

Betsy Kindall ([00:08](#)):

I'm Betsy Kindall.

Nicole Fairchild ([00:10](#)):

I'm Nicole Fairchild.

Stacey Moore ([00:11](#)):

And I'm Stacey Moore.

Betsy Kindall ([00:12](#)):

And this is Arkansas AWARE, a project to advance wellness and resiliency in education.

Betsy Kindall ([00:22](#)):

Welcome back everybody. We are together again today with Dr. Michael Mrazek from Finding Focus. If you're interested in this particular curriculum, please check out our previous episode where he explained it. We'll do a quick recap for you, but we've got an in-depth episode just prior to this. And today we're going to pick his brain a little bit about how Finding Focus and anxiety might intersect and ways that that program could possibly help all of us during a time where anxiety seems to be the topic of the day.

Stacey Moore ([00:56](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. And for those of you who have not heard our previous episode, Finding Focus is really a 22 day course with four minute snippets that teaches students how to train their attention and how to use attention to relate more effectively to their thought and emotion, and really help them succeed in the classroom. So Dr. Mrazek, tell us a little bit, since we've been talking this season a lot about anxiety, about how they may be able to use this particular tool, if they are experiencing anxiety within the classroom or really within life, to be honest?

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([01:34](#)):

Yeah. So there are several ways that attention is relevant to anxiety and to our mental health. And there's a ton of research to back this up. People who get stuck with clinical levels of anxiety oftentimes have biases of their attention, where their attention gets pulled more to sort of the negative experiences and the negative thoughts. And that there are treatments actually that are centered around that, around helping people break some of the habitual patterns about where they focus in order to have a little bit of relief from the anxiety that they experience.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([02:14](#)):

And I think that there's really two key ways that the attention training provided by Finding Focus can really help people with anxiety in school and just in daily life. And the first is by giving people more influence over how they relate to their thoughts. So as you go through your day, you have thousands of thoughts every single day. And a lot of those thoughts, they come into your head and then leave a moment later. But some of them you hold onto, you start elaborating them. You take a single thought and then you turn it into a whole extended train of thought.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([02:51](#)):

And what dictates whether you let it go or you elaborate a thought, is your attention. Which thoughts do you give attention to? And a lot of our emotions are fueled by our thoughts. Our thoughts, and our evaluations, like our judgements about whether things are good or bad. And so people who experience a lot of anxiety oftentimes find themselves elaborating the worrying thoughts and turning them into extended narratives and big stories that really perpetuate their anxiety. The anxiety might have come and gone if they had just let the thoughts come and go. But because they latched on to a particular thought, started to develop it in a particular way that really fuels their emotion and continues it.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([03:39](#)):

And it's one thing to understand that, it's another thing to be able to actually release those anxiety producing thoughts. That's a skill, and it's a skill that takes practice. You have to train your ability to release a thought and to direct your attention somewhere else. So it's not something most people can do very easily until they've started to actually practice that skill. And Finding Focus is a course that helps students practice that in a variety of different contexts. You can learn how to focus and release by listening to music and trying to just anchor your attention on the sounds you hear and releasing distracting thoughts. And you're building that same skill that then you can use later when you have these repetitive, unhelpful anxious thoughts, filling your head. So you can release those and focus your attention somewhere else. So that's the first way.

Betsy Kindall ([04:31](#)):

Yeah. And that's fantastic because you're absolutely right. We've been talking about how to rewire your anxious brain is been one of the books that we've been reading and just kind of talking about how when your anxiety is thought based, it's going to take the hard work of shifting your attention. And it's not going to be easy and you don't get to just take a pill and then your thoughts go away. It's going to take skill development. And so I do love that this helps build the skill in a way that is unrelated to the anxious thoughts, but you're building the skill that you can later apply to the anxious thoughts.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([05:09](#)):

Yeah, exactly.

Stacey Moore ([05:10](#)):

Yeah. I love that. I love also shifting and doing it in an intentional way, I think makes all the difference.

