



EPISODE 833

The Truth About Anxiety

**With Guests: Dr. Wendy Suzuki, Dr. Daniel Amen,
Dr. Uma Naidoo, Dr. Ellen Vora and Dr. Susan
David**

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SHAWN STEVENSON: The results of the American Psychiatric Association's annual mental health data is in. Their new data is affirming in a startling way that American adults are feeling increasingly anxious. In 2024, 43% of adults said that they feel more anxious than they did the previous year. Up from 37 percent in 2023 and up from 32 percent in 2022. Rates of anxiety, specifically severe anxiety, are continuing to rise. According to the NIH, nearly 20 percent of American adults experience a severe anxiety disorder in the past year. Again, rates of anxiety of all types are continuing to rise and the question is why? Today I put together an invaluable resource for you with insights from the world leading experts in anxiety and mental health.

They're going to help you and any of your loved ones who need this information to understand what we're actually dealing with. What anxiety really is and science backed ways to relieve and reverse the symptoms of anxiety so that you will have these tools for a lifetime. Up first, you're going to hear from world renowned neuroscientist and best selling author, Dr. Wendy Suzuki. Dr. Suzuki has been doing incredible work out of her lab at NYU. And in this segment, she's going to share with you what anxiety actually is and the surprising roles it plays in our bodies. Check out this first segment from Dr. Wendy Suzuki.

DR. WENDY SUZUKI: Anxiety is simply defined as that worry for an imminent possible event or worry about uncertainty. Before the pandemic, 90 percent of the population raised their hands when asked, do you feel anxiety during the day that has clearly gone up. And so this is something that we're not suffering all alone. Look around the room. 90 percent plus more people in this room are feeling these same feelings as you are. So that's the important place to start. So where does it stem in the brain?

So it stems from our stress response system. This is an evolutionarily ancient system that was developed, and this is a key point in the book, the stress and anxiety response system was evolved to protect us. It is a protective mechanism, and I like to say that over and over again because all of us, including me, it's like, oh, stress, anxiety, just get it out, just make it leave. But, this is one of the key messages in Good Anxiety. At its core, it is protective. How can we reshape and re-funnel the activation energy in stress and anxiety, to help it protect us more, get back to that core feature. And so how do we do that? Everybody's heard of the fight or flight response. It is undergirded by a part of the nervous system called the sympathetic nervous system.

That's automatic. If there is a danger or a possible danger, what happens? Your heart rate goes up, your respiration goes up. All your blood leaves from your digestive and reproductive systems goes to your muscles to allow you to either fight or run away. And that happens whether there's a line coming at you or whether there's a big worry of global warming, pandemic, all these things.

Even the threat of that possibility, that anxiety, can activate the same system. So that's where we're getting tripped up in our modern society. Way back 2.5 million years ago our ancestors had the same system but they weren't bombarded with stress and anxiety every single day. There's an occasional lion that might come our way and we can run and get rid of it and then go back to normal. Today, 24 hour news cycles. Instagram feeds all the time reminding us of the beautiful clothes and the beautiful life we don't have and all of the dangers in our world, which are real.

And so it's activating our stress system to an overload. And that. is not healthy. That is not normal. And again, it's protective. We're getting ready to move, to act on it. And that's the other problem. A lot of these issues are, there isn't the lion to run away from. And what I've given tools for is to help you churn that worry into some kind of action to dissipate, to use that energy in a positive way. Why am I doing that? Because that is what the system was evolved to do.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Up next in understanding the truth about anxiety, you're going to hear from world renowned psychiatrist and bestselling author, Dr. Daniel Amen. And he's the world leading expert on brain imaging, specifically SPECT imaging. Looking at functionality and blood flow in the brain so that we're actually looking at the organ that's most associated with anxiety. And in this segment, he's going to be sharing the primary concerns with being prescribed anti anxiety medication that most people don't know about. Plus the impact that sleep deprivation has on our brains and much more. Check out this segment from the amazing Dr. Daniel Amen.

DR. DANIEL AMEN: So I'm a well trained psychiatrist. I'm board certified in general psychiatry, child and adolescent psychiatry, and I'm not opposed to medication. I'm completely opposed to how it's prescribed in the United States now. 85 percent of psychiatric medications are prescribed by non psychiatric physicians and seven minute office visits. By family practice, doctors, pediatricians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, internists, gynecologists. And once you start these medications, they're insidious and that they change your chemistry to need them in order for you to feel normal.

If you have anxiety disorder, what are the 10 things you should do? Before you start taking benzo, which will be very hard for you to stop. If you have depression or an addiction or you have insomnia, what are the things to do before you go on medication? So for example, with anxiety disorders, people don't know that things like Klonopin and Xanax, they actually increase the risk of dementia later in life. Not only that, they're addictive that, you know, once you start them, you're going to have trouble stopping them and you're going to have to take more and more to get the same result.

So, well, how about we first have to check your thyroid because for your hyperthyroid, you're going to be anxious. We need to check your blood sugar because if you have low blood sugar, hypoglycemia, you're more likely to have panic attacks. I'm going to teach you to breathe diaphragmatically. I'm going to teach you to meditate. I'm going to teach you to exercise. I'm going to give you GABA, magnesium, Theanine, all never hurt you. Scientific evidence, they may help you.

And I go, so what has a level of scientific evidence because so often the physician knee jerk reactions? There's no science behind supplements. And of course, my response is, do you read because there's all sorts of science you just haven't bothered to look at it. And so there are 286 references. So what has a level of scientific evidence for depression? Okay. Saffron, the world's most expensive spice, has antidepressant qualities. There's 20 studies, randomized, double blind, placebo controlled trials, saffron, Sammy, Omega three fatty acids, St. John's wort. What has a level of scientific evidence for anxiety? Magnesium. I mean, how simple is that? Plus 80 percent of us are low deficient in magnesium.

