

Episode intro:

To love it, to invite it, I can't wait to be anxious again. When you are at that place, that's the real freedom, where you are not trying to manage yourself. That's where the real freedom is.

Welcome to the Art of Accomplishment where we explore how deepening connection with ourselves, and others leads to creating the life we want with enjoyment and ease. I am Brett Kistler, here today with my co-host, Joe Hudson.

Brett: All right. Hello, Joe, how are you doing today?

Joe: I am a bit under the weather today, actually. I woke up or went to sleep with a little bit of a sore throat. I did the COVID testing. It was negative, but a little under the weather but still happy, still feeling good, just a little lack of energy.

Brett: I know that whole I am having some symptoms. Is it COVID? A little anxiety there. Is this going to be a two-week thing? Is it going to be over in a couple of days? Is it going to be far worse? Did I give it to somebody? Who gave it to me? Do they know they have it?

Joe: That's not happening, but yeah, I can imagine.

Brett: I mean I guess I just assume. Last time I spoke with you you said you were in a love relationship with anxiety. If I was in a love relationship with anxiety and I woke up feeling under the weather, this is the go-to.

Joe: Yeah, the love relationship with anxiety came out of an experiment I wanted to do, which was to as much as possible through the day feel whatever anxiety I might be having, to get in touch with it in my physical person and just be in touch with it without trying to change it, without trying to do anything, just to increase my awareness of how anxiety moves through my system. That's what the love relationship with anxiety was, and that experiment has ceased. I am not doing it right now though it seems like it would probably be appealing to do again but vacation happened.

Brett: You have beaten anxiety and passed the level.

Joe: No, no. For whatever reason, experiments come for a while and then they go for a while. Then sometimes they come back. There was just this awareness, and during it, I recall just an appreciation for the anxiety, the love for the anxiety. The more that I paid attention to it, the more it transformed inside of me, the more it just showed that it was life force. That's the best way I can describe it.

Brett: Let's define it. What is anxiety to you? What do you mean by anxiety?

Joe: That's a great question. I would talk about anxiety from the perspective of the three brains, the head brain or the human prefrontal cortex, the emotional side or the mammalian side, and the nervous side of the brain. For me, for the head, anxiety is just constantly preparing for attack. It is trying to figure out what's going to go wrong and modulate your performance and your environment to prevent anything from going wrong, whatever that is, meaning there that a lot of times what we think is wrong actually turns out to be a huge gift.

Then from the heart perspective, from the emotional, mammalian perspective, I would say it is unmet needs. If you just think about a mammal, they are anxious when their needs aren't being met. Our needs, because we have a sense of self, are far more complicated probably than many mammals, but it is any time you have an unmet need, which I think is really important to see because it allows you to take immediate action when you are having anxiety.

Then, from the nervous system, it is just that constriction of life force, the anxiety. I think that's when I was saying the more I paid attention to it, the more it is a life force, and what's happening there for me in that experiment was the more I paid attention to it, the less the constriction was necessary. It is almost like a child acts one way if it is wanting your attention and acts another way when it gets your attention. For me, the anxiety is really just the constriction of life force on the nervous system level. That's how I would define it.

Brett: You described these three levels, which we have talked about before and you have mentioned before as the head, heart and gut. It has showed up in some of the exercises and courses where you do practices in each of those places, also describable as the prefrontal cortex or the logical mind, the limbic system or the emotional mind, and the gut, which is just the deep nervous system looking for its safety, food and hunger. Kind of what you just described is this feeling of anxiety is a constriction of life force, what do you mean by life force? Are those emotional movements?

Joe: Two things with that, what do I mean by life force? I mean when we are alive, there is something that animates us. There is an energy. You could call it the battery pack of a phone. It is literally the energy, so I am not trying to do anything spiritual with that. I just mean that we have something that propels us forward. I am using that for life force. You can use the word 'energy' for it. It is what allows you to be awake and moving around. It is life, and so that's what I am speaking to. Think about it just very practically, like a battery pack or what the battery would move through your body to get you going.

Brett: Basically, impulse from deep within you that is driving your behavior, driving what you want, driving what you need, driving the safety you are looking for, driving

the passions that you are into before you construct an emotional or logical story around them.

Joe: Yeah, and the second part that makes that really important is that there are studies in animals. I think it was mice, maybe it was rats. It is like three generations. If a baby mouse or maybe a baby rat isn't cared for in the proper way, in a typical way, then they have an anxiety that occurs in their system, what we would call anxiety. They are jittery, fast paced, more anxious and they don't raise their children the same way. It takes three generations of safety for small mammals without cognitive ability to go from anxiety to non-anxiety. That nervous system side of things is really profound. It is a very profound thing.

