

## ***Relaxing Anxiety During Stressful Times***

[Link to Episode](#)

**About the Episode:** If you live in the United States – and probably for many people who don't – it's been a bit of a stressful week. Today we're talking about relaxing anxiety, weathering the storm, and taking in the year as a whole.

### **Key Topics:**

1:30: Where do we want to allocate our attention?

5:00: Rational, appropriate stress and anxiety.

8:00: The cost of 'negative' emotions.

12:30: Practices of calming stress.

14:45: Giving yourself grace, and accepting some amount of stress.

17:40: Deal with the bad, turn toward the good, take in the good.

22:15: Seeing what is true.

26:45: Being happy when others are not.

36:40: A practice for calming and centering.

44:45: Learning from the hard parts of practice.

### **Expanded Notes**

**2:50:** Okay, let's start with a juicy one. What the heck is a *libidinal cathexis*, and how does one withdraw it?

As a quick disclaimer, I'm not a psychoanalyst. I wasn't familiar with much of this material before researching it for purposes of these notes, so I may be off on some of the details here.

This concept [finds its origins](#) with the psychoanalytic approach of Sigmund Freud, who thought of the cathexis and *anticathexis* as ways in which the self (and particularly the id) [utilizes its energy](#) or prevents that energy from being utilized. A cathexis is essentially an emotional investment in something outside of the self, some other idea, thing, or individual. *Libido* is generally understood as sexual energy, though it's sometimes used

commonly to refer to energy or attention in a broader sense. If you've read any Freud, it won't come as a surprise to you that much of his work was driven by [understanding sex](#), and he framed much of his theory in terms of how an individual allocates their sexual energy.

When we form a cathexis with an idea, we're applying our energy (sexual or otherwise), attention, or emotion to it. That energy originates from the id, which is the root of our basic needs and desires. The id is incapable of separating imagination from reality, which is part of why we don't act on every one of the id's impulses. Simply forming the image of the desire in our mind can be enough to satisfy the id. The ego is responsible for taking this energy and converting into something that exists out in the world.

An anticathexis is the opposite of that: the blockage of energy from being able to be directed at an idea. When an impulse of the id is socially unacceptable, the ego steps in and tries to cut that energy off. Returning to Freud, this blockage often took the form of *repression*. It costs the ego energy to repress the id's impulses, and over time the repressed energy builds up and must find some form of release. Under ideal circumstances this results in [sublimation](#), where the unacceptable desire is converted into some useful impulse. For instance, directing it into acts of creation like art or writing. But much of the time this results in less healthy ways of coping, including the manifestation of mental disorders.

To frame all of this in terms of our conversation, Rick is using these terms here broadly and loosely in order to illustrate a general point. To simplify, what are some of the things that you have an energetic bond with that may no longer be supporting your mental health? How could you redirect that energy in more useful ways – both for yourself and for the planet?

**5:30:** This is a key point, and a pretty good summary of much of what we've talked about recently on the podcast. What are you *using* the consumption of political media, or news generally, in pursuit of?

I think it's fundamentally moral to be an engaged, informed, energized citizen of the world, and to use that energy *both* in support of own lives and the lives of those less fortunate than we are. That feels like [right action](#) to me.

That action is supported to some extent by the consumption of news media. But sometimes it's also supported by unplugging from that media if we need to take the time to recharge and refocus. Sometimes it's supported by focusing on the local level rather than global one, or simply trying to be a good citizen inside of your immediate community. If our media consumption supports the goal of being a good citizen, then great. But if it's just a form of intensely anxiety-provoking entertainment, or [doomscrolling](#), then I don't think we're doing anything to support either ourselves or the causes we care about.

**7:30:** As a quick detour, it's pretty common to run into quotes on social media attributed to the Buddha like, "Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment."

[Fake Buddha Quotes](#) is one of my favorite websites for this reason. The accurate translation of the [passage in question](#) is closer to:

*Let go of the past, let go of the future,  
let go of the present, and cross over to the farther shore of existence.  
With mind wholly liberated,  
you shall come no more to birth and death.*

The overall point the Buddha was making is simply that none of our experiences should be clung to. They all arise, and they all fall away. That doesn't mean we can't enjoy them while they're here, or make our suffering any less real. It's simply a feature of existence.

**8:00:** As we've explored many times on the podcast, the mind is built from that which the attention rests upon. Your nervous system is designed to be changed by your experiences, and your experiences depend on what you're paying attention to. In order to convert passing experiences into lasting inner strengths, we have to be able to focus

attention on an experience long enough for it to start being consolidated into the nervous system. This is one of the key benefits of mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness is the key to regulating your attention so that you get the most out of beneficial experiences while limiting the impact of stressful, harmful ones. It enables you to recognize where your attention has gone, and return it to where you'd like it to be.

Other things could be happening alongside mindfulness, such as compassion for your hurt feelings or caution about a truck getting too close on a busy highway, but mindfulness itself does not try to change your experience or behavior. It is receptive and accepting, not judging or directing. Mindfulness holds your reactions in a spacious awareness that is itself never disturbed by whatever passes through it, and it allows us to take a step back and observe those reactions compassionately when they do naturally arise.