So, teenagers who sleep on average, just one hour less than their peers have a higher incidence of depression and suicide. When you sleep, your brain cleans and washes itself. And there's this great study, soldiers who got seven hours of sleep at night were 98 percent accurate on the range. Those same soldiers who got to six hours of sleep at night were 50 percent accurate on the range. Think about that difference, five hours, 38 percent accurate. Four hours, they were dangerous, only 15 percent accurate.

Being sleep deprived kills more people than alcohol related accidents. We need to make sleep a priority. And in 1900, on average, Americans got nine hours of sleep at night. Now in 2020, on average, they get about six hours and 40 minutes of sleep. But you can't go through that kind of change in such a short evolutionary period without the expectation, they're serious problems being created.

SHAWN STEVENSON: And evolution takes time.

DR. DANIEL AMEN: It takes time.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Wow.

DR. DANIEL AMEN: And we have changed so much in the last 120 years with technology and lights where we're being bombarded with lights. And if you just think about it. You know, for all of these risk factors and basically for the brain, it's three strategies. Love it. So love your brain, love your blood flow, love your sleep, love your blood sugar, avoid things that hurt it, do things that help it. And so if we think of, well, what's hurting our sleep, it's our gadgets. It's negative news. Do not watch that before bed. That's not going to give you good dreams.

It's actually going to give you nightmares. So it's the gadgets. It's the electromagnetic fields. It's people thinking of alcohol as a health food. Well, it's not a health food. It messes up your microbiome and it decreases the quality of sleep that you have. Noise, caffeine. And if I was an evil ruler, I would create a culture where you have to have caffeine in the morning to wake up and alcohol at night to go to sleep.

And that's the culture we have that's just damaging our sleep, which then damages our brain. Plus, as your weight goes up, you're more likely to have sleep apnea. And we saw sleep apnea actually triples the risk of Alzheimer's disease, and we can actually see it on scans. Your parietal lobes, top back part of your brain, are decreased in our patients who have sleep apnea. So I can often go, Oh, I bet you have sleep apnea. You need to get a sleep study and you need to take care of that. So why is blood important? It brings nutrients, but equally important, it takes away toxins. So if you don't have healthy blood flow to your brain or any organ, really, it prematurely ages that organ because it can't get rid of the toxins.

And so, how do you know if you have low blood flow to your brain if you don't get a scan, if you have hypertension, high blood pressure. And 60 percent of Americans are either hypertensive or prehypertension. If you have any form of heart disease. If you're sedentary, if you have erectile dysfunction and it's like 40 percent of 40 year old men have erectile dysfunction. 70 percent of 70 year old men have erectile dysfunction, which means 40 percent of 40 year old men have brain dysfunction and 70 percent of 70 year old men have brain dysfunction because if you have blood flow problems anywhere, it likely means they're everywhere. And in the book, you know, I have these checklists. Well, how do you know if you have blood flow issues and then, well, what do you do? You exercise, walk like you're late 45 minutes, four or five times a week, lift weights twice a week. I mean, keep it simple. And then I talk about racket sports because people play racket sports, live longer than everybody else.

People play football and soccer, live less long than anybody else, but because of the head trauma, but racket sports because they activate the cerebellum. So the cerebellum is this cool. Cerebellum is Latin for little brains, about 10 percent of the brain's volume in the back bottom part of the brain, but it has 50 percent of the brain's neurons and it's like the CPU, the central processing unit of the brain. And when it's not right, the rest of your brain doesn't work right. So coordination exercises, my favorite is table tennis. Can really help and then there are foods, foods like beets, increased blood flow, cayenne pepper, increased blood flow, oregano, rosemary, cinnamon. All have been shown to increase blood flow. Supplements like ginkgo and been posted can increase blood flow. So none of this is hard, know which of the risk factors you have and then just choose to do one thing for them because you love yourself. Right. I mean, getting well is never about, I should do this. I shouldn't do that. It's a sign of how much you love yourself.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Got a quick break coming up. We'll be right back.

As you know, mental health challenges have skyrocketed in recent decades. Without addressing the root causes shown in mountains of studies, including social isolation, sleep abnormalities, nutrient deficiencies, sedentary behavior, and many other factors will continue to see rates rise, and our communities struggling for solutions. It's so important for people to understand that no two cases of depression are alike. There are unique lifestyle and mental health work that each of us need in different situations. And right now in the United States, depression is the leading cause of disability is the number one reason for people missing work and school.

And so we've got to do something about this. Of course, medications can be helpful in some contexts, but most people are not educated about the science backed natural supplement that's shown to be just as effective as many medications. An analysis published in the Journal of Affective Disorders found that the renowned spice saffron was just as effective as conventional antidepressant drugs like Prozac, Tofranil, and Celexa. Additionally, the researchers noted that fewer people experienced side effects from saffron than from those other treatments. This should go without saying people should know about this. Something that's been utilized for centuries, far safer, and just as effective as conventional antidepressant drugs.

Now, are we talking about curing this condition? Absolutely not. We're talking about having another option to turn to something that can be supportive in an overall plan to support our mental health. There is no supplement. There is no drug that's going to fix everything. But again, people need to know about this. And there are great companies that are providing easy to use saffron supplements, like the happy drops from Organifi.

This includes a therapeutic amount of saffron, gacha cola, passion flower, and ginger. They are amazing. You really do notice a difference. And I highly encourage you to look at the reviews for this product.

I'm just going to share a couple with you because they really do stand out. Nicholas said, *"Happily surprised. He said that I was extremely skeptical of this product, despite all the good reviews. However, after using it daily for the past two weeks, I can definitely say they work. I definitely have an easier time staying positive and rolling with the punches of daily life with the help of Happy Drops"*.

Hillary said, *"Happy drops will make you happy you ordered. I found out about these little drops of bliss on Instagram. I was skeptical as every product makes claims that aren't always backed. Upon trying these happy drops, I've noticed a mood improvement, energy that lasts throughout the day and improved sleep at night. I'm thrilled"*.