Brett: I think that's fascinating. For the way that a lot of us relate to anxiety, we will try to figure out what it is and why it is there. I think something that has been really helpful to me is to let go of trying to figure out what the anxiety is and just let myself feel it. Whatever is going on in my body, especially deep down in my nervous system is far too complex for there to be a story or a narrative around. Maybe it is epigenetically inherited through my family or passed down through behavior of family or society, and a lot of it is just associated with the way that life has changed so much in a couple of generations that our nervous systems aren't ready for or prepared for.

Joe: It is an interesting thing. What you said is true that some people are trying to figure it out. Oftentimes people are beating themselves up for it. I have got to stop being so anxious. The other day I was having a session with somebody, and within 30 seconds, I said, tell me about your anxiety. It was the first time I had had a session with the person. They said how did you know. Did somebody tell you? It was like no, it was all over the way she held herself, etc. But the way she said who told you, it was shame based. She had shame about her anxiety. I think a lot of people have shame around their anxiety. It is not even trying to figure it out. It is like I want to get rid of this thing. That, of course, only creates more anxiety.

Brett: It looks like what happened there is her intellect was looking for the threat as you just described, and the threat was somebody recognizing my anxiety and being rejected for it.

Joe: That's exactly right.

Brett: What would make it that we would constrict ourselves from feeling this life force or feeling these unfelt emotions that results in our anxiety?

Joe: It is uncomfortable. It is a bit like a deep tissue massage, anxiety. If you are not fully in contact with a deep tissue massage, it is going to be really painful, and sometimes it is going to be a little painful even if you are in deep contact. If you are

getting a deep tissue massage and you are talking on the phone, it is going to be annoying as hell. If you are getting a deep tissue massage and you are in a quiet room with relaxing music, it is going to be less annoying. I think anxiety is very much like that. It is a direct signal telling us that something is wrong. We want to take action over that. That's the nature. That's where it comes to the unmet needs. It is saying something is wrong. We need to take some sort of action to fulfill and to make sure we are safe. That's what it is meant for in general.

However, anxiety was built for I think probably far more about the physical body than the sense of self, and the physical body can't really be under threat for sustained periods of time unless it is in a war. It is the short moments, whereas you get this long, sustained anxiety because the sense of self can be under threat all the time. All the time, if your sense of self is as a CEO and your company is having a hostile takeover which leads to an eight-month legal battle or a six-year legal battle, your sense of self is under attack for that whole time. That's brutal.

I think there is a sustained thing that happens, which is what is new in our modern society. What's true historically with anxiety is it is telling you there is some unmet need that's going on there. That insight is the most profound for taking action around anxiety.

Brett: It is true that we recognize that when there is anxiety, there is some unmet need and there is some action we want to take. Often that action is that we want to think about what to do and then we circulate in that for a long time, thinking, thinking and thinking, because no action feels like it is leading to a safer place because we are stuck in some local optimum. Every direction feels like it is worse before it potentially gets better, and we might not see that.

Joe: We are scared of the consequences. We are trying to avoid a consequence, and so we are looping to create 100% certainty, which is not really how life offers itself. The cool thing about that is that we don't actually need 100% certainty. We just need to be convinced there is certainty, meaning one person goes outside of their house and walks to the grocery store. In their mind, there is 100% certainty they are going to get there and get back. Intellectually, they might be like there is a small chance, but they don't think about it. Somebody who is scared to leave their house, they are not certain of that. It is really not even that it is logically certain. It is far more about whether that perceived certainty is there, which is somewhat ridiculous because the results that we think we want are usually not the best results.

Brett: The results we get from acting on the first impulse from anxiety are often now the best results.

Joe: The most likely thing is for them to create the thing we are anxious about.

Brett: In particular, if we are trying not to feel the anxiety. If we are trying not to feel the anxiety, then the unmet needs are going to come out as proposed actions that we take that are askew to the actual unmet need.

Joe: They are going to create it, probably. If I am anxious that I am going to lose my job, if I am anxious that I have to keep my boss happy or I will lose my job, I am far less likely to keep my boss happy.

Brett: Far more likely to lose the job.

Joe: Far more likely to lose the job because I am not acting in flow state. I am getting things done as quickly. I am second guessing myself all of the time. I am trying to get it perfect instead of understanding the deeper requirement the boss has, etc.

Brett: I think on some level we know this, which is why we want to be calm. We want to move ourselves into this calm state, which feels like it is moving away from anxiety, and it is going to get us there. But it is actually anxiety that is the signal that is showing how to reach homeostasis. It is showing us the unmet needs that are going to bring us back into equilibrium.

