

Stephanie: This is Episode number 171 for Stay Happily Married: Anxiety is Ruining My Relationship.

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Stephanie: I'm Stephanie Lockwood, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show, everyone. Anxiety is reaching epidemic proportions, with nearly 50% of Americans meeting the criteria for an anxiety disorder at some point in their life. We worry about money, our health, safety, car accidents, whether or not people like us, traveling, work, and everything else, wasting an enormous amount of time and energy that would be better spent elsewhere.

An often overlooked area of concern is the impact of anxiety on our close relationships. Dr. Christine Korol is a Cognitive-Behavioral Therapist who specializes in the treatment of anxiety disorders, and sees the consequences of untreated anxiety on the relationships of many of her patients.

Dr. Christine Korol is a psychologist specializing in anxiety and stress in adults and children, and is currently practicing in Calgary, Alberta. She has worked for many years in both private practice and in hospital settings, and is a former lecturer of the University of British Columbia. Christine is also a cartoonist and author of the blog, wiredtoworry.com, which we will have a link for in the show notes. She is currently working on an illustrated guide to anxiety management.

Welcome to the show, Christine. I'm so glad you could join us.

Christine: Oh, thank you.

Stephanie: All right. Let's start with the basics. What exactly is an anxiety disorder?

Christine: Well, everyone experiences anxiety. An anxiety disorder is when the anxiety becomes so intense and persistent that it interferes with your day-to-day activities. You really have a hard time at work and with your family and relationships. There are different types of anxiety disorders as well. It's an umbrella term for things like phobias and panic disorder, and you could worry about your health, or obsessive-compulsive disorder and social and generalized anxiety.

There's a whole different set of anxiety disorders that you could fall under. The main characteristic is that they really cause trouble in your life. They bother you, and you'd like it to end.

Stephanie: What exactly causes these anxiety disorders?

Christine: They definitely run in families. We do see family history. Even kids who are adopted away will be very similar to their biological parents in terms of their anxiety. But that's not the entire story. Just like if you have trouble losing weight, that could be a genetic factor, too, but that doesn't mean it's impossible to maintain a healthy body weight.

It's the same thing with anxiety disorders. They are actually very treatable. In cognitive therapy, we really focus on how changing the way you think changes the way you feel. In anxiety in particular, the cognitive model of anxiety is that anxiety occurs when you underestimate your ability to cope, and you overestimate the danger of the thing that you're worrying about.

Stephanie: That's an interesting way to put it. I've never heard that one. What are the typical signs and symptoms when someone has an anxiety disorder?

Christine: There are four different categories of symptoms: physical, cognitive, behavioral and emotional.

The physical signs are probably the most troublesome. They're the ones that everybody wants to just go away. When people come to see me in my office, they're just hoping I can make them disappear. I need a little bit of time, but there's a lot that can be done.

Your heart racing, lots of muscle tension and tightness, feeling like you're not getting enough air or you're choking, some dizziness, even having hot flashes and feeling sick to your stomach. Any of those jittery feelings are the main distressing physical symptoms of anxiety.

And then the cognitive thoughts that we have when we're anxious; feeling like I'm going crazy, I'm a burden to my family, my concentration is off, I can't focus, my memory is poor, this is going to kill me, this is terrible, this is awful. Those kinds of thoughts really intensify. They're like fuel on the fire of the physical symptoms. They really can get you going and you can wind yourself up.

The behavioral symptoms are avoiding things that you normally would want to be able to do. If you have a panic attack in the mall, you find you avoid the mall. If you're afraid of public speaking, you might avoid a career that requires you to give presentations or lead sales calls. Or you might look for reassurance, especially in relationships, since this is the focus of today's talk.

People with anxiety tend to really ask, "Did I screw that up? Did I make a mistake? Do you think everything is going to be okay?" Or they might apologize excessively as well. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry that I did this or that I did that," trying to make sure that nobody is mad at them for being anxious. Or you could clam up and not say what you feel and keep quiet. That's another kind of more verbal avoidance.

The emotional symptoms, of course, are just the feeling nervous and edgy, tense and kind of jumpy.

There are a lot of symptoms to anxiety disorders, and once they reach a point where they are really bothering you and making it difficult for you to get through your day, then that's when we would look at helping a person overcome them.

Stephanie: So when people are experiencing these fits of anxiety, what exactly happens when things don't go as planned? Like you said, they are constantly seeking reassurance. If they have a specific type of anxiety, whether it's related to a factor in a relationship or just life in general, what happens when things don't go the way that they need them to?

Christine: It depends on the person. Some people will clam up and not say what they want, and go along and feel very uncomfortable in the situation that they're in. Others will freak out. If somebody tried to get me to pet a rattlesnake, I don't think I would sit still quietly. I'd jump up, I'd step back, I'd say, "Get away." If they kept coming at me, I'd yell at them.

When that fear response gets activated, you can have quite a strong reaction. It can lead to arguments and disagreements. It depends. If you feel like you can speak up, if you feel comfortable with your partner, then you might have a moment with them where you start to lose it or you feel like you're losing it. The difficult thing is to know what a balanced reaction is. That's something that we work on in cognitive therapy, being able to articulate what it is that you're feeling anxious about and knowing when it's a good idea to be cautious in an area.