Definitely check out Organifi's science backed gummies. Again, they're called Happy Drops. Head over to Organifi.com/model, and you're going to get hooked up with 20 percent off. Go to [O R G A N I F I.com/model](https://ORGANIFI.com/model). Again, you're going to get 20 percent off store wide. Pop over there and check them out. And now back to the show.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Up next in this truth about anxiety masterclass, we've got. Dr. Uma Naidoo. Now, Dr. Naidoo is a Harvard trained psychiatrist and bestselling author, but she's also specifically an expert in nutrition related to mental health. In this segment, she's going to be sharing why a certain category of foods is literally fueling anxiety in our society today. Plus what foods and nutrients are proven to reduce symptoms of anxiety. Check out this segment from the amazing Dr. Uma Naidoo.

DR. UMA NAIDOO: I think it goes back to the fact that with diagnostic criteria, we have the DSM 5TR. It's not like if you come in, Shawn, and you have a cough, I can get a sputum test. I can order, different, you know, you can order an x-ray and order several things and actually treat what I know might be infecting you. It's not that way in mental health. We can't just do a brain biopsy. We have these diagnostic criteria and people very often have a mixed set of symptoms. Then when we get to the medications, we have had a very heavy sort of reliance on the serotonin hypothesis. And a study published in the British Medical Journal, which I referenced in my book last year.

And I'm careful about how I frame this because I'm not trying to say if you're taking a selective, an SSRI, stop your medication. I'm not saying that at all. Talk to your doctor, examine the data for yourself, have a conversation with the provider. But, essentially this, this research group in the UK, essentially said, you know, there's not much basis for this. And the

way I see this is it has spun off into the pharmaceutical industry in a very big way. The reliance that we have on SSRIs. And I feel like we just need to have a longer, bigger conversation about this so people have more solutions. And that's where I do feel food is one of those lifestyle pillars that could make a difference that we often overlook.

SHAWN STEVENSON: You pointed out in your book, and this was such a strong statement, that the American diet is actually fueling higher rates of anxiety.

DR. UMA NAIDOO: It is.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Can you talk a little bit about why that is?

DR. UMA NAIDOO: It is. You know, unfortunately, for the most part in America, we are led by things like the standard American diet, which is, you know, which you know, SAD, called SAD for a reason. The acronym, and it's also called the Western Diet. And that diet is really very high in processed, ultra processed junk foods and fast foods. We know that some fast food french fries have added sugar in them to make them hyper palatable. So when people go to that drive thru, they upsize. When they get that larger size of fries, they eat, they eat it.

And then the next time it's lunch, they feel for it again because it's starting to tap into our craving cycle. But these foods are engineered a certain way. We also have a very heavy reliance on just sugar in many of our foods, including things like bread. And if you've not eaten a certain product for a while and you go back and taste it, maybe at a dinner or at an event, you will actually realize there's so much sugar in some basic foods that we eat, including savory foods.

So the added and refined sugars are a problem, the high fructose corn syrup, the sodas, the sports beverages that are loaded up with sugar and things like that. We also know that through the foods we eat and sometimes the fact that we eat those processed foods, there's a lot of processed vegetable and seed oils that can actually drive inflammation. So that's another thing that's in our food as well, and there's artificial sweeteners. There's some newer sweeteners where there's some really exciting and newer data, but for the most part, the sweeteners that are on the foods that are labeled diet or low sugar or, no sugar, have, are problematic, especially in the diet sodas.

And then it's the sort of unhealthy fats. Things you know, the shelf stable baked goods that you can buy this week and you can, you can serve it next week and they're shelf stable because they're kind of pumped up with sort of preservatives and colorants and dyes and all that stuff, but also the wrong types of fats, right? The trans fats and the hydrogenated oils,

which are really pro inflammatory for our bodies. Because we tend to eat this kind of diet without a reliance on fiber and vegetables and a plant, I would say a plant rich diet, and balancing that nutritional psychiatry plate with the right proteins, fats, and even complex carbs. We've kind of gotten our meals into disarray. And, and that is, that is definitely driving anxiety, and it worsened during the pandemic.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Let's break down a little bit why sugar is so troubling when it comes to anxiety. Why is sugar something that can exacerbate symptoms of anxiety?

DR. UMA NAIDOO: I think it's a little bit of a trick, and this is what I mean. There are times that people will say, but you know, when I'm really anxious, I just, I want that candy bar. I need that soda or that, you know, very fancy coffee with tons of ingredients. I just need that because it's going to make me feel better. It's going to calm me down. And the funny thing is that in the short term, you actually may feel a little bit better. That kind of is tricking our brain because that initial rush of sugar may make you feel better. It's the long term effect that is actually problematic. And in fact, has been shown to damage neurons over time. So if our subs, if we're subsisting on that sugar laden diet, we are damaging our brain over time.

The other thing that sugar does is that it drives inflammation in the gut and in the brain. So we're feeding those not so great, not so cool microbes down in our gut microbiome. And when they thrive, they upset the environment of the gut. They lead to dysbiosis and inflammation in the gut. Over time, their toxic breakdown products damage the cell lining of the gut, and you get leakage into the circulatory system. You eventually, you know, develop inflammation in the gut, leaky gut, or intestinal permeability over time. So, sugar is problematic on multiple levels and it is hard to extract from our diet. So I just try to guide people toward extra, not extra, not natural chocolate, towards pieces of fruit, towards berries, rather than a reliance on just, you know, candy, which is what we used to, candy and candy and cakes and that kind of stuff.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Mental health is really brain health. You know, it's a big, big part of this. And you just shared if we could just get this as a society like sugar is not without a cost. You know this is something that was not a part of our diet as a species literally until about 150 years ago. It became more prevalent. But is really 50, 60, 70 years ago where there's this huge upswing in its consumption and availability.

And we went from, you know, around the 1900s, maybe under 10 pounds of added sugar per person in the United States or in the Western world per year, and that number is skyrocketed. It's at least 70 pounds per person. Some reports estimate closer to 100 pounds of added sugars per person. And you just shared again, if we could get this, this sugar consumption is

damaging our neurons. And this is where all the magic is happening with our mood and with our cognitive function.

