THE
STOP BINGE EATING
PODCAST
with Kirstin Sarfde

Ep #53: Anxiety

Hi! How are you? I am good, doing good. I hope you are too. I hope you're feeling calm and not at all anxious because from what I hear from you all, anxiety is quite the binge or at least overeating driver.

One of the most common feelings that people tell me they binge in response to is anxiety.

It is not a comfortable thing to feel.

We all might experience it differently, but there's usually a sense of restlessness, maybe increased heart rate, shallow breathing, a buzzing throughout your body, amongst other things.

You might feel like you need to do something, like you can't just sit there and do nothing.

For many of you, as soon as you start feeling this way, you want out of it. You want calm and comfort asap and the quickest way for you to do that is to eat.

Eating will calm you down. Eating will distract you. Eating will give you something to get up and do.

Eating is your way to ease anxiety.

We all feel anxious, some of us more often than others.

We feel it, just like with any feeling or emotion we feel, because of our thoughts.

Now, are there times when medications or caffeine can cause anxiety? Sure, but that's not what I'm talking about here. Although, later on in this episode I will talk about a way to help yourself if you are feeling anxiety due to one of those factors, but mostly here I'm focusing on thought induced anxiety.

There are so many thoughts that can lead to feeling anxious. Thoughts about work, school, your kids, your relationship, your life, your weight, the list goes on and on and on.

But I like to say that the basic thought that causes anxiety is that something bad is going to happen.

You're thinking about the worst case scenario.

It could be because you said something that you think will bite you in the butt. You made a comment to a someone and now you're feeling anxious about whether they're going to say something to someone else and how that could affect you.

Or someone else did something you think will cause a bad outcome. Someone close to you lost their job and now you're feeling anxious about what's going to happen to them.

Or maybe nothing has happened at all yet, but you're just thinking about the future and are afraid of something bad happening. You're anxious about your financial state even though nothing has changed, what's going on in your relationship even though he says everything is fine, your future even though everything is going fine right now and you're on a good path.

So much fear, worry, and nervousness. That's what anxiety is all about and I think it's useful to break your anxiety into which of these, or something else, that more closely describes how you're feeling. The more specific you are, the easier it will be to understand why you're feeling it.

Some people like to refer to anxiety as a cover emotion, one that's kind of vague and not super specific. This can make it difficult to figure out the cause of it, but when you take it one step further to look at the underlying emotion that's there, that's when you might get more clarity.

But at minimum, you can notice that you're thinking something bad is going to happen and then look at what that thing is for you in that moment.

Maybe you are going to have a conversation with someone and you're feeling anxious about it. Then you notice that the anxiousness is nervousness. Then that you're feeling nervous because you think they're going to get mad. The bad thing you think will happen is that they're going to get mad.

You don't really know if they will, you may have good reason to believe that they will, but you don't really know. It's in the future and we don't know for certain what will happen in the future.

So you're thinking something bad is going to happen, you're feeling anxious, and now you think something is wrong because you're feeling anxious.

You think feeling anxious means something is wrong. But no, it doesn't.

Anxious means you're thinking a thought that is causing you to feel anxious. That is it. You're feeling a feeling that is totally normal to feel. Again, everyone feels it and we as humans have been feeling it forever.

It used to be a very useful feeling for us to feel, and is also sometimes now, but not as often.

These days we feel anxious about non-life threatening things like conversations, interactions, life consequences, things that we will be able to persevere through and we'll for sure be okay once it's all over.

But back in the day, like way way back, anxiety was our cue to move it or lose it, like literally lose our lives.

It's our body's way of preparing us to get the eff out because there is impending, or imminent danger. A bear was after us or we're going into uncharted territory and we don't know what's there. So much of the world was unknown and wild animals were right around the corner so when we thought something bad was going to happen back then, it was most likely life threatening and it was great that our bodies responded by creating the flight response. Heart rate is up, we're restless, this means go.

But now, most of what we perceive as danger, really isn't. The danger is in how we're going to feel in the experience or if the thing happens. Feelings, not life, are at stake.

But our brains don't know that. Our brains are simple and something bad is something bad. It doesn't know what it is, it just assumes you're going to die so it wants you outta there.

Anxiety is a part of life. So are the emotions that come along with it like fear, worry, and nervous. We think about bad things happening, it's in our nature, we're scanning for danger, threats, hazards, because if we don't, we'll run into them and die.

But again, we're not going to die from most things we get anxious about in our current world. Yet our bodies still respond the same way.

This does not mean anything has gone wrong. It means you're thinking a thought. That's it.

It doesn't mean something bad is going to happen, it means you think something bad is going to happen that's why you feel anxious. The thought comes first.

Our feelings are not predictors of the future. They are effects of our thinking.

We think about the future, we think anxiously about the future, and we imagine things happening. We don't know how people are going to react, what's going to happen to us, what's going to happen to other people, how things are going to turn out. Yet we assume the worst.

There's that saying, "hope for the best, but expect the worst." Why would you do that? Why expect the worst to happen? Why believe the worst is going to happen or that it's likely it's going to happen? What is the upside in doing that?

It doesn't protect anyone. It doesn't change any outcomes. It doesn't cause you to take action to do anything. Most likely when you're in a state of anxiousness, fear, worry, or nervous, you're going to either freeze and do nothing or act like a crazy person. Do you see anxious people calmly working through problems, making rational plans, or allowing things to happen as they will? I don't. I see them running around, freaking out, and trying to control the universe, which they obviously can't. And of course then there are those of us who eat to try and numb it all away.

It's the response to the anxiety that is the biggest problem. When you see anxiety as a problem, you either resist it, react to it, or numb it away.