I think often what we mistake is what part of us has that need. What you were just describing is that the sense of self is something that can be under attack all the time. If we feel the anxiety and just let it move, what happens to that sense of self that we think we are defending? What happens to what we think the unmet need is when we actually sit in the feeling of the need being unmet instead of immediately trying to fix it?

Joe: There are levels of the need, and there is an annihilation of a sense of self that happens. I would also call that a sense of freedom, annihilation of sense of self. Nothing left to be defended, more freedom. But what's interesting is, let's take the example of the boss. How many people do we know that have that fear that the boss is going to fire them? It is pretty prevalent in our society.

Here's what's not prevalent in our society, somebody saying hey, to their boss, I notice I am operating out of anxiety I am going to get fired at some point. I want to not operate out of that anxiety because I am going to be more efficient. I am going to do better, and I am going to enjoy myself more. I am going to burn out less. I am going to have more energy for you. I am wondering if we can get really clear expectations of what you want from me so that I know exactly what's needed to keep my job. We can make an agreement if I do this, then we get there. That's not happening, a simple conversation. That's an example of getting your needs met.

First I am anxious, I am going to take action without being with it, what it does is it hits the most surface level of the need instead of the deeper need.

Brett: The process of sitting in the anxiety, feeling the anxiety, being curious about where it is coming from, what it is, not even a story about it but just somatically feeling it, what does this feel like in my body? That gets you deeper.

Joe: Yes. I would even say you can do all that and it won't work very well if you are trying to get rid of it. What's going to happen is if you start doing that process, if you are like where is the anxiety right now, you are going to notice that the anxiety loosens. The life force is less constricted. Then the brain is going to say if I am with this, if I am with this, then I can get rid of it, which isn't actually addressing the underlying need. Then it stops working.

It is far more about loving it than it is about being with it. The translation of the Eastern meditation stuff is all about be with, awareness. It is great, very important stuff, and to love it, to invite it. I can't wait to be anxious again. When you are at that place, that's the real freedom where you are not trying to manage yourself. That's where the real freedom is.

Brett: I can see the subtle management in the concept of being with a feeling. The feeling is there. You are next to it. You are sort of observing it as a way to not really feel it. There, there feeling. Joe says to recognize that you exist here. I am just going to stand here and watch you change into something better.

Joe: Instead of I can't wait to feel this again.

Brett: I've been moving through that a lot myself in just the past couple weeks. For the audience here, we actually had an episode on this topic that we recorded and later on we decided to redo it. We can do a better job of performance on the episode, but in the episode, I started to feel something in my throat. We went into that. I sat with that as a meditation over the next couple of weeks. What was in there that led to this feeling and this constriction?

Just going in and letting myself love feeling it has opened up a lot of things. A number of things have shifted in my life. It is hard to point it all back to one thing because everything is so multifactorial. It has been a really interesting journey for me to be loving the anxiety, not just seeing it as something that's theoretically welcome.

Joe: If you had to point to one thing that you think, obviously you can't prove it, but what do you think has shifted by feeling the anxiety that lives in your throat?

Brett: When we were talking about anxiety being a constriction of life force and there being emotions that are unfelt, but particularly that constriction of life force, I felt that in my throat. I was feeling anxiety in times when I felt like I was limiting myself and times when I was making myself smaller or hiding.

I used to be in sort of a cycle where I would feel that in my throat, and that would be a sign I am hiding. Then I would be like I am doing it, and then I would try to not be doing that by altering my behavior rather than feeling what is this constriction I am feeling in my throat. Then, going into that and finding there are other constrictions, there is really subtle muscle tension in certain parts of my body. Then just sitting in those.

The other day I was really having a really rough day when a lot of challenging information was coming to me from all sides. I was feeling overwhelmed. I sat down to meditate, which I haven't been doing much. I was beating myself up about it. I've got to get meditation back into my practice. I sat down and I didn't do any kind of meditation practice formally. I just sat down and felt what was in my body. I was anxious. Then I just loosened the tension in my muscles a little bit more and I felt more of the anxiousness. I just sat and literally 30 seconds later, instead of getting up and going to the fridge and doing more avoidant things, I pulled up my phone and sent a couple messages that were really important and started some conversations that were really fruitful.

Every time I felt a little bit avoidant that day or like procrastinating, I just sat down and felt it. In very little time, suddenly an impulse came to do something that was actually beneficial for me.