Maybe, something your partner wants to do doesn't really feel safe. If somebody asked me to go bungee jumping, I don't think I'd be up for that, and that's okay. But if I didn't want to go on a holiday because I was afraid of the plane coming down, then we're in the range of anxiety disorder.

In cognitive therapy, we spend a lot of time helping people recognize when is it something that you would like to do but it's fear getting in the way, versus when is it smart to not go ahead and do something that might be a bit more risky or dangerous than most people would find. Does that make sense?

Stephanie: Yeah. So anxiety obviously can affect so many different aspects of a person's life, but when it comes to where relationships are involved, where exactly can anxiety affect the couple?

Christine: There are lots of different ways. What anxiety really does is it puts on the brakes, so when a situation comes up where you feel uncomfortable, you might say, "I don't want to do this," but your partner may want to. It might be really important to your partner. Maybe, they really like travel or want a little adventure in their lives, and you're not really comfortable with that.

Or maybe they want to spend more money than you do. Money is a big issue. A lot of people with anxiety may even have a number in their head that their savings account should be at in order for them to feel safe, like they could weather any financial storm, and then the other partner feels like, "Well, I can't spend any money." I've even worked with more than one couple where the anxious person controlled all the money and would hand out checks as needed to the other partner, really watching everything.

There can be a lot of disagreements about what's safe. What's a reasonable level of savings, what's a reasonable way to run the household, and it can build up a lot of resentment and anger on both sides, actually, and hostility and impatience with the other person with whom they can't see eye-to-eye.

When you're working with couples, one of the things that you really want to do is make sure that you see that it's not just the two of you against each other, it's both of you working against the anxiety and getting to a place where everybody feels comfortable.

The other thing that can happen a lot is the anxious person keeps quiet about things, not speaking up for fear that the other person will get mad at them. But the non-anxious partner can feel that way, too. They can feel like they have to keep quiet and go along with whatever the anxious person wants in order to keep peace in the house. Whoever it is, if one person is trying to keep the peace but they don't feel good about it, it can lead to resentment where either one can blow up later on.

When you work a little bit more with your anxiety, a healthy response is to laugh it off. "There goes my brain again trying to protect me," or making a joke about it, and learning how to work with the anxiety. So knowing that even though the anxiety comes up, it's not necessarily a reason to put the brakes on and not go ahead with something that might be fun for one or both of you.

Generally, though, the big consequence in relationships, I think, is that the relationship starts to feel unequal. The anxious person can feel guilty or like a burden to their other partner. The other partner can be worried about them. If they give in to the anxiety, then that can even make things worse. Even though most anxious people don't want to be worrying, they can't stop it, so they kind of feel like they're going crazy or that they're neurotic and really troubling their partner, which isn't good. You always feel like you're in a one down position, or like one person is the calm, cool, collected one in charge of everything, and the other one is the worrier who gets themselves into trouble.

It can be very distressing. It feels very upsetting for couples when anxiety gets in the way.

Stephanie: I could foresee a situation, especially when you're dealing with the kind of anxiety where it seems like the anxious person is trying to control all aspects of life, which everyone knows is impossible, I can just see someone exhausting themselves trying to make that work, trying to control everything. How could the non-anxious spouse go about approaching the anxious spouse about their actions and behaviors without the anxious person feeling like they're being attacked or that someone is just there to try and change them?

Christine: I think everybody has to have some awareness that this is anxiety getting in the way. What the non-anxious partner can do is really acknowledge how very exhausting it is. I'm going to be doing a web course on anxiety coming up in a couple of weeks, and we're going to leave it on the web so whenever you happen to hear this, it should be up on wiredtoworry.com.

The first lesson in that course is basically just how demoralizing and exhausting anxiety is when you're living with it. It absolutely drains you of all the energy you have. I think when you're in this situation, what you want to do is acknowledge to your anxious partner that you really know that they are concerned and they are trying to keep the family or the relationship on good ground, but it's exhausting. You don't want them to have the whole burden of trying to make sure that you stay safe and secure.

What you'd like to work towards is everybody being comfortable with a certain amount of risk so that you're on the same team. Once you get to a point where you do acknowledge the anxiety and everybody is working towards it, when it comes up, go "Is that you talking or is that your anxious brain talking?" Make a distinction that it's not just your partner who is worrying about this, it's basically how we're built.

The body is not built to keep us happy; it's built to keep us safe. It really doesn't care if you're happy or relaxed. In fact, the people who survive are the ones who scan constantly for danger. If we were living in a tribe a million years ago, somebody had to stay up and listen for lions and other predators that might be coming to eat us. The ones who were just enjoying a walk in the woods and not having a care in the world would get eaten. It was the ones that were walking through the woods, always scanning and looking for rustling leaves in the distance, that stayed alive.

This is why there's this kind of hyper-vigilance all the time with anxiety. So just knowing that your partner is on high alert can give you a little bit more empathy and patience for them when they're struggling.