You think it's a problem so you try to fight it and push it away, or you see it as a problem because of what it drives you to do whether it be the craziness or the eating.

This all just makes it worse.

Fighting makes things worse as it intensifies it and reacting to it makes it last longer and you're taking actions you don't want to be taking.

When I was bingeing, I always described my urges as anxiety. And it was a mix of both urges and anxiousness a lot of the time as I was feeling the strong desire to eat plus a fear of my impending binge. I'd feel that buzzing and restlessness and I'd fight against it telling myself I wasn't going to give in, but then fighting back and forth with my desire and fear thoughts. I'd resist as long as I could until I couldn't do it anymore and I'd just get up and eat to numb it all away. I wouldn't have to fear the binge anymore, I was doing it. I'd eat until the feeling finally went away.

By doing this, I never learned why I was feeling it to begin with and how to handle it. I just kept feeling the anxiety, thinking the feeling was a problem, thinking a binge was evident, and making it go away by eating. That was the protocol each time.

But had I known why I was feeling it, my thoughts, and had I known my thoughts were optional, which they are, then I could have done something about it.

Had I known I had the ability to allow myself to feel instead of using food, which I didn't know how to do yet, then I would have learned how sooner than I did.

I didn't know there were options or that resisting it wasn't helping. I didn't know that resisting it was just intensifying it. I thought I could resist it into going away, which is funny to think about now because that never happened, it never worked, yet I still believed that was the way to do it.

I thought it was the worst feeling in the world and I wanted out. I wanted it gone. But now, when I feel anxious, I just let it be.

I let it be because I understand it better and can see how harmless it is and how it's just an effect of my thinking. I'm causing it, not anything outside of me. This means I'm in charge of it, I can do something about it.

If it's coming from thinking something bad is going to happen, whatever that thing is, I can choose to think it's going to be fine.

And most likely, in the end, it is.

So many times we've all been anxious about something that doesn't even happen, or that isn't as bad as we anticipated.

What a waste of energy, right? So much time, mental energy, and headspace wasted when we could have instead expected it to be fine.

You can expect the worst, or you can expect the best. What's the downside to expecting the best?

You do have the option of preparing for the worst, I think that's a lot better than expecting it, so that way you can decide how you'll handle it if it happens, but putting all your focus on that bad outcome is

taking away any good feelings you might want to feel in the meantime.

Now what about those times when you just can't believe it will be okay? You're just not able to change how you're looking at the situation? Or if like I mentioned before, your anxiety is happening because of a medication or you happened to drink too much caffeine? That happened to me once, drank too much caffeine, and oh my, I was standing there at one point and felt like I wanted to jump out of my body.

Basically, what I mean is, the anxiety just isn't changeable in the moment.

A couple weeks ago, I had a day where this happened to me. I had to make a phone call and have a conversation that I was dreading because I was afraid of hurting the person I was going to talk to. All day I felt anxious about the call. I put off calling them, totally procrastinated it. And because I did, the anxiousness just stayed with me all day. So I stayed with it. I knew it was because of me that it was there. I knew I was thinking about how uncomfortable the call was going to be, I knew I was fearing their reaction, I knew all of it. But I couldn't get myself into a space where I believed it would be fine.

I felt it. I went along my day, went grocery shopping, ate lunch, ran errands, did all the things while feeling anxious. I did my best to keep my cool and not eat to numb it away. I took responsibility for creating that feeling and I owned it. I felt what I was causing myself to feel.

What you do is allow yourself to feel the sensations of anxiety. You be open to it. You breathe into it. A good piece of advice I heard was to focus on the exhale. The inhale may be hard as one of the sensations can sometimes be the feeling of constricted breathing, and that in itself might add some uneasiness to your anxiety, so focus on the exhale. Feel the breath coming out. Relax yourself. When you focus on your breath and slow down your breathing, it's like you're telling your body and brain that it's okay. You're doing something physically to show them that you don't need what they're giving you. And when you focus on your breath, you're focusing less on the anxiety producing thoughts.

The purpose is to bring the anxiety down instead of making it worse. You have to believe that nothing has gone wrong, that you're fine, and go against how your brain and body are reacting. They don't know the truth, they just think you're in danger, but you know better. You tell them what's really up.

If you allow your anxiety to run rampant, it's just going to intensify. If you keep thinking anxious thoughts, you're going to keep feeling anxious. You're going to compound the anxiety. You have to take action to relax yourself because if you don't and you just let things continue how they are, then you're going to become an anxious mess.

Understand that you're truly going to be fine. Things might work out fine. And the worst thing that is going to happen is an emotion, not death.

You don't need to do anything. All you need to do is calm yourself down with your thinking and with your breath.

Recognize that you're feeling anxious, be even more specific if you can about whether it's fear, nervous, or worry. Acknowledge your discomfort. Find the cause of it. What is it that you're thinking that's causing this?

Whatever it is, know that the feeling doesn't mean something bad isn't going to happen, you're just thinking there is. You're feeling anxiety because of a thought.

You can even write your thoughts down so you can literally see what is happening in your mind that's causing this. Notice how illogical the thoughts are. And don't even try to change them right away, just observe the cause.

I didn't try to change my thoughts before that phone call. I don't even think that was a real possibility for me that day because I was so in it. So my option was to just feel.

Make feeling your option. Eating isn't going to solve it and it's not going to make whatever you think is going to happen, not happen. What will happen will happen whether you eat or not but I'll tell you, if you do eat, then that will be the something bad you predicted. And it could have all been for nothing when you find out everything ended up being fine.

You feel anxious because you think something bad is going to happen. If you're not able to talk yourself out of that, then you feel and breathe. Focus on the exhale. Know that nothing has gone wrong. You will survive.

Have a great week, bye bye.