

**Paras:** Hi everyone. For those of you tuning in for the first time, I'm Paras. I'm a counselling psychologist and a founder at TAS.

So in this episode, I'm going to talk about an issue which a lot of you have reached out to me over social media and over emails. And of course I'm talking about the issue of anxiety.

A lot of you have written to me, saying that you have been facing anxiety—not just right now but for quite a long time now—and a lot of you want to understand what anxiety is, where it comes from, how much anxiety is okay, how much anxiety is unhealthy, and of course, is there a way out of anxiety?

So, in this episode, these are some of the issues that I'm going to try to answer, and of course I'm going to do this building on what I spoke about last time—about self-compassion and mindfulness. So, let's get straight into it then.

Before I talk about how do you manage anxiety, what anxiety does to you, and why it may be not-really-good for you, let me take you back a little bit and talk about one of the basic things which will be useful in explaining this.

### *Fight, Flight, or Freeze*

So this is something called the fight, flight, or freeze response. Now whenever our body, or whenever our mind, perceives that there is an impending danger or an impending threat, it goes into what is called as a fight, flight, or freeze response. Now this is an evolutionary response and it is designed to alert us to an impending danger, and it allows us to either prepare to fight and eliminate it, it prepares us to run away from it, or sometimes we just freeze and we're not able to do anything.

Now, anxiety is a prolonged experience of this state. If I were to say it in the simplest terms, that's what it is. Now what's supposed to happen with the fight, flight, or freeze response is—This is not a state you're supposed to be in for a long time. This is, at best, a crisis response. So the idea is, once this state passes, your body and your mind is going to back into a rest and relaxation state.

Now, prolonged exposures to this means that the alarm system is broken. So it takes very little to set it off, and it never resets. So, you think about it. If you think about the fight, flight, freeze response, you look at the kind of bodily and psychological changes it's producing.

So, typically in a fight, flight, or freeze response, because your body and your mind is getting ready to run away or fight something, you will see that your muscles

tense up, your senses get sharpened, and your cognitive processes become more and more reactionary. At the digestive level, what it's doing is that it's pumping most of the blood and the glucose in your system to your limbs and to your senses, and digestion goes for a backseat.

And in terms of your thoughts, because your thoughts are becoming more and more reactionary, deeper-level cognition—or thinking about something at depth, thinking about something with nuance—is not something that we're able to do when in a fight, flight, or freeze state.

Now, again, remember that you're supposed to be coming out of this state in some time, after a crisis has passed. But what happens in anxiety, what happens in this state is that the alarm system has gone off too many times and now it's broken. So it's not functioning correctly, and you are in this panic state, you are in this high-alert state all the time—which means your body doesn't relax, your muscles remain tensed; which means you're going to have aches and pains, you're going to have muscle tightness, stiffness, joint pains, neck pains, shoulder pains, back problems.

You're also going to have hyperacidity because your digestion's gone for a toss, you're also going to feel hyper vigilant because your senses are very very sharp. You're also going to feel hyper vigilant because your senses are very very sharp.

So, let's say you're really really high-alert and somebody comes and touches you, you may jump out of your skin because it is unexpected for you. It wasn't really a threat to you but because you were in that state, you may experience this sensation of really jumping out of your skin. Or, you might be in a situation which isn't actually life-threatening but you may start feeling this shortness of breath and quickening of your heartbeat.

All of these are anxiety responses, and usually they indicate that a real danger, a real objective danger is present, and usually this response—this bodily experience and this psychological experience—is supposed to subside when the danger goes away.

Now the problem is that our mind, our brain isn't able to distinguish between a real fear or an imagined fear. So, take this example: if you have a fear of heights—or if you have a fear of water—if you're not going to be at a high altitude (or in deep water), it's not going to be there. But, since your mind can't distinguish between high altitude/deep water and, say, a fear of failure, it's going to produce the same bodily response to all of these scenarios.