DR. UMA NAIDOO: You're right. And thank you for pointing out those statistics because we now eat so much sugar and as the food industry developed these neat tricks, like you know, creating refined sugars. But then adding it to foods and realizing, hey, food can be tastier, you know, and people are going to want to eat those foods. So, it kind of caught on, and then it was developing high fructose corn syrup, and let's see what that does. We can put, where can we put that? And it ended up in almost all foods. So even savory foods have a ton of sugar that you don't even realize is there. So now you'll see healthier brands coming up with ketchup with, you know, they'll have a label low sugar, no sugar or no added sugar. And that's the reason because a lot of those foods have a ton of sugar that you don't even, you don't even realize is there.

It's pointing to a mechanism. It's pointing to a way in which society has actually evolved and changed that is driving disease in a certain way. I also see this shown a lot with, in a lot of questions about children's mental health. And why are we seeing so much more of these specific conditions? And I can't not include the fact that this conversation has to involve the food we're feeding children and that we're all consuming. But are we seeing that uptick because there's such a reliance on those foods. And there are things, simple things like condiments. You're not thinking to yourself when you're eating something else that I should worry about the condiment.

But those are often, even salad dressings loaded with not only high fructose corn syrup, but you know, just other ingredients that are not good for us. For example, it was a study in an animal study and, you know, I'll just preface this by saying we have to start the study somewhere and then we have to move them to humans. But I thought what was significant about this one is it looked at the microbiome and a substance called carboxymethylcellulose, which is actually a thickener in food. And so, the CMC was damaging the microbiome of these mice. And they had less of an ability to form the short chain fatty acids that we need.

This was a 2022 study. So, what it informed me of, it's not diagnostic, it's not, you know, we need more information, but it at least alerts us to the fact that it is a problem. And where do we find those ingredients in, you know, kind of processed, ultra processed foods? Thickening something, or whatever it is. So, it's the sugar, it's the other processed ingredients, and until we find our way forward, no one has to be a perfect eater, but at least stepping back from some of that finding those, you know, healthier ketchups or whatever it might be for what we eat and enjoy.

For the purpose of kind of having people just have almost a little cheat sheet in their head, I break it down into a mnemonic comms. And again, these are only a few of the foods, but C is for choline, which, you know, is an important nutrient. People often overlook it. It can be found in, uh, from legumes to eggs. So there's lots of choices there of actual whole foods where you can get choline. Then it's vitamin C. Extremely important for several biochemical reactions, but also interacts with the next C, which is extra dark natural chocolate. One of my favorites, because it actually contains magnesium. It has the process by which it's made, main makes, makes it has a prebiotic fiber in it.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Also iron.

DR. UMA NAIDOO: And it has iron. It is actually the largest source of plant based iron. So, but the trick is that you need vitamin c for the absorption and so I love to pair an extra piece of extra dark chocolate with a piece of clementine or a piece of orange. Just because it helps there's the vitamin C to help it.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Chocolate's a special food. Let's pause on this one. Even you know traditions that used it thousands of years ago, whether it's the aztecs. They would combine it with things that are high in vitamin C, like peppers, for example.

DR. UMA NAIDOO: It's so interesting.

SHAWN STEVENSON: It's right. It's so fascinating.

DR. UMA NAIDOO: And how, how people have, how this has, has come to be. And I haven't allowed that combination because people want a little bit of something sweet. And, and if you can just kind of get used to extra dark chocolate, it is delicious. The other C is for chickpeas because of the tryptophan in chickpeas. So it's good food to Help with these different symptoms. It's just a good, good thing to add the fiber and all of that. The A is for ashwagandha, one of the supplements that actually has, because it's very bitter tasting. Trust me, I've tasted this as a kid. It's not worth tasting it. It's actually easy to get as a supplement, but it has a good amount of evidence for anxiety, and it comes from sort of diabetic times, and people have used it.

Antioxidants, because we know that there's so many in, that we get through the foods we eat, from spices and herbs, to those colorful kaleidoscope of vegetables. Those plant polyphenols that are bringing back, you know, vitamins and micronutrients. And, then the L is for, believe it or not, liquids. And this is because when we are dehydrated and we short, we haven't drank enough water that day, you can actually develop, you can develop a panic

attack. But you can also have more anxiety. Dehydration is also associated with depression and a low mood. So just making sure that you know, you're sipping throughout the day.

Maybe you're carrying a sustainable water bottle, but you're just hydrating. Another way to do that is with a calming tea. So I talk about passion flower tea and lavender tea in the book, just different alternatives for people to lean into to help with calming also green tea, one of my favorites. So, and then M is more omega threes. You know, we know that omega threes help people well caught salmon or short chain omegas in things like Wal walnuts or flax seeds or chia seeds. Absorption is different, but you know, just remember we, we need more omegas. And then the S is for spices and herbs, something we often overlook that can have. Powerful properties that can help calm the mind. So it's just a little cheat sheet to keep in mind when you, when you at the supermarket or farmer's market, wherever you shop.

SHAWN STEVENSON: I hope that you're enjoying this masterclass on understanding the truth about anxiety. And up next, we've got psychiatrist and bestselling author, Dr. Ellen Vora. And in this segment, she's going to be sharing some huge insights about anxiety, including what can trigger something called false anxiety. You need to know about this. What can trigger false anxiety and some practical things to do to relieve anxiety common anxiety symptoms. Check out the segment from the incredible Dr. Ellen Vora.

DR. ELLEN VORA: I was really influenced by the work of a woman named Julia Ross and she wrote a book called *The Mood Cure*, where she details that we have our real moods. That's when something happened, and we're in a mood as a result, and it makes sense. We've experienced a loss and now we're grieving. But she pointed out that we also have what she called emotional imposters, or false moods, which are those times when, seemingly out of nowhere, you wake up on the wrong side of the bed, you're suddenly irritable or anxious or sad or angry, and if we could actually peek under the hood.

