sure that there are many reasons why. I'm sure that my hormones are different. I'm sure these foods affect me differently biochemically, but there's also something to be said, as I said earlier, about my mindset of knowing I am taking care of me so I can relax. The other thing that I love to do is just to comfort myself. We are so hard on ourselves, you all, and that just makes our anxiety worse. It's like we're already scared to death. We're already worried and full of unease. And then we're going to be really mean to ourselves

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and expect that to help, expect that to be the answer. All I can think about, I like to visualize me as a little girl sitting in the corner of a room scared because I can't find my parents. I'm so scared. I'm so afraid. And then someone walks in and just starts screaming at me how worthless I am. That's what we do to ourselves. It has to stop. When you're having anxiety, I want you to be your own advocate. I want you to cheer yourself on. I want you to wrap your arms around yourself. I want you to comfort yourself. And that's going to be different for all of us.

I want you to seek healthy comforts because the downside to this is sometimes we seek out escapes versus comforts. And in the moment it feels comfortable because it allows you to escape your emotion, but it's not solving the problem. It's making it worse. When I talk about comforts, I'm talking about comforting yourself while you have the emotion, not doing something to try to numb yourself or to escape the emotion. There's a very big difference. And so there are things that we can do physically. For example, one of the things that I do that really helps my anxiety levels are baths, warm, warm baths. And so sometimes when I'm feeling really anxious, I'll run a bath and I'll just sit in there. And sometimes I work in the bathtub because I have things that I'm doing. And I've been known to take five baths a day because that was one of those days where I was having that much anxiety and being in the bath and being surrounded by that warmth was really helpful. I didn't try to get rid of the emotion. I just comfort myself while I had it and worked through it. For some people, it's the fabrics that they put on them.

For some, it's going to be the words that you used to yourself and for yourself. But what brings you comfort when you are having anxiety? And maybe you don't know the answer to that yet and you're going to need to experiment. Try different things to see what brings you a sense of feeling like you're not alone and feeling okay with the anxiety. And then lastly, the thing that I do to romance my anxiety is I am curious about why it's there. Now, what's really interesting is I used to do a lot of thought work around my anxiety and it was very enlightening because at one point I didn't even realize it was being caused by thoughts. I just thought I was just an anxious person. Now I understand it's my thoughts. And now I'm at a point in my journey where I don't even always necessarily need to go in and find a thought and change it. I'm just like, all right, I'm going to be anxious today and that's okay. And I just get to work. And the moment I just embrace my anxiety and not try to change it, it starts to dissipate. It doesn't have that big of a grip on me. And there are some thoughts that I've had for a long, long time and I'm very well aware of them.

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I'm very mindful of what they are. I understand why I have them, where they came from. And I have done a level of work on them. And even with all of the work that I've done on them, some of them are still there. One, people may leave me. That is a very real thought for me. And the truth is they may. And eventually they will. I hate to even think about it, but eventually they're going to leave or I'm going to leave. That is the facts of life. And so I can spend all my time working on that thought, or I can just understand, yeah, babe, it makes sense why you have that thought. That was a big fear you had growing up. And it is inevitable. And it makes you sad and it makes you afraid. And that's so normal. And I'm going to love you through it because listen, this is life. This is not a cakewalk. It's scary and it's hard. And the more I comfort myself and I'm like, okay, but I won't leave me. I'm going to stay with me. I'm going to stay with me even when I'm having anxiety. I can notice the anxiety start to dissipate.

Now there are other thoughts that I have worked on that used to cause me so much anxiety. One of them being I'm overwhelmed or I'm running out of time. I don't ever have those thoughts anymore. And it's because I did a lot of thought work and I unraveled them and, and I just realized they're such useless thoughts. And so I've trained my brain not to go there, but a thought like people will leave me. That's just like a fear that I have. And I just know for me, trying to change that thought has not worked. And so I've just made peace with it. I'm like, yeah, I have this thought. It's one of my biggest fears and I'm just going to love myself through it. And it's so crazy. You all by doing that, I don't have the thought as often. It's the wildest thing. And that just brings me to my whole romance with anxiety.

When I started romancing my anxiety, she didn't come around as often. It was like, she was just there to be understood and to be heard and to be offered grace. And today it's not even a romance anymore. It's just like an old friendship that her and I have. And every once in a while she comes for a visit and we sit down and we have a chat and I assure myself that it's okay. And that she's harmless because if you think about it, anxiety is just a feeling in your body. That's all it is being created by thoughts in your head. And it's a normal part of being a human being. And I think it's even more intense in this day and age. And so if you're someone who has anxiety, listen to me, nothing's gone wrong. And I want you to offer yourself so much grace and comfort, love yourself through it and get curious about it. And as this relates to self image, because your self image is how you see yourself.

What often happens when we've had a lot of anxiety is we begin to identify as an anxious person. We begin to take on that identity. And that's a lot of the work that I've done around anxiety. I refuse to call myself an anxious person, but I am a woman who

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sometimes experiences anxiety. And I don't make that mean that anything has gone wrong. I just make it mean that this is a normal part of life. And do you know what else I do? And this is for all of you who love law of attraction because I do too. What I tell myself, and this is a belief that I wholeheartedly believe in because I have so much evidence for it now, but I can do amazing things with anxiety. And the moment I think that thought, I get excited. It's like, I don't even have to change the anxiety. I'm like, yep, me and anxiety, we're going to come along and we're going to do some amazing things. And so don't be afraid of it. Romance it, court it, understand it, have a relationship with it, because everything, including anxiety, is just here to teach you something about yourself. Have a beautiful week, my beautiful friends, and I cannot wait to see you in next week's episode. Cheers.

Hey, before you go, I want to invite you to join us for a truly transformative experience called the week of calm in a world filled with challenges from a turbulent economy to personal struggles. It's so easy to be overwhelmed and lose sight of our own wellbeing. Stress takes its toll on our bodies and our minds, leaving us drained and disconnected, but doesn't have to be this way. My friend during the week of calm, you will learn powerful lessons and insights that will equip you to navigate any storm with grace and resilience. You'll understand how your mind works and discover effective strategies to combat worry and panic. This mini retreat is not a luxury reserved for a select few. It's accessible to everyone and can truly be life-changing by choosing calm as a daily decision. You will unlock a superpower that empowers you to build an extraordinary life that you love. And here's the best part. It is absolutely free. You can join us by visiting schoolofselfimage.com forward slash calm until next time stay calm and take care.