Joe: That's really beautiful. That avoidant behavior, it is actually one I have a little bit of challenge with in that it is not in my system at all. I don't have direct. For whatever reason, as a kid, I was the person who created the conflict. I didn't avoid the conflict. I was the family crucible. I was the person who always said what was wrong that everybody wanted to avoid.

I don't really understand the avoidant behavior the same way I understand a lot of other behaviors, but what I just heard you say was that the more you were with your anxiety in wonder, in vulnerability, in VIEW if you will or with love, then the less the avoidance happened.

Brett: Yeah. Another thing that shifted was that the conversations I was saying, the same kind of conversation, a difficult one by many metrics, suddenly became more enjoyable. I was able to experience the pleasure of showing up.

Joe: Also, notice that in the conversations my guess is that you were addressing unmet needs.

Brett: Yeah, speaking things that were important to me that I hadn't been saying before, also not buying stories that weren't true for me, but also being there to validate the feelings in them. Overall, feeling the anxiety of the consequences I am afraid of.

Joe: That's a beautiful distinction you just made, which is I didn't buy the story, but I validated the emotional experience of the person. I just want to say how beautiful that was.

Brett: I wasn't afraid of the consequences. I was doing it from what was alive for me and in my enjoyment, and not trying to manage the situation, not trying to manage the people I was talking to. It really shifted the relationships I was involved in, in this dynamic. It shifted it so quickly that I actually can't even tell that it was me shifting it or if all of us dropped a thing at the same time or if one of them dropped it first and then that impacted me. I really don't even know. A lot of things just shifted all at once.

What I do know is that I started to feel a lot more pleasure in the process of digging up what would normally have been uncomfortable topics.

Joe: Beautiful. That's an interesting question. To me, if I am listening to this podcast, I would think to myself. I am not sure if I have a great answer to this either. I would be thinking to myself, how do I stop caring about the consequences. I think the best answer I have on that one is that the consequences you are scared of are actually an emotional state. If you can love every emotional state, you are not worried about the consequences.

Somebody is probably saying I am not scared of that. I am scared of losing my job and not having any money. If I said to you that you lost your job and didn't have any money, you were totally happy and blissed out, what would be the problem? You would still be standing, sitting, and lying down just like you are today. Obviously, there is some place where it is like we have a primal instinct to be fed, but we all know that we definitely make these big mountains out of molehills. I think in general what I would say is most people's fears over having to feel some way about themselves or having to feel some way, that's the consequence we are actually avoiding.

Brett: I feel like the process in feeling my anxiety is, I got deeper than the threat to myself and by feeling the anxiety and loving the anxiety, I started to feel what was really a threat and what was not a threat at all to my actual physical self. Most of the story fell away as that's actually not a real threat. I can actually see how having that story is more of a threat. It was easy for that to shift.

It felt a little bit discordant for myself to be enjoying difficult conversations so much, which brings me to another set of emotions that people don't tend to notice can be part of anxiety is unfelt joy, unfelt happiness. Let's talk about that a little bit.

Joe: Yeah, it's an odd thing. We all want it. We all want joy and happiness. Most products are sold on the idea that they will make you happy. It is something that we

all want, but we are all actually really scared of it in my experience. There are a couple ways to see this and think about this. The first one is if you think about you are alone in a café that's full of people, and you start crying. Or if you get angry, or if you get scared in a café, and then how about if you just start laughing out of just pure bliss and joy? Which one is going to make people most uncomfortable? Which one is going to be the most scary?

Also, if you look at little kids and people say hey Johnny, calm down, how much of that exuberance is totally squashed in kids all the time? That just rampant joy, so that's another way that you can see how our society does not accept a deep level of joy, a deep level of exuberance. There are a couple of ways to look at it.

The other thing is there is just something about pleasure anxiety as well, which is you will see people oftentimes laugh because they get it in a session and then they will stop laughing. They will stop laughing because they have this oh shit, I am not allowed to feel good. Sometimes that comes to the other shoe is going to drop, that's the thought. If I let this in and feel good, the other shoe is going to drop. If I let this in, I will get hurt in some way. If I let the love in, then that person can hurt me. There are all these very false conceptions that happen.

Another way to really see about this is how well you accept compliments. If someone compliments you, do you let it in? Do you say hey, thanks? Or do you say that's not me? Are you like wow, thank you very much? How does it hit you? How much do you let it tickle you and feel good in your system?

Brett: How much does it bring up anxiety?

Joe: How much does it bring up anxiety? Exactly, right. It is the same way with other things of pleasure, orgasms or laughter, how openly can you laugh, how long is the orgasm. All these things are good indicators of how much joy you can feel.