And get an omniscient glance into what's going on in the body in that moment, we would see that something has tripped our body into a stress response. And it's usually pretty benign, modern stuff, like we're in a blood sugar crash. We had an extra cold brew coffee that day. We're a little hungover. We're sleep deprived. Something is generating a stress response in the body. We subjectively experience that as a mood like anxiety. And our mind, the consummate meaning maker that it is, is always happy to swoop in and tell us a story to make sense of that experience of anxiety. It says, Oh, I'm anxious right now. Of course I am.

That makes sense. This thing is going on at work. This interpersonal dynamic from the seventh grade still irks me to this day. We'll tell ourselves a story to make sense of the sensation. But it's actually a retrofitted justification. And what's really occurring there is a

physically generated stress response. And I consider that to be good news because seven years of psychotherapy on the couch to unpack all of our problems is a slower process. Figuring out how to keep your blood sugar stable or just having a slightly different relationship to alcohol or sleep, we can do something about that pretty readily. So, I think a lot of our anxiety is based in the physical body. It's what I call false anxiety, and it's avoidable, and we can identify the root cause, address it at that level, and eliminate unnecessary suffering.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Wow, that is profound. And I love that you mentioned our minds are these meaning making machines. And I really just based on, I've been in this field for 21 years now, and just all the patients I've had the opportunity to work with, all the experts I've talked to, what I've learned is that the smarter, the quote, "smarter that we get, the better we become at making meanings and connecting things and justifying why we're experiencing said anxiety". Like you said, we could tie that back to, you know, such and such stole my lunch money. You know, this is why I'm experiencing this anxiety, but really you're just hung over. You know, it's just like we are very good at creating and putting in things the more intelligence that we pick up or life experience or kind of spectrum, especially if we're studying this stuff.

DR. ELLEN VORA: Yeah.

SHAWN STEVENSON: We can start to put things in place that don't necessarily fit. And we become better at giving that belief legs and making it stronger.

DR. ELLEN VORA: And in therapy we call this intellectualization and the more cerebral we are in many ways, the more we engage with the world from the head. The less we're able to drop into the body and say, well, here's how I'm feeling right now. But I think that people are savvy and a big part of how I practice mental health and psychiatry is to really validate someone's experience. And if they're in a false mood and they're thinking to themselves, this is because that interpersonal dynamic from the seventh grade is still bothering me. I really think it's important to validate that, because there's truth to it.

There's always truth to the story we tell ourselves. So you can even speak to yourself in this way. You can say, Okay, I'm feeling anxious right now. It makes sense that I'm feeling anxious right now. And, because I give myself permission to feel anxious. And those stressors, those challenges, they're real. And maybe I need a snack right now. It doesn't invalidate the stories we tell ourselves. It just helps us remember that our body plays a role in our mental health. And we're not going to eliminate our challenges by addressing our false anxiety. We're just going to make ourselves more resilient in the face of our stressors.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Yeah, what if that is the first go to, is making sure that your physical needs are met so that we can better assess the situation, right? And I'm curious, can we talk a little bit more about, you mentioned how blood sugar abnormalities can cause us to feel anxious. What's going on there? How does that translate?

DR. ELLEN VORA: Yeah. And I like the way you put it. I consider this to be the low hanging fruit in the algorithm of how I approach anxiety. You start with false anxiety. You sort of shore up wherever the physical body might be out of balance and contributing to anxiety. And then you've cleared the air and it makes it easier to tune in to our true anxiety. And to not get distracted by something that's not really a deep inner truth, it's just a blood sugar crash. So what's occurring in that case is we live in this modern American food landscape where our diet is built on a foundation of refined carbohydrates and coffee drinks that are secretly milkshakes and rosé all day.

So we're on this blood sugar rollercoaster. And when our blood sugar crashes, the design of the body is to secrete our stress hormones, cortisol, adrenaline, and that communicates to the liver to say, break down the storage of starch that you keep, and then it breaks down the glycogen, releases glucose into the bloodstream. We have blood sugar restored. Our organs don't fail. We live to see another day. It's an overall beautiful thing that we can generate blood sugar when our blood sugar has crashed. It's just that it happens to have as a side effect that this requires a five alarm fire stress response in the body. And that can feel identical to anxiety or even panic.

It also pertains to our ability to have good attention, to have stress tolerance, to sleep through the night. So this is impactful in a lot of different ways. And it's good news. because there's something we can do about this. We can keep our blood sugar stable. And there's different approaches. I think about it as the definitive solution, which is starting to train your body to have metabolic flexibility and eating a more blood sugar stabilizing diet, just a little different for all of us.

And we can talk about some of the different strategies, but it's not a one size fits all thing. And there's, to use the term hack, there is this hack that I find is profound for a lot of my patients. And they use something like coconut oil, almond butter. I use ghee personally, and you can take a spoonful in anticipation of your typical blood sugar crashes, and because it's basically pure fat or fat and a little bit of protein, it's slow to be digested, slow to be released into the bloodstream, and it gives you this safety net of stable blood sugar that can then superimpose, or it can blunt a superimposed blood sugar crash. So I have patients that ended their panic disorder with this strategy.

They just started taking a spoonful of coconut oil every four or five hours or before they brush their teeth at night or before they head out from home when they're not sure when they're going to eat next. And that can just prevent these blood sugar crashes that were then generating unnecessary moments of peak anxiety.

SHAWN STEVENSON: I love that. So it's like essentially looking at that as a treatment, you know, and, and it even stretching that out long term. So that is in a therapeutic moment potentially to, to help symptoms, but long term, and this has impacted me personally as well. I realized, you know, we had this crazy low fat dogma that we existed in, you know, and I remember this, and this is something I participated in. You know, I went, I was graduating from college around this time. And you know, even when I started college, it was really on fire. And We didn't realize at the time, I know that I didn't, that even our nervous system, that insulation requires fat, right? Even myelin in our brain to be able to lay down those pathways and what happens when we're deficient in these key nutrients, like our wiring.

