

Talking Therapies: Is my body anxious?

With Lorna Evans

Suzy:

Hello and welcome to Talking Therapies, a podcast made together with Psychologies magazine and the UK Council for Psychotherapy, or UKCP for short. I'm Suzie Walker, and I'm the editor-in-chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies, we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. Our anxieties can often manifest in our body without us realising. If you feel unsteady from the anxieties that you're experiencing because of outside triggers, then stay tuned for some helpful insights and advice.

Lorna:

And really, we've got to get feeling steady, safe, and grounded before we can start getting into any deep psychotherapy, because we need the clients to be breathing, feeling steady and safe in their own bodies.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Lorna Evans. Lorna is an accredited psychotherapist and trauma informed yoga teacher. Through her work, she integrates psychotherapy, the body, breathing and movement to help people experiencing trauma, anxiety, and depression. Lorna is often featured in the media and has worked with MTV, the Discovery Channel, the BBC, Yahoo, and Sky. She also regularly uploads to her YouTube channel, offering advice and helpful tips. You can also find her videos by searching The Mind Movement on YouTube.

Sarah:

COVID-19, climate emergency, social media and just the news every day really heightened our anxieties. How is that impacting on us?

Lorna:

Well, what a great question and very timely, because actually with COVID, with the pandemic, with the climate change dialogue that's going on and becoming louder, thank goodness, we are as humans reacting as if we would when we were cavewomen in cavemen and cavepeople. So actually, this drip, drip, drip that we get on our phones, on social media, it's like a coffee percolator drip, drip, drip. And that drip is, yeah, we can have healthy stress and actually without that healthy stress, we wouldn't get stuff done. Okay, so we need a little bit of adrenaline and cortisol and that's actually the chemical in our brain that released in this drip, drip, drip. However, over six months, one year, 18 months of the adrenaline and cortisol, it tips over into anxiety. So, this is where we become on high alert. And we're quick to move our backs to the wall. It is really impacting our bodies, our minds, our breath. And we are literally on high alert. So, you may have heard of the phrase, fight-flight, but I'm going to throw a few more in there. So, we've got fight, flight, freeze and fawn, okay. Would it be useful for me to explain those to you really quickly?

Sarah:

Please do, Lorna, yes.

Lorna:

Okay, great. So, we can be in the here and now and everything's fine. But in the background is that drip, drip, the news, the headline, choice and control being taken away from us, power and liberty being taken away from us. So, what happens is in our brain, because we usually think from the front of our brain, this is all the adult stuff, in the here and now, I need to get to work for this time, I've got to buy some food for tea, all of this. When this drip, drip, drip happens and we tip into anxiety, there's a point in our brain, in the middle of the brain, and it's like a red alarm bell going off, and it's called the amygdala. So, we stopped thinking, and often you'll find that when people talk about their anxiety that they can't think or they've got scrambled brains, and we are flooded with adrenaline and cortisol and there are certain options that we have. The first response is, we shout for help. So, imagine you're lost somewhere, and you shout for help, 'help help help.' Or you might ask someone the directions of where to go. When that fails these other responses kick in. So, our bodies are flooded with this adrenaline and cortisol, the fight. So primarily, it's as if we're going to go and fight the dinosaur. So, we go and fight. We're not thinking here. This is survival. This energy, we may go into flight, so very much in today's world that will be avoidance, not showing up, but we will run like hell to get away from the dinosaur. The freeze response, which is becoming more and more in the language of people in 2021, especially as people are learning more about trauma. Because the freeze response, it's a bit like a deer in the headlights, okay. The deer freezes so the dinosaur runs past and doesn't kill her. And then the deer will have a little shake and run off. However, for us, and clients talk every day about feeling numb, frozen, a deadness in their body. So, there is a connection with mind and body here, but it without movement, okay. And the final response is called fawning. So, it's a funny word, isn't it to talk about 2021, fawning. So, imagine a baby deer, a little fawn. With fawning, people please, the person who has control or power over them. So, this happened a lot in lockdown, where people were pleasing maybe the bad boss, the company, because they have to stay safe. So, it's knowing that over this period that we are living in today, that has gone on for extended time, we are more hyperalert, our backs to the wall. And the more we can start to notice what's going on in our bodies, spotting these early warning signs, we're able to have choice get safe and do something about it.