The second problem is that, a fear—or a phobia even, if you may call it that—is something that can be switched off. Worry lives with you. Worry goes with you where you go, and worry is relentless. Worry is not going to say, "Hey, you know what? I've been giving this guy a really hard time. Let me give him a break." Worry is not going to do that, worry is going to be relentless. It's going to be with you, it's going to be on your back at all times.

Worry is also not going to look at the time of the day and say, "Okay, it's time to go to bed. Let's switch this off." It's not going to do that; it's relentlessly there.

So as a result, you're going to be in this prolonged state of alertness, bodily as well as psychologically. And of course, since this is not designed to be a state that you're supposed to be in for a long period of time, you're going to feel tired and weary but at the same time, unable to relax.

So, if you want to understand what the experience of anxiety is, this is what it is. Now please understand that I'm not saying that this is what anxiety disorder means. Generalized anxiety disorder—and this entire cluster of, what is labelled as, anxiety disorders—is a completely different thing, and experiencing anxiety is one of the symptoms which constitutes these disorders. I'm not talking about that, I am talking about the experience of anxiety; so I hope that part is clear for you right now.

### *Why Does Anxiety Happen?*

Now why does anxiety happen? So one of the reasons why anxiety can happen is prolonged exposure to traumatic situations—and when we're talking about trauma, we're talking about two different kinds of traumas.

One could be traumas which threaten our life. So this could be life-threatening accidents, life-threatening illness episodes, or natural disasters, or man-made disasters that you had to face. So that's one part of it.

The other kind of traumas could be things that don't really threaten your life but threaten the sense of stability, threaten your identity, threaten your wellbeing. So think about the loss of a loved one, the loss of a relationship, the loss of a job, or a particular traumatic failure—either at work or academically. All of these also feel threatening to our wellbeing.

So prolonged exposure—Even in a violent relationship, which is not life-threatening but there is prolonged emotional abuse, prolonged physical violence, prolonged

emotional violence, prolonged sexual violence. All of these things can produce trauma, and trauma is manifested in the form of anxiety.

So these are some of the roots where anxiety emerges. Now, one question which people generally ask: Is anxiety good for you? And the answer to that, pure and simple—from my side at least—is that no amount of anxiety is good. And I know this is going to be an unpopular opinion; some of you may think, "Hey, anxiety is what drives me to work everyday. If there wasn't anxiety about losing my job or not doing well, I probably wouldn't get up and go out and earn a living."

So for those of you with that question, I would suggest that you listen to the podcast on self-compassion and listen to the section which talks about what self-compassion isn't. Self-compassion isn't self-indulgence and that's what I mean by saying that anxiety is not good for you.

If you feel that anxiety, fear, and feeling like you're going to lose your job is what is driving you to go to work in the first place, maybe it's time for you to reevaluate and see if this is the job that you want to do; or it might be time for you to evaluate whether you need therapy to address this fear because, believe me, no amount of anxiety is good.

And again, I'm distinguishing anxiety from fear. Fear is natural, fear is ingrained, and fear also serves a life-saving purpose. In the absence of fear, what would happen is that you would go into oncoming traffic and not be afraid. That's not really healthy for you; fear actually is a life-saving mechanism. Anxiety, on the other hand, is not.

So let's get into [sic] how do we address anxiety? Now obviously this is not an exhaustive resource to deal with anxiety but here are some directions in which you can do that.

So the answer to this—I'm going to draw a parallel between a personal story also, over here. So I have a dog, you may have seen me posting about her on social media. If you don't, well, you may want to see it now. But anyway, so I have a dog and, for most parts of the time that we have had this dog—We've had this dog now for four years, her name is Zoe, we have been living with her for the last four years, and for most part of these four years, Zoe's been living alone.

My spouse and I, we go to work, and Zoe sits alone at home for the entire day. Now, there have been times where we have seen that she's had trouble staying alone, or we've had neighbours complain that she has been howling or whining and that she's not been doing well. And we tried to understand why this was happening.

So we read up, we spoke to a couple of animal behaviorists, and we found that this is what is called as separation anxiety.