Our sensitivity to the environment and the world around us, it's kind of like wires being exposed, right? And so bringing in these key nutrients, especially fat to keep that insulation. So we're not as sensitive because I, again, this happened to me when I was doing this low fat protocol, I just used to feel like. Just very sensitive to other people, to the environment. Don't even get me started. If I go to Walmart or something like that, like I'm leaving there feeling nauseous. And of course there's an energy shout out to everybody at Walmart, no disrespect, but there's a certain energy when you walk in the building. And we become more sensitive to this stuff because the thing is at the, at the core of all of this is that we are energy, you know, we're made of this stuff and we're interacting with.

And if you don't have some kind of ability to insulate yourself, you're going to be at the mercy of the environment and also at the mercy of every crazy thought that you're going to have. So this is why I just longterm, I love that making sure that we're getting those fats in just so we give our bodies the nutrients to keep us insulated.

DR. ELLEN VORA: Going in two different directions with that because I love everything you just said. On the one hand, I've had so many patients over the years who come to me, they're doing what they've been taught they're supposed to do. Limiting fat in their diet. Limiting cholesterol. Limiting animal foods, which we can talk about the pros and cons there.

And they're coming to me. They're thin. They're wiry. They're chugging caffeine. They're soothing their frayed nerves in the evening with red wine. And they exist in a really high frequency wired state and the stories are virtuous, right? I'm so bothered by the state of the world by this problem by this problem and True, and we do want to address all of those

problems. We also want to do it from a place of strength and resilience. We want to be in our power when we take on those problems. And when we're , our nerves are afraid, we're not really the best soldiers for that. And what people never realize is that They're, like, by juicing up their nutrition and getting them to a place of physiologic stability, then they're not as anxious.

They can still be aware of everything that's wrong in the world, but they're stable and they have a calm outlook on it. And it was never just the problems of the world that was making them so anxious. It was actually the low fat, low cholesterol, caffeine, alcohol diet, and it doesn't have to feel so hard. The other place I want to go with that is just sensitivity as a concept. And maybe we're all artists, maybe we're all writers, maybe we're all sensitive souls, I don't know. But it seems like we have slightly different roles in the human ecosystem. And there are folks who I would think of as life naturals. I think that's a term from Sarah Wilson.

And the idea is they're unflappable. There are surgeons, there are pilots, they're not dialed quite so open. And then we have our sensitive folks, our artists, our healers, our intuitives, our anxious friends, and our antennas are wide open. And that is a gift and a liability. And I think it's really important to do the reframing around that as a gift, as a superpower, and when the world tells you, why are you so sensitive? What's wrong with you? You can remind yourself, this is actually a gift that I have, that I can attune to all of the energy. I can feel what's going on here. It helps us show up. We can be attuned to the people in the room, we can be attuned to the problems in the world. It's an important calling and duty, but it, this is a loud world.

So if you have a wide open antenna, you actually have to do a lot to take care of that antenna. And we all need to like brush and floss, and I think that sensitive folks need to ground and sleep and nourish ourselves in particular ways. Clear energy sometimes, and just give us all ourselves a lot of energetic boundaries when we're in Walmart for example.

SHAWN STEVENSON: I love that so much and it's so true. All right, so just to dabble in the physical aspect a little bit more, so we've talked about blood sugar and you did briefly mention sleep as well. So, do we have some data on sleep deprivation? Potentially increasing our incidence of anxiety.

DR. ELLEN VORA: Yes. Yeah. Sleep is my favorite physical treatment to do for anxiety. And we're in a world right now where we say, I don't sleep well. It's because of my anxiety. It's my depression that is impacting my sleep. It's the bipolar that's making me not sleep. There's validity to all of that. But what we're not yet appreciating is that it's a bi directional relationship. And Sleep quality impacts every single mental health diagnosis, and it's the

easier entry point. So on the one hand, we might say the seven years of psychotherapy fix the anxiety, and then you fix the sleep. Or you could give this a couple weeks of effort, fix the sleep, and then you've improved the anxiety. So, with sleep, I think that there are a few caveats, shift labor, jet lag, and perimenopausal, postmenopausal sleep.

Let's put them aside because those are trickier puzzles, but for the most part, I think we're suffering from what I think of as modern insomnia. Our body knows how to sleep. It wants to sleep, but there are aspects of the modern environment that are dysregulating our circadian rhythm and we're not sleeping. And it used to be we weren't prioritizing sleep, but to the credit of people like Ariana Huffington, we've had a cultural shift around that from, ah, sleep is for the weak or the lazy. I'll sleep when I'm dead. Sleep is my secret weapon. So now we're like, Ooh, I want to be good at sleep and it still eludes us.

And so we just have to be aware of that. There are inputs that impact our circadian rhythm by far and away. And your viewers know this, but the lion's share of that is light. Light is what cues our circadian rhythm. We have an internal clock in our brain, but it's not connected to a satellite. It's connected to our eyeballs. And the only way our internal clock has of knowing what time of day it is, is based on light. And that system was foolproof on the proverbial savannah of human evolution. You couldn't get it wrong. We had bright daylight during the day. And then in the evening we had darkness. And I don't blame evolution for not anticipating this plot twist, which is that we were going to harness electricity and invent the lightbulb and eventually the iPhone and eventually secession and nobody was going to sleep anymore. So we have to flip the script. The onus is on us as individuals to make sure we're giving our eyes and therefore our brain the proper light cues so that we can have a healthy regulated circadian rhythm.

It starts first thing in the morning. You want to actually see sunshine with your eyeballs. Not through sunglasses, not through a car windshield, not through a window, but the real thing. And then after sunset is really where the magic happens, because we evolved seeing fire and moonlight, and now we are surrounded by this psychedelic light show of modern life. So short of moving off the grid and homesteading and making your own sauerkraut, raising chickens, you can just get orange glasses. And it's not a perfect solution, but I think it's the best harm reduction strategy we have. And you put on blue blocking glasses after sunset, you wear them till bedtime, and at the very least, it blocks the blue spectrum light from suppressing your melatonin release and it protects your ability to get tired and fall asleep at an appropriate time in the evening.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Up next in this master class revealing the truth about anxiety We have Dr. Susan David She's a world renowned psychologist and best selling author and she's going

to be addressing one of the most critical Aspects of anxiety of diagnosis, which is the psychological implications of the labels themselves of the diagnoses themselves.