Sarah:

I wanted to ask you, though, when we have this constant bombardment, how can we learn to recognise our triggers, the things that specifically set us off individually?

Lorna:

Great question. And this is something that for me is really important that we do notice. And I just want to say positively as well over the past year, you know, more and more people delete the apps off the phone, you hear people now say, 'I don't check the news.' Or they may start to dip in with a little bit more now because on the whole people have noticed what their triggers were, you know, during the pandemic. However, what I would encourage people to begin to notice is their body. So actually noticing, 'where do I experience anxiety?' And maybe be able to put the hand there or name it. So let me give you an example, with anxiety, it's higher energy. So, it's usually upper chest, heart, hands, it's a higher, faster energy. So really, at the time when this is happening, we can't think, you're not going to notice what the trigger is because you've gone into survival mode. However, I'd like you just to reflect for a moment what your early warning signs may be. And actually, being able to name it as 'okay, this is my anxiety,' because often people may think that there is something from outer space going on, rather than actually knowing that this is fear based on something in my environment. What is the tiger? What is the dinosaur? So, it's being able to notice what is my fear. And then I'd also encourage you then to notice what goes on in my body, what might I notice.

So let me give you some examples of what is normal, that happens when we are under threat. And it's really useful for people to be able to bring this into awareness. So very often, our breathing will change. So, it becomes quicker and shallower. And remember the dinosaur example, this is so we've got more oxygen to run away. So, the heart is going to be pumping fast. And it's also pumping blood to the larger muscles, the legs, and the arms so we can run like hell or go and fight the dinosaur. It is so bad people go to A&E and ring 999 because the thing that having a heart attack. And as medical people who are maybe listening to this podcast will understand, very often they have to send people home and say, 'this is anxiety.' This has been particularly bad over the last year. Your head might get dizzy, maybe lightheaded, tunnel vision and a dry mouth. So very often people say 'oh, yeah, my mouth has gone dry.' So, it's a decrease in saliva, because primarily, we don't need to digest food when we got to go and have the energy to go and kill the dinosaur and survive. So, a lot of young people have actually mouth sprays or have a drink of water with them, which is really good. Our thoughts are racing, often more on the negative side. Remember, it's back to the war. We're in survival mode where you're not in the here and now. Yes, we can make quick decisions. However, there can be a focus on it's all about the danger and we're not thinking rationally in the here and now. And if you have a place in your body that may be weak or that is sort of your weakest spot, when you're stressed and when you're anxious it's going to go. So this might be people's backs, it might be people's knees, it might be their shoulders. So, it's just bringing into awareness, 'hang on my back's playing up a memory, am I really stressed, could that be connected?' Actually, yes, it really is connected. And also, with this huge release of adrenaline and cortisol, it goes in our stomach. So, people say, 'I feel sick,' and often people are sick. And it's really just connecting that with what's going on, can you spot that early, so you can get safe. Butterflies would be mild, but often people will talk about, like molten lava coming up, the front of the body coming up and interfering with the breathing and connecting with that pounding heart. And also, something that is very common with anxiety is that you're going to need to go to the toilet a lot, because our muscles relax, because our energy is being used to go and fight or flight. So very often, when people talk about IBS, this is an anxiety response to what is going on in the situation. So again, I need to ask you just after the event, pause and reflect 'what was my fear? What was going on in the environment at the time?' You know, when our thinking started to return, you know, palms may be sweaty shaking. And with all this it's like having 50 espressos and a couple of Red Bulls, we can't sleep. So, you're going to be unable to sleep when you're super anxious. And when we don't sleep, we really go towards not feeling very well, our thinking goals, we can walk towards madness quite quickly. So, it's really important that we start to notice our body, our sleep. So, we can start to put some really healthy coping tools and mechanisms in place.