**8:45:** If you're new to the podcast you may be unfamiliar with the language of [first and second darts](#).

There are many kinds of suffering a person can experience, but we can place most into two groups. The first darts of life are unavoidable forms of pain. This includes literal physical pain, as well as some unavoidable painful emotional reactions.

Then there are the second darts: our emotional reactions to those darts. For example, you could react to a headache with anxiety that it might mean a brain tumor; you could greet a romantic rejection with harsh self-criticism. To use the [Buddha's words](#), when we are "touched by [a] painful feeling, [we] resist and resent it. Then in he who so resists and resents that painful feeling, an underlying tendency of resistance against that painful feeling comes to underlie his mind."

There are plenty of things that bring great suffering as we are experiencing them. But much of the suffering in the world is created not by our experiences, but by our reactions to them. When we accept our negative emotions, our resistance to painful experiences – and the pain of that resistance – tends to decrease.

There are two front-line interventions for limiting the pain of second darts. First, accept the inevitability of first darts. They hurt, but pain is the price of living. Second, work on responding rather than reacting. Increase the space between what happens to you and what happens next. This is a habit we can build over time with deliberate practice, and there's an enormous difference between reacting immediately and even putting a single second between negative stimuli and our response to them.

**11:45:** We've explored the costs of stress many times in this space, here's a summary of some of the major points:

1. When we're stressed, the SNS secretes adrenaline and noradrenaline (also known as epinephrine and norepinephrine), which we experience as the "fight or flight" response. This stress response inhibits other systems in the body – [including the endocrine system](#). There is decreased [secretion of insulin, hormones related to sexual behavior, and reproduction and growth and tissue repair](#), and inhibition of the parasympathetic nervous system – which is associated with rest and recovery.
2. Traumatic stress is associated with [increased cortisol and norepinephrine responses](#) to subsequent stressors, which means that people who have been traumatized get hit harder by future stressful situations. Put another way, the [negative impact of stress is cumulative](#). The longer we spend under stressful conditions, the greater the impact of stress on our physiology.
3. Our ability to access higher-order processing, which relies on sophisticated cortical structures in the brain, is [impaired when under extreme stress](#).
4. Regular exposure to high levels of stress can actually change the [epigenetic expression of genes](#).
5. Stress [inhibits digestion](#), and generally messes with the gastrointestinal system, which is one of the reasons that digestive issues tend to accompany chronic stress.
6. Particularly relevant these days, [chronic stress suppresses the immune system](#).
7. There's evidence that [chronic stress disrupts neuroplasticity](#).
8. [High levels of stress tend to impair memory retrieval](#), which is why it can sometimes feel like we forget everything we've ever learned when "put on the spot."

**13:30:** We've explored material related to experiencing the body as a whole a number of times in the past, alongside associated material related to the *allocentric* and *egocentric* modes of experiencing:

- Egocentric – Things known from the personal, subjective perspective of “my body” or “my self.” What things have to do with me. A targeted, often narrow view.
- Allocentric – Things known from an impersonal, objective perspective. The whole setting or context in its own right. Less sense of “I.” A wide view.

Taking in the “body as a whole” probably requires some amount of activation of systems related to both the egocentric and allocentric modes of experiencing, and could be a way to gently transition from our egocentric experience to a more allocentric one.

In *Neurodharma*, Rick offered a practice of experiencing wholeness:

*Resting at ease in fullness, be aware of the sensations of breathing in the left side of your chest.*

*The right side . . . and left and right together . . . being aware of the sensations in your chest as a whole. Many sensations as a single experience.*

*Gradually widen awareness of breathing to include your stomach and back . . . head and hips . . . arms and legs included. Being aware of your whole body as a single field of experience . . . abiding as a whole body breathing.*

*While remaining aware of the whole body, include sounds in awareness . . . hearing and breathing together. Then including seeing . . . feelings . . . and anything else in awareness.*

*Accepting all that you're experiencing . . . opening to your whole being . . . accepting all the parts of yourself . . . all the parts of you as a single whole.*

*Widening further to include awareness . . . all of you as a whole . . . abiding undivided.*

**14:00:** The body's systems related to fear and anxiety are some of its oldest and most primal. Many of those systems are based out of the *amygdala*, an ancient part of the

brain near its base that's responsible for many functions related to emotion and memory. When you feel threatened and afraid, the amygdala automatically [activates the fight-or-flight response](#) by sending out signals to release stress hormones that prepare your body to fight or run away. Layered “on top” of the amygdala are a wide variety of other brain structures including the [frontal lobes](#), a much newer part of the brain responsible for many functions including rational decision making.

Early humans were exposed to the constant threat of death. To improve their chances of survival, the amygdala evolved the ability to [work very quickly](#). This allows your body to leap into action to defend you before you're able to make a conscious choice. It's not quite the same thing, but a classic example of this is touching a hot stove and reactively pulling your hand away before you even experience pain consciously.