She's going to be sharing the critical need to understand the labels and the diagnoses that are put on us so that we can maintain agency over our health. This is such an important part of addressing this epidemic of anxiety. And again, most people simply don't know this, but you are about to, and I encourage you to share this with the people that you care about. But for now, let's dive into this next segment with the incredible Dr. Susan David.

DR. SUSAN DAVID: This is a little bit of what I observed when I was in my psychology training doing clinical work is that labels are extraordinarily powerful. Labels can help us to understand the world, but labels can also become prisons. And this becomes very challenging, because what can happen is we can begin to over identify with a particular part of ourselves, such that that part becomes the everything. And I'll give you an example of what I mean. If we think about the core narrative that we have about emotions, even in psychology, in most of the academic articles in the world, it's that emotions are good or bad.

Okay, they are positive or negative. So what is bound up in that is the idea that the good emotions are experiences like joy and happiness. Positive thinking that these emotions and thoughts are good. And that when you have Other experiences, when you have experiences like stress or grief, disappointment, loss, anger, frustration, any other thought or story that you might have that these are bad. And so if you think about it, if you have this mental model that some of these things are good and some of these are bad. And then you do something that's called living. And living means that your heart is going to get broken, that things aren't going to go according to plan, that sometimes you're going to think you're in control of your business goal or your strategy, and then you're going to this thing called COVID comes and taps you on the shoulder and laughs in your face and says, aha, you thought you were in control, but actually, you know, you aren't.

So if you have this mental model, which is that emotions and thoughts are good or bad, and then you do this thing called living. And so what you experience is the truth of living, which is that beauty and fragility hold hands with one another again come to this bothness that when you love, you also open up yourself to having your heart broken. That when you are in a job that sometimes things don't work out in the way that you want, then life demands that you that you're going to experience some of the so-called bad thoughts and bad emotions.

So let's take this then to this logical conclusion. Now, not only do you have this idea that you've got good or bad emotions, but you experience a bad emotion, so called bad emotion, and then what you start doing is you start beating yourself up about having it. So in

psychology, often we think about type one and type two emotions. Type one is the I'm stressed. I'm sad. I'm disappointed. I'm angry. Type two is when you start hustling with whether you are allowed to actually experience that experience. You know, I should be, I'm unhappy in my job, but I should be grateful that at least I've got my job. I'm feeling sad, but I'm not allowed to be sad because the world is demanding that I be positive.

And so then what you start doing is you start layering on shame and blame and judgment. And now, instead of being in a situation where you experiencing the type one emotion, the type A emotion, the first experience. Now you've got this extra layer of messiness, and so now you're not in a clean relationship with yourself. You're not able to look at that emotion and say, What is this emotion telling me? What's helpful to me here? What values congruent here? Instead, you are in a war with yourself. So I think that this labeling of good and bad is one type of labeling. The other that I just wanted to connect with briefly, because I think it's so important is you mentioned this idea about sometimes what happens is the emotion or the experience becomes our identity.

And I think this is really powerful. And I'll give you an example of what I mean here, which is words matter. Words matter. So Often we'll say something like, I am sad. Okay. I am sad. I am angry. And it's so commonplace. We all do this all the time. Like I am sad. Of course, like what else would I be saying? But if we think about it, when we say I am sad, what we are actually saying is I am all of me, 100 percent of me is defined by sadness. And so Shawn, one of the things that I speak about a lot in my work is about the fact that all of us, every single person listening today, we all have beauty and wisdom and compassion and capacity and values and intentions.

You know, in the dark of night when we aren't in a swirl of anxiety, but rather we kind of get into bed and we are just alone with ourselves and we kind of tap into the core of who we are as individuals. Every single one of us has values and like this kind of deep voice inside of ourselves. That is really what I want to think of as our human wisdom. And when we say something like, I am sad, there's no space for anything else. There's no space. If I am angry with my partner or with my spouse, if that emotion is all enveloping, there's no space for who do I want to be in this interaction? Who do I want to be in this relationship? What are my values right now?

Yes, I'm angry with this person. But what is the greater goal of how I want to come to this relationship? And so I often think that when we say I am sad, it's almost like what we are doing is we are saying, Almost that sadness is a cloud in the sky, and we have become the cloud. And what I like to think instead is, That there's huge power in naming our thoughts, our emotions, and our stories for what they are.

They are thoughts, emotions, and stories. They aren't facts. They aren't our identity. They are thoughts, emotions, and stories. So they are part of us, but they are not our identity. All of us. And the way we start getting this beautiful separation so that other aspects of ourselves can come to the fore is when we start noticing them for what they are.

And that's what you were reflecting on earlier. I'm noticing that I'm feeling sad. I'm noticing the urge to shut down in this conversation. I'm noticing the thought that there's no point in trying. I'm noticing that this is my I'm not a good enough story. When you start to notice your thoughts, your emotions and stories for what they are, which is thoughts, emotions, and stories, parts of us, but not all of us. What we start doing is we start creating space for other aspects of ourself to come forward. And so what are we doing when we do this is we move away from. I am sad. I am the cloud into recognizing that you're not the cloud, that every single person listening, you are not the cloud. You, you are the sky.

You are the sky. You are the sky. Human and messy and able and big enough and capacious and beautiful enough to experience all of your thoughts, your emotions, and your stories, and to still choose who you want to be in the space in this moment you aren't defined. You know, when you look at the, when you look at the sky, you don't look at a cloud. And define the sky by the single cloud and emotional agility is about moving into the space of being the sky.