Betsy Kindall ([05:17](#)):

All right, I'm ready for number two.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([05:20](#)):

Okay. So number two is about how we evaluate or judge the anxiety itself. And what's very common is that when people experience a difficult or uncomfortable emotion, they immediately start to evaluate that as a problem. It's natural and understandable that they would, because it doesn't feel good and so you want to be rid of it. And so you start seeing it as a nuisance or something that's going to get worse or something that's going to interfere with your life. And you start evaluating it as a problem. But that tends to only exacerbate it and an alternative approach, which again, takes practice but can be really helpful is

to recognize that you have a lot going on in any moment and your emotions are only one piece of your whole experience of life. And that you can actually be okay with having a little bit of anxiety and not letting it dictate your entire life without having to get rid of it immediately.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([06:27](#)):

In Finding Focus we use the example of clouds in the sky. And that if there's a big dark cloud in the middle of the sky, it's just pouring down rain as though that were like a really negative emotion. It's very easy to just feel like that's your entire experience. And there's nothing else besides that dark cloud. But if you can zoom out a little bit, you can notice that in addition to that emotion, you're also seeing all sorts of things. You're hearing all sorts of things. You're having thoughts that might not always be anxious. And so the difficult emotion that you're experiencing is only one small part of who you are. And if your overall experience in that moment, and that perspective can allow you to just not evaluate the emotion as such a big problem which takes off some of the struggle. It's like you stop struggling over the struggle of anxiety.

Betsy Kindall ([07:23](#)):

Yeah. This may be a silly example, but this is what it makes me think of. It's like, it's a training your brain. My daughter has been listening to songs that I find annoying. Michael, she's a teenager that I find annoying and they will get stuck in my head. And I don't want that song in my head. I don't want that song in my head, but it's constantly playing in my head. And so I will on purpose, put another song in my head and repeat it so that I can get the other one gone. Is it similar to that in any way?

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([07:58](#)):

Yes. I think that's a great strategy and one that we do focus on in Finding Focus. And we call it refocusing where you have one thing that's kind of predominant in your mind, but it's not helpful. And so you try to let that go and then you replace it with something else. But actually what I'm proposing here is a little bit different. It's taking a stance that you don't have to get rid of the anxiety to be okay.

Betsy Kindall ([08:23](#)):

Oh. So I would have to keep the song?

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([08:26](#)):

Just imagine could you be okay even with that song running through your head. It's easy to fixate on the song and feel like, God I have to get this out, it's so annoying, it's so frustrating. But really so much else is happening in that moment even as that jingle is happening in the background. You can be okay with the jingle in your head if you can just stop evaluating it as a problem.

Betsy Kindall ([08:50](#)):

Oh, that's true.

Stacey Moore ([08:50](#)):

I love that too, because that is life. When these kids are out in real life, they can't always just do things to make that go away, like you're saying. And so I think that also, I tell, you guys have heard me say this over and over on this podcast, but like I tell my kids all the time. The hardest times that's when you grow the

most, that's when you learn those lessons. And so when my kids, or a peer or a friend is having a hard time one of the questions, once I try to comfort them is, okay, what lesson can be learned here? Because there may not be a quick fix, but I promise you a lesson and an opportunity for you to grow from this experience. And I think what you're talking about, that's what that reminded me of. And I really like that concept.

Stacey Moore ([09:44](#)):

And it reminds me of... What did we talk about using stress in a positive way?

Betsy Kindall ([09:51](#)):

Oh yeah.

Nicole Fairchild ([09:52](#)):

What was the book that was...

Betsy Kindall ([09:55](#)):

Yeah. The Upside of Stress.

Nicole Fairchild ([09:56](#)):

The Upside of Stress. Yeah.

Betsy Kindall ([09:57](#)):

Yeah, sure.

Nicole Fairchild ([09:58](#)):

Like there is an upside to stress. There is an upside to those feelings. And number one is recognizing what you're feeling and number two, recognizing that it's okay to have that. And I kind of like that affirmation piece.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([10:14](#)):

Yeah, no nobody's ever going to of completely rid themselves of difficult emotions. And I wouldn't even think that that would be a good aspiration. But recognizing that in the moments, in inevitable moments of your life, where you're going to experience difficult emotions, you can still be okay even when you feel that.

Betsy Kindall ([10:35](#)):

I think so many of our young people need to hear that because it feels to me a little bit like in raising kids, we swing between rescue and teaching them to tolerate.

Nicole Fairchild ([10:44](#)):

Yep.

Betsy Kindall ([10:44](#)):

And so maybe in the past, we asked them to tolerate too much, but now we want to rescue too much. And I've had lots of people. In fact, several school nurses say they've got kids in their office all day long with anxiety who just want to go home. They just want to be rescued from the discomfort, get me out of here. But these kinds of skill, like that's not sustainable.

Nicole Fairchild ([11:06](#)):

No, because in real life, when they're a 20 year old or a 25 year old at a job, you can't just leave. You can't just go home. That's not a functioning way to live your life.