Sarah:

As you're speaking, Lorna, you know, it really does show how our mental and physical health have to be seen in parity. Because what you're describing there, I mean, so many of us experienced that all the time, we probably don't even realise it's happening after a while. But left unaddressed, it's going to cause potentially some serious illness for you, isn't it?

Lorna:

Absolutely.

Sarah:

I'm just wondering how, you know, you've talked very much about the body and how much we can hold this within us. I know that you're a keen proponent of movement and breath. How does movement and breathing help with our anxiety?

Lorna:

Okay, great question. And I just need to clarify when we talk about movement and breath. I am not a dancer. I don't think I made the cut for the dance class, the singing class, any of this, okay. So, when I'm talking about movement, this is going for a walk, having choice, getting safe, okay. And also, it's interesting, there was something on TikTok recently, Sarah, and it was a young person sort of doing a skit of calling the mental health crisis team, and that the person on the phone was saying to them, 'just take three breaths,' and I get it, you know, it was a skit. However, when we understand the why we're doing it, a bit a neuroscience, and actually all of my clients and this is what I do on my YouTube channel to explain this very simply, so we understand why. And ultimately, when we have a panic attack, when we have anxiety, we cannot think we do not know our own name, we do not know where we are. If you can remember to breathe, and move your body, it will bring you back into a state where you can think, then you can put other things in place. So actually, the reason behind the movement is this - You are riddled with anxiety and cortisol. So, you are high, you need to go and burn that off. You need to go for a run, go for a walk before you can just sit and meditate or relax because you are wired. So, in the animal kingdom a horse, a deer and even our dogs and cats, when they get a fright or when there is some fear, they will react, they have a rush of adrenaline and cortisol, they bolt and then they have a good shake. And then they just get on with eating some daisies or, you know, wanting to have a snack. They just get on with the day. Where do we go and shake? We need to get rid of that adrenaline and cortisol. So, people say, 'oh, yes, you know, I listen to the apps calm etc. I can't meditate,' of course you can't meditate because it's as if you've had, you know, 50 espressos. So, we need to move our bodies first, then we can sit, then we can relax, but we need to get safe. And also, with the breath, and again these are tools, this isn't a magic fix, these are just tools that we can all have in our toolbox to stay well, with the breath quite simply when we inhale for four, so we can do this now live, inhale for four, two, three, four, exhale for six, two, three, four, five, six. When we do this, we instantly impact our nervous system. So rather than the high arousal, which is called the sympathetic nervous system, high, high alert, red, alarm bell in the middle of the brain, when we exhale for longer, it actually switches on the opposite side of that, the earth that pulls us down. It's called the parasympathetic nervous system. Purely by doing that, inhale for four, exhale for six, it will bring us back over time, five minutes, ten minutes, 20 minutes into a place where we can think and be in the here and now. So, we need to just back it up with a little bit of science, it is a tool that we can use.

Sarah:

I felt that when we did that, we only did it once, we just breathed in for four and then held it and then let it go for six and I felt immediately an impact from that. Would you say it's a good idea, we're always scheduling meetings and zooms and everything else, perhaps we should schedule in ten minutes in our calendars for breathing?

Lorna:

For breathing, and you can do it walking as well. So, you can just do four steps, six steps, and then in awareness, slow it down. So, in the olden days, people would say, you know, if people are stressed, that they're bad with the nerves, and they have to go, and they sit people in a corner with a brown paper bag. So, there's something about breathing, You do not need to sit in a corner, you need to move, you need to walk, and you need to feel safe. So that's more the crisis side and that we have tools to use, it's a tool. On the other side of this, and when I say other side, I mean, when people aren't in crisis, when they are working on themselves every day to stay well, and we forget, we fall off the path we get back on.