And surprisingly enough, animals experience it too. So it's not something inherently human, but also what the animal behaviorists told us was that separation anxiety is not something that your pet is supposed to experience.

Now why does separation anxiety work? I'll just tell you why I'm talking about this example here, in just a minute. So separation anxiety means that, when you leave your house, your pet starts to howl because they associate you going away with something bad that may happen to you or something bad that may happen to them. They may fear abandonment, they may not like being alone, so they start howling and whining. And if you actually were to put a recorder or a camera in the room, you may see that your dog is doing this for hours on end. And when you come back, it actually reinforces your pet's belief that their howling and their anxiety throughout the day is what made you come back.

So the trick to break that—separation anxiety—as we were told was that, you should vary the amount of time you come back after you go away, so that your dog starts associating you going away with different outcomes. So sometimes we would give her treats when we left, so she associated us going away with a pleasant outcome—"Hey, I'm gonna get a treat now! These people are getting ready to go to work." Or she would associate that, if I sit quietly for some time, they might come back.

So that was how we broke the singular association between us going away and something bad happening. The same thing happens with us, with anxiety. We start to believe that our worrying is what actually prevents bad things from happening in the first place. There isn't an association between the two but think about it: you would have done this yourself.

If you are somebody who finds yourself chronically worrying about your loved ones, or if you are somebody who finds yourself chronically worrying about everything—whether it's job, career, relationships—you may really think that things haven't gone bad yet because you've always been on high-alert. And because there's also something called a negative bias, which operates very strongly in our minds, we start to believe that the instances where it admittedly went wrong—and the laws of probability will tell you that, well, sometimes things *will go wrong*—our negative bias makes us believe that, because we didn't worry at that point in time and we let our guards down, things went bad.

So, actually speaking, a lot of us saying we don't want anxiety but letting go of anxiety isn't very easy because we've made these associations between constant worrying, constantly being on high-alert, and being safe. But we need to understand that the very biological foundation of the experience of anxiety comes from a state of not feeling safe. So to say that anxiety is what is keeping me safe, is the most ironic thing you could say. It's the opposite of feeling safe.

### *Dealing with Anxiety*

So step number one would be to acknowledge that all anxiety is bad anxiety. Step number two would be to ensure and assure yourself that it's not anxiety that assures that things don't go wrong; there are other things that you probably were doing, which were more adaptive, that ensured that things didn't go wrong. You could have been working hard, you could have been ensuring that you submitted your stuff on time, you could genuinely be good at the work that you're doing. Think about those possibilities.

So when we break that singular story—that we worry and therefore bad things don't happen—is when we allow ourselves to make newer associations with the experience of worry.

Now one more thing I just want to add quickly, before we wrap up for today: if we start pairing the experience of anxiety with an experience of self-compassion or a practice of mindful meditation, our bodies and our minds start to heal.

And I'll tell you how: it starts making new associations and new neural pathways. So it's actually, at a structural level, changing our brains; it's making new neural pathways between the experience of anxiety activating in your mind—immediately you're saying something self-compassionate to yourself. Or there is an experience of anxiety happening, immediately you are getting into a mindful meditation exercise which is shutting down, manually, the experience of the fight, flight, or freeze syndrome.

So what that is doing is that, it's telling your mind that every time anxiety presents itself, we don't have to go down that path of worrying, beating ourselves up, thinking the worst is going to happen. So the more different things that we do, the more options your mind has to choose from when an experience of anxiety presents itself. This does not mean that anxiety-provoking situations or triggering situations are not going to present themselves—of course they are. That's a part of dealing with the trauma; but, the presence of a traumatic event, or the presence of a triggering event, does not mean the absence of relaxation.

So this is what I want you to take away from this session. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive resource but if this is something that you find that you have been dealing with, if this is something that you find you're able to relate with, and if this gave you a different perspective of looking at your anxiety, your chronic worrying, and you want to have richer deeper conversations about it, it might be a good time for you to start accessing therapy.

So that's all for today. I hope you really found this podcast useful and, until next time, goodbye.