SHAWN STEVENSON: All right. I hope that you're enjoying and truly getting a lot of this important masterclass on the truth about anxiety. In closing, we've got some additional tips and insights from my really good friend, NYU professor, Dr. Wendy Suzuki. Again, she's a world renowned neuroscientist and best selling author and in closing, she's going to be sharing some key insights about anxiety, about helping to relieve the symptoms of anxiety, including how creativity is a key to reducing anxiety. Now, this was really interesting, but again, when you learn from these incredible neuroscientists and world leading experts on this subject matter, you find these things that just simply make sense. And I wanted to provide you with a lot of different voices, a lot of different tips and tools to find those things that really click, that you can utilize in your life. And to utilize these with the people that you care about. Let's dive into this closing segment with the amazing Dr. Wendy Suzuki.

DR. WENDY SUZUKI: A classic experiment that Marion Diamond, my mentor at UC Berkeley, did way back in the 1960s. And this is at a time when we didn't think that the adult brain could change in any appreciable way. And so she said, I don't, I don't think that's true, but let me try and do an experiment to show the rest of the scientists that this is not true. And so she, she turned to the environment, how, what kind of lifestyle or life environment do these mice or rats have and she created two different ones. One was the enriched environment which I like to call the Disney world of rat cages with lots of toys to play with other rats around

The toys got changed out every day so it was like living in a real life Disney world for three months. And the other was an impoverished environment where there were no toys. Maybe one other rat. Both rats got free food and water, as much food and water as they could eat or drink. And if the adult brain didn't change, then those environments wouldn't change the anatomy of the brain at all. Well, three months later, they went back, they looked at the anatomy, and what they found was the rats that lived in that Disney world of rat cages, the outer covering of the brain, the cortex, was significantly different. It had actually grown significantly so that she could measure that and it not grown all over the place but grown in brain areas that made sense.

The visual cortex was bigger. The visual environment was much richer in that Disney world of rat cages than in the impoverished environment. The motor cortex was bigger. They were playing around, there were multi levels and they had lots of toys to play with. Somatosensory cortex, the touch cortical area was bigger. And so you can change your brain. You can learn and grow in those positive environments. How do I get that? What is the secret ingredient? Moving your body. Yeah. Exercise, and particularly aerobic exercise that is simply exercise that increases your heart rate. That is the secret. does not necessarily mean you don't have to become a marathon runner.

A good power walk, a walk up the stairs, is aerobic. So start with that. Know that that counts. That is increasing levels of BDNF in your brain. And so imagine, I like to give the analogy that every single time you work out, you are, or you remove your body, you are giving your brain this wonderful neurochemical bubble bath of features of proteins, including BDNF, but also neurotransmitters that you might've heard of, dopamine, serotonin, noradrenaline. So that is the image that I want to give everybody so that they realize every time I walk farther to Costco around the store. I'm giving my brain this bubble bath. Every time I go for a walk, every time I take my dog for the walk, I'm getting this bubble bath and I'm strengthening my hippocampus.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Question. Yeah. How does boosting our creativity potentially help with our anxiety?

DR. WENDY SUZUKI: Yeah, so I'm going to flip that around and I'm going to say that having anxiety is a wonderful way to help boost your creativity. Why? Because in anxiety there are many different kind of emotional regulation. There are kinds of environmental changes that you can make to improve your anxiety level. That is a wonderful exercise in creativity. I'm about to have a meeting with the person that makes me the most anxious in, in, in my life. How do I mitigate that anxiety? What kind of mechanism can I use? And we give lots of tools in the, in the book about preparation, putting yourself in, in a nice calm mindset before you go there

If trigger issues come up, you can kind of deflect that and go to other things that are planned. You know what you're going to talk about. You can do that thing where you say, I'm really anxious. Okay. about this conversation and I really want to try and make, you know, the best outcome as possible. Just, you know, address it full on, fully presently. Those are all creative mechanisms that You have, and you're probably already using to deal with your anxiety, but you don't maybe categorize it as creative mechanisms. Think about it as creative mechanisms, kind of enrich that, that practice of creativity. And that's how your own anxiety can help enrich your creativity to help your anxiety.

The other way I talk about the relationship between anxiety and creativity is that sometimes our biggest challenges in our life that includes the anxieties that we have that stimulate some of the biggest creative kind of bursts that we have. And you can read biographies of lots of creative people where all of these challenges have defined the beautiful, creative, burst or thing that this person is known for. And without knowing that backstory, you think, oh, this person is just, you know, bursting with creativity. No, it be, it came because, you know, the poet had dyslexia and couldn't read quickly, and instead had to read very slowly.

That gave him the appreciation of the rhythm of the language or the sadness that comes from that informs songwriting of some of our most famous songwriters. I'm pulling my examples from a wonderful book called Spark, How Creativity Works from my friend, written by my friend, Julie Burstein, who has interviewed on her show, Studio 360, some of the most creative people in, in the whole world, and has categorized where this creativity comes from.

And for so many of our most creative people in our world today, a lot of their creativity comes from those negative emotions, those hardships that they have endured in their life. So that, so anxiety becomes a source of creativity and people don't think about it that way. But what if that, that, that is the case? That is, that is a superpower. A little known and underappreciated superpower of anxiety.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Rates of anxiety are continuing to climb at epidemic rates. We've got to do something about this. And that's what this is all about. There are real solutions that exist. There are so many people suffering and there's so much unnecessary suffering. The truth is that anxiety is a natural human experience to feel anxious about things that might make us anxious is totally normal, but having anxiety for no reason, or not being able to investigate what those reasons are. That's not natural, that's not normal. And that's what we are providing these insights about, to be able to find out what's at the root of our anxiety. And also to understand that this is not something that defines us. We are far more than a label of being somebody with anxiety and staking claim on that and being a part of our identity.

For we are so much bigger than that. And again, this is something to share with the people that you care about that might be going through a challenging time or experiencing bouts of anxiety. Please share this out. You can send this directly from the podcast app that you're listening on. And of course, you can share this out on social media. Just take a screenshot of this episode, share it out on your favorite social media platform. Of course you could tag me. I'm @Seanmodel on Instagram and on X and I'm at The Model Health Show on Facebook. We've got some incredible master classes in store for you and some phenomenal guests. So make sure to stay tuned. Take care. Have an amazing day. And I'll talk with you soon.

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