Betsy Kindall ([11:16](#)):

No. So we to learn how to, like you've said, increase our bandwidth, increase our ability to tolerate discomfort.

Betsy Kindall ([11:24](#)):

I can have that ridiculous country song that my daughter like... It's something about snakes.

Nicole Fairchild ([11:31](#)):

Somebody's going to send you a message and be like, "This was the song."

Betsy Kindall ([11:32](#)):

I don't know, Snake Farm. I don't know. Anyways, it's dumb. Drives me crazy, but can I tolerate it? I can if I choose to.

Nicole Fairchild ([11:43](#)):

It also reminds me of the conversations we've had on our podcast before about the window of tolerance and about understanding where you are within that window. Not just for other people, but for yourself.

Betsy Kindall ([11:55](#)):

Yeah. I got to say so just before I came down here, I was talking to one of our specialists who I had given this curriculum to, in order to check it out, I just knew he'd be interested in it. And I said, "If you have a minute you could maybe pop in and talk to Dr. Michael with us." And he said, "I can't, but I got to say, I've got to get back into it." He said, I know this is supposed to be for the students, but I really kind of missed the daily beats and I want to do them again.

Nicole Fairchild ([12:28](#)):

I love it. Yeah. Because I think too, I was just the thinking, I need to do this with my kids. I need to just, let's just commit 22 days, four minutes a day to try it and do it, not just for them, but for my own sanity as we go into the holidays.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([12:48](#)):

Yeah. It's not only students who have trouble focusing and who experience difficult emotions. I mean, we all do, and these are things I still practice every single day of my life. I think it's a skill that's relevant to pretty much everybody.

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Nicole Fairchild ([13:02](#)):

Can I ask you a vulnerable question?

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([13:03](#)):

Of course.

Betsy Kindall ([13:05](#)):

Can you, oh, you said, of course I like that.

Nicole Fairchild ([13:07](#)):

So can you give the listeners an idea of, and maybe just an anecdote of how this skill, because you're going to practice what you preach. I mean, you've created this, so I know it's embedded in you. Can you tell us what a difference it makes for you or maybe even just an anecdote about how being able to do this improves your life?

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([13:33](#)):

Sure. Maybe I'll give you one that's very timely, which is that my whole life I've had fear of public speaking and going on a podcast would never be something that I would intrinsically want to do.

Betsy Kindall ([13:48](#)):

And yet here you are.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([13:50](#)):

[crosstalk 00:13:50] I do for me.

Betsy Kindall ([13:50](#)):

You are for me. And this morning I experienced some anxiety in preparation for this call, but I did two things to help address it. One is I didn't evaluate my anxiety as a problem. I knew that I was going to be okay even if I experienced some anxiety. Being a little anxious for a couple hours isn't the end of the world. So it's okay. I can be okay even if it exists. But I also chose to direct my attention to things that were more productive. And I thought about the opportunity to share some of the insights with teachers around the country. I thought about the opportunity to make two new friends. I'd focused on the things that would actually make this experience meaningful and worthwhile for me and that helps often the anxiety as well. So these are skills I literally used every single day of my life and that I'm using right now as we talk.

Betsy Kindall ([14:43](#)):

That is excellent. I'm so glad I asked you that question and you were willing to answer it. That's excellent. You're right. We can tolerate more than we think we can. And it does add beauty to our lives when we do. Well done. Well done. Thank you so much for being with us.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([14:56](#)):

Thank you for having me.

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Betsy Kindall ([14:58](#)):

Yeah. We've enjoyed this conversation so much and I'm so, so excited to share this resource and this tool with all our listeners, our educators, all the adults listening and for our students of Arkansas, because if we can just do... Anybody can take four minutes out of a day to plug in to help themselves. And we've talked a lot about anxiety in this season, but in the past we've talked a lot about teacher wellbeing and self-care. And I know that that's a topic right now. But I think this is also a really great way to take care of our own wellbeing in order to reach our kids and to make sure we're healthy in order to do what we need to do to ensure that others are in a good place.

Betsy Kindall ([15:46](#)):

So I'm so excited to share that. And thank you so much for being with us today, we've so enjoyed having you.

Nicole Fairchild ([15:52](#)):

Yeah. Thank you.

Betsy Kindall ([15:53](#)):

All right. Well-

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([15:54](#)):

Thanks for having me.

Betsy Kindall ([15:55](#)):

... You bet. We will see you all next time when we dive deeper into anxiety.