Brett: I think a thing in common with all of those is some form of loss of control. There is a feeling of loss of control, and then anybody who is around you might also fear that there is a loss of predictability. The guy who is laughing maniacally for reasons I don't understand in a coffee shop, I mean I have seen in movies that that's probably the guy who has planted a bomb at the local hospital and is about to paint his face. The base rate there is to expect something unexpected and that scares us.

Joe: It is the most common thing I hear about the podcast when people talk to me. People are like your laugh. Some people are like I don't trust your laugh. Some people just make fun of it. My laugh is the thing that I get the most comments about. It touches something.

Brett: I remember a moment in a weeklong workshop with you where as part of an exercise somebody told me something that was for me to hear, to process and to reclaim about myself. Speaking to a history I have in extreme sports of having a lot of friends having died, they said you did a shitty job mourning your dead friends. I let that in, and it imploded into grief as I expected to, but then it just exploded into a supernova of joy that I just didn't understand. The joy felt like a celebration of every one of their lives and a celebration of me still being around, all of the positive feelings associated with having been through this life path. Nanoseconds after it began and I nearly leapt out of my chair, I calmed it back down. I brought myself back to the present, back to the moment.

Joe: I have a couple of stories. It is very common for me when I am working with people for them to start laughing hysterically for a while when they see through something. There is a great quote that I love, and I have probably mentioned before here, which is, "God is a comedian playing to an audience that's too afraid to laugh." I remember multiple stories of this. Even one of the people who mentored me, Case, one day I was noticing, you stop your laughter. What's going on? I am scared I am going to offend you. If I can be offended by your laughter, bring it. I will find something about myself.

Laughter is such an amazing thing, and so many people stop it. But the most annoying one is I think it was my last meditation retreat with somebody else leading it. Maybe we'll do another one, but I think this is part of the reason I haven't. I was laughing at everybody's questions. All of these very sincere people were coming up and asking these questions that I am sure were deeply profound for them, and I kept laughing.

I realized I had made a decision in myself that I was going to laugh whenever I felt it, which makes it difficult for me sometimes in sessions because I will laugh at somebody's pain sometimes. I am not laughing at it like haha, you are hurt. I am laughing at it like haha, you believed that. I just find it so amazing and hilarious at the ridiculousness of ourselves, not just them but of me as well.

I was laughing for five days of a silent retreat, every other question or something like that. There was some jackass who was me in the back of the thing laughing just hysterically. I know because afterwards I was around for like an hour and I had a couple people who clearly got their ire.

Brett: How do you think that retreat would have been for you if you had been trying to hold in that laughter and instead be a good meditator, a good silent retreator? What would you have been feeling in your body?

Joe: Wow, that's a great question.

Brett: Here's a hint. It's the topic of our current episode.

Joe: Yeah, it would have been discontent for sure. I think there would have been anxiety and more shame, probably both. I think the anxiety from the constriction of it and the shame because I notice the more I am not authentic, the more shame I have in my life. I don't know why that mechanism happens, but it does seem to be the case. The more authentic I have, the less shame there is.

Brett: I think there is some part of us that just knows if we are not being authentic, even if nobody else sees it, we see it. We feel that shame. That makes maybe shame another great topic for this emotion series as another loveable emotion with a very valuable signal in it.

Joe: For sure, just to sum up, I do see that a lot of the constriction of life force is a constriction of joy. The other thing to say about anxiety that I think is really important is life requires friction. It requires resistance, meaning a cell can't survive without some level of friction or resistance. A sun can't exist without some level of resistance or friction. We can't exist without it either. To try to get rid of anxiety is somewhat ridiculous. Life has this as an aspect of it. If we took all of the resistance or the friction of life out there, it is death.

Four years, five years, maybe even more back, I was doing this meditation where I was trying to hold my anxiety as lightly as possible without letting it go. Was it anxiety at the time? I think I didn't even call it anxiety at the time, but I think I called it the dis-ease. I was trying to hold my dis-ease as lightly as possible without letting it go. It was really a great experiment. I highly recommend it.

Brett: To close this episode, what's one question we could sit with to develop this relationship with anxiety?

Joe: I would recommend if you are going to do the experiment, which I highly recommend you do, to be with your anxiety as much as possible in a way that you are grateful and you are embracing it, then a great question is: How is my anxiety right now? That's a great question. It is a little awkward. The question is a little awkward. How is my anxiety right now? It is designed that way because it keeps the head out of the action a little bit. How is my anxiety right now?

Just ask it and feel it for a moment.

Brett: I feel like that question goes more to the quality of the anxiety instead of a story around it. The felt sense. Thank you, Joe.

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