Stephanie: That's got to be exhausting. Like you said, if you bring it down to the basics of how humans function, this level of stress just can't be healthy to an individual person, to always be on alert 24 hours a day, let alone a couple. What would you recommend if someone was this kind of anxious and maybe not speaking up, not

stating their preferences, and they were holding back, how would you recommend someone go about changing these behaviors in themselves?

Christine: There are a number of ways. Certainly, we know cognitive therapy is very helpful for anxiety disorders. If you wanted to see a therapist, a good way to find a therapist is to ask them if they do cognitive therapy and to learn a little bit more to see if they actually do cognitive therapy. Judith Beck, who runs the Beck Institute, recently wrote a Huffington Post article about how a number of people who call themselves cognitive therapists aren't actually doing cognitive therapy, so it's a bit of a buzzword.

A good place to search is actually the Academy of Cognitive Therapy website. They have a list of therapists in different areas so it can make it easier to find cognitive therapists. Asking, "What do you do to treat anxiety? Do you work with my thoughts, my feelings, my behaviors? Are you comfortable helping me do experiments or exposure exercises that can help me face some of the things that I fear gently?" That can be a good resource.

You can look for a training center. Often a lot of universities have a center where they train students to do cognitive therapy. You can call the Psychology Departments and see if they have a predominantly cognitive therapy orientation. That can be another good place to find good training.

There are a lot of self-help resources. They can be a little bit overwhelming to try and sort through and figure out. There's a great book that just came out a couple of weeks ago by Beck and Clark, Aaron T. Beck who invented cognitive therapy and David Clark, called "The Anxiety and Worry Workbook". I don't have it in front of me, but it's a fantastic book and really nice. It goes through everything that you would need to know for social anxiety, generalized anxiety, and panic attacks. So that's a great resource as well.

"Mind Over Mood" by Greenberger and Padesky is also an excellent book. Actually, if you go to my website, wiredtoworry.com, I have a list of resources there as well, so you can find some more books that I like. Certainly on the Academy of Cognitive Therapy website, there are even more books for different conditions, both for professionals and the public, different self-help books.

I mentioned a little bit earlier that I'm going to do a six-week online anxiety class. It's going to be free actually, and we're going to keep the recordings up. What I'm doing right now is I'm building a library of cognitive therapy videos for people to go and watch any time, so always for free. That's kind of my way of giving back, and it's starting to be a fun project. The library is just growing, so you can go to wiredtoworry.com and check that out.

The other thing that can be helpful is mindfulness meditation. We find that when you add mindfulness meditation, a particular kind of meditation where you learn

to refocus your attention over and over again onto an object and that keeps you more in the present moment. That really helps a lot with reducing relapse with anxiety disorders and generally improving outcomes.

There are a number of places where you can learn more about mindfulness. You can look at local meditation centers in your community, a number of hospitals now have mindfulness-based stress reduction programs so you can check with your local hospital. Also, Jon Kabat-Zinn has written a number of books on the subject as well. So there are lots of great resources for that, too.

Stephanie: I wasn't expecting so many in-depth answers. It's a lot out there.

Christine: I think that's the hard part, though. There's a lot out there and it's hard to sort through, because there are a lot of books that are just not covering what really works. There really are good treatment programs out there. Even with the self-help programs, there are a lot of self-help programs that have been found to be really effective in reducing anxiety. Many people, when it clicks, you feel better.

It doesn't necessarily have to take a long time to get over an anxiety disorder. For some people, it's just hearing the right information and you get it right away, and it clicks. Other people, like me, I'm a slow learner. It takes me a little bit longer. I'll get a little bit stuck.

My problem is I often try too hard with things like this. The harder you try to get rid of anxiety, usually the longer it takes to get over anxiety. It's like trying to fall asleep. The harder you try and fall asleep, the more likely it is that you're going to be up all night. And the harder you try to stay up all night, the more likely it is that you're going to fall asleep.

Anxiety is one of those paradoxes where you really do get stuck if you try too hard. I treat a lot of children for anxiety and they tend to get better fairly quickly because they're like, "Oh, well, of course that works." They're not as skeptical.

If you are ready and it's not too entrenched or hasn't been going on too long, a good self-help book could definitely be enough to help you. There are lots of resources every day, but the Academy of Cognitive Therapy is probably a good place to see a lot of them.

Stephanie: Thank you so much, Christine, for taking the time and being on the show with us today.

Christine: I'm happy to chat about this any time. Thank you for having me, Stephanie.

Stephanie: To find out more about Dr. Christine Korol, you can visit her site at therapyworks.ca, or her illustrated blog at www.wiredtoworry.com. As Christine said, she's actually doing a six-part cognitive therapy web class starting in

November of 2011, and all of these videos will be available on wiredtoworry.com for your viewing pleasure.

Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. We always love to hear from you. To comment on this or any other episode, you call our Listener Comment Line at 919-256-3083, or you can actually e-mail your comments to comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Stephanie Lockwood. Until next time, Stay Happily Married!

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