One of the most interesting features of the extended Amygdala's fear system is that it experiences [anticipated threat in much the same way that it processes actual threat](#). Unpredictable activation of our fear system – such as in laboratory experiments where a subject is told that something bad is going to happen to them [but not when it is going to happen](#) – is even worse, and evokes significantly more anxiety than predictable events.

This is why practices like “alright right now” are so fundamental to well-being these days. The pandemic places threat at everyone's doorstep, and while that threat has some predictable elements its invisible nature makes it fundamentally unpredictable. It's impossible to anticipate when and where the virus might exist, and this unpredictability throws our threat system into overdrive.

Here's a practice of experiencing the body as being “alright right now” that can help calm the amygdala and move us back toward a place where we see the real threats clearly, and can then do more about them:

*Take some breaths and relax. Be mindful of any tension, uneasiness, or worry. Step back from any anxiety and observe it. Let it be, and let it come and go.*

*Let fear in any form move to the background of awareness. In the foreground, bring to mind things that protect you. Be aware of the solidity of the floor beneath your feet, the stability*

*of a chair, the sheltering of a roof over your head. Be aware of your clothing, shoes, and other things that protect you. As you recognize these protections, open to feeling increasingly protected.*

*Notice that you are basically all right, right now.*

*You may not have been all right in the past, and you may not be all right in the future, but in this moment you are OK, protected, and resourced.*

*There may be pain, there may be hurt or sorrow off to the edges of your mind. But there is no mortal threat, no tiger about to pounce. You are fundamentally safe, moment after moment, breath after breath. Your heart is still beating, you are going on living, you are still all right.*

*Let thoughts and feelings come and go. Abide in the moment of now. You are still breathing just fine, the next moment is passing through, you're still OK, you're safe now, safe in this moment, moment after moment, basically all right, right . . . now. And now...and now.*

**20:15:** The quote Rick is referencing here is from Leonard Cohen's wonderful song [Anthem](#).

**24:00:** I couldn't find the same root meaning Rick mentioned here for science. The word science comes from [Latin by way of Old French](#). The Latin word is *scientia*, which can be translated as "knowledge" or "knowing."

The literal meaning of "Buddha" [could be interpreted](#) as "one who knows."

**24:50:** In 1936 Piaget proposed a [theory of cognitive development](#) that explained how a child constructs a mental model of the world. More recent research has [found some holes in Piaget's theories](#), but they were groundbreaking at the time and aspects of them remain fundamental to our understanding of how people learn.

Piaget [focused his work on children](#), and on understanding how children think in distinctly different ways from adults. His theory is built from three big components:



1. The construction of “mental models,” build from **schemas**, that allow us to understand and react to the things that happen to us in the world. Think of this as being a kind of “script” for a given idea or interaction. When I say “elephant,” an image pops into your head. When I say “ordering food at a restaurant,” you can think of the script for that interaction.
2. His **stages of cognitive development** which include sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational.
3. The understanding of learning as an [adaptive process](#) based on interaction with the outside world. This adaptation is driven by two key processes: **assimilation** and **accommodation**, alongside our desire to return to the comfortable **equilibrium** of assimilation.

Assimilation occurs when we can use an existing schema to deal with the world around us, or take in new knowledge without violating that schema. Accommodation occurs when the existing schema doesn't work to solve the problem in front of us, and we must significantly update or change it in order to reconcile the issue.

One of Piaget's key ideas is that not being able to fit new information into our existing schemas, in other words not being able to assimilate, is uncomfortable. Accommodating allows us to assimilate once again in the future, which returns us back to a happy equilibrium. But it's not hard to see how someone might want to avoid this painful process altogether as an adult, and simply avoid or ignore information that they can't assimilate so they don't have to go through the uncomfortable process of accommodation.

**27:30:** [Bayesian Probability](#) is an extension of [Thomas Bayes' theorem](#), and it seeks to describe the likelihood of something happening based on reasonable expectations that derive from our current state of knowledge. In Bayesian Probability a person assigns an estimated probability to the hypothesis they are testing, which is referred to as a *prior*. This prior is then *updated* based on new evidence, which is acquired based on a variety of mathematical techniques. If you've ever heard the phrase “I updated my priors,” this is where it comes from.

Rick is referring here to Nate Silver, a well-known statistician and political analyst who is the founder and editor-in-chief of [FiveThirtyEight](#).

**28:00:** [This article](#) is an excellent exploration of many of these topics.

**37:15:** Here's [the poem](#) from Thich Nhat Hanh that Rick is referring to:

*You are me, and I am you.  
Isn't it obvious that we "inter-are"?  
You cultivate the flower in yourself,  
so that I will be beautiful.  
I transform the garbage in myself,  
so that you will not have to suffer.*

*I support you;  
you support me.  
I am in this world to offer you peace;  
you are in this world to bring me joy.*

**37:30:** [Jaimal Yogis](#) is a surfer and the author of four books including [All Our Waves Are Water](#). His work is autobiographical in nature, and follows his personal journeys around the world as a storytelling device to get at some deep truths.