When we move and every client, every person will have a different type of movement that they're like, okay, and the client will always say the thing that they want to do, I never have any clue what they're going to say, and I love this. So, when we also move our bodies, we create serotonin. Serotonin is the same chemical that is in an SSRI, your antidepressant. So, what we're then able to do is build up a natural resource of serotonin, from the movement. So, what I say to people is, it's not about fitting in your jeans, you're probably not going to want to do regular exercise, and move. It's having the mantra of, 'and I'm doing this for my mental health,' knowing that you're not going to do it, 'I'm doing this for my mental health, I'm creating natural serotonin.' And it's very important, because there's loads of books on this, people have been talking about this for years and years and years, actually, thousands of years, really, if I think about yoga and movement. Unless you feel it in your body, you are not going to do it tomorrow, you are not going to do it again. And some people won't want to do it, that's their choice. But when people feel it somatically in their body, that they have a better day, that actually they were less angry, work was better, that didn't snap at the kids as much. They were able to make better choices that day. And it was because of the movement, whatever they may choose, it might be running, walking, cycling, kettlebells, whatever that might be. They have then felt it in their body and that creates change.

Sarah:

People may be listening to this who aren't able-bodied and it's not necessarily an easy thing if you're living in a high rise flat even to be able to just step outside. How can people find what's right and sustainable for them?

Lorna:

And that's a great question. So, I'd just ask you to think about, what would you like to do? Do you want to be on a skateboard? Do you want to just be feeling some freedom in your upper body? I work a lot with people who aren't a full movement, don't have a range of movement and actually, you can do this work seated, right? It's not about running a marathon, it's about something that's accessible and starting small. So, it may be just some gentle shoulder rolls, bringing some movement into the upper body, squeezing the shoulder blades, circles in the wrists in the fingers noticing tension, gentle stretching, and listening to your body about what you'd like to do. So, there's lots of videos on YouTube that are maybe seated yoga, if that's something that's interesting to you, or you might want to do weights. It really does come from the individual actually, which are find wonderful. Because unless they have a want to do it, they're not going to do it. It's like, I think cycling is great and I see wonderful results for people, but it's not for me, I'm absolutely exhausted, I'm wrecked for days if I do a big cycle. But other movement is good for me, I do yoga, I do weights. But I'm not that sporty person, I literally need, there's a phrase a wild horse had to drag me to do it. Very often, it's a wild horse that's dragged me out of the house to do this activity.

Sarah:

I'm just wondering, as a psychotherapist, like yourself, what other the support might you offer someone trying to manage their anxieties at this time?

Lorna:

So, in therapy, we would make sure that the client felt safe. And really, that the client is able to talk about what's triggering, what's going on for them, and pulling it apart and beginning to notice what is going on with their body. And if they're in crisis, that they have some tools, for example, if you are super anxious, and having panic attacks, you blow that breath out for six, really, so it's inhale for four, and you blow it out, you absolutely blow it out. And also, there's something around clients becoming aware of triggers for their anxiety.

I do this all the time, so I sometimes may take this for granted, but it's knowing that what fuels going into my body because if I'm not eating regularly, my blood sugar is going to crash, therefore, my anxiety is going to kick in. And I'm more likely to be triggered and to be going into that higher state of hyperarousal. As well as caffeine, so this is real health, just awareness work, but around caffeine. So, caffeine and anxiety are absolutely best friends. Again, alcohol, and alcohol is a depressant and also, it's probably the most popular coping strategy for adults in the West, shall we say. So, alcohol may sound like a great idea at the time, because it will very quickly stop you being in that hyper aroused state. However, you're not going to sleep, your body's going to digest it, your brain is going to be super dehydrated in the night. And the next day or later on, that anxiety is going to come back hotter and faster. So, there's something around clients having this in awareness, so they're able to put the correct tools in place. And really, we've got to get feeling steady, safe and grounded before we can start getting into any deep psychotherapy, because we need the clients to be breathing, feeling steady and safe in their own bodies.

Sarah:

It's very difficult, isn't it, to kind of build in healthy practices when you're just running to keep up. I'm wondering then what advice you would have for somebody listening to this as to how they can even start to build some kind of regular practice to manage their anxiety. Is there any tips you can give us just to make this a habit?

Lorna:

Yeah, that's a really great question actually, Sarah. So, it's knowing that yes, I can go to therapy, knowing I have choice. But actually, just taking a moment to have awareness of 'okay, that maybe has triggered me, this happened and what choice do I have?' With anxiety, I really need to encourage people to move, feel safe. And, you know, if you're in a situation where your life is at risk, taking three breaths, it's really not going to do anything. You may have an abusive partner, or you may be concerned about financial stressors, really, that's where three breaths isn't going to do anything. You need to get safe. So, it's who can you talk to, who's safe and confidential, who you trust? And again, our friends and family can be wonderful, and we can love them, but they might just start talking about themselves. So, it's knowing that, you know, I can go and talk to a therapist. Coming back to notice what your triggers are. Am I putting self-care in? And self-care isn't just you know, a face mask and bath and it might be that, but for me it's really coming back to fuel, food, sleep. What am I putting into my body? What am I coping strategies? Am I using the phone too much? You know, it's really bringing that into awareness and just sitting with that and noticing what is making me feel better? What is not? And again, I have to really bring in for when you are safe for maintenance, that you are moving your body, that you are feeling steady. And again, it doesn't just mean yoga and mindfulness, it may be fishing, football, playing netball, all sorts of things. We need to get your heart rate up, at least once a day, you're going to sleep better, it's going to impact your nervous system. And if it gets too much, I really want people to hear that, go online, look at some therapists, maybe just pick a few who you like the look of, and then contact them, drop them an email, and have a chat and just know that you have choice.

Sarah:

Lorna this has been so helpful. This is the kind of podcast I'd want to always keep on my phone or on my desktop, because it's such an important piece of emergency SOS when we find ourselves feeling like things are spiralling out of control, which unfortunately, I think most of us do, at some point, most days and most weeks at the moment. And I think that you've really got across to us some very simple techniques, be it our basic hygiene around sleep and caffeine and alcohol. And just some simple breathing, just taking a few moments. This is a good reminder for us to keep close to ourselves when times get particularly rough. So thank you very much for your advice.

Lorna:

You're very welcome. And the reason that I do this, Sarah, is because working with hundreds and hundreds of clients, I realise I'm repeating the same information to people. This is why I put it on YouTube and make it freely available to people. And also, it makes therapy more accessible. People already want therapy, it's in the media, on a lot of reality TV, it's very normal for people that have therapy. So let's make it in the UK accessible for people. It's already happening. I have to say, I'm really happy it is already happening, that's why I do it.

Sarah:

The other important message you got across is actually you know, you've only got to look at human biology and history to show that when we do get anxious, when we do get scared, that's a perfectly normal reaction. It doesn't mean that there's something wrong with you. It means that actually, you're having a perfectly natural reaction in a strange world.

Lorna:

Yeah, and it's knowing that there's something triggering you in your environment and like you say, Sarah, it is the normal reaction to the abnormal situation.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Lorna Evan, speaking to Sarah Niblock, the CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy. If, after listening to that, you feel you could benefit for some talking time with a psychotherapist then go to the Find a Therapist section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website address is www.psychotherapy.org.uk and use the Find a Therapist tool. We'll also be discussing anxiety and its effect on the body in Psychologies magazine this month. You will find it online at www.psychologies.co.uk. We'll be doing a podcast each month with some of the UKCPs psychotherapists, so remember to like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first. It also helps others to find us too. So, join us again next month, till then thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves.