

Anxiety Making You Feel Crazy? Meet the Anxiety Sisters — They Can Help



Episode 54: Anxiety Making You Feel Crazy? Meet the Anxiety Sisters — They Can Help

Gregory Anne: Welcome back everybody. To another episode of rebellious wellness, over 50. I don't want people stuck in conventional wisdom that makes them feel old at any point in time, but certainly before their time.

Today I have with me, the anxiety sisters, Abby, and Mags and we're going to talk about anxiety and what it looks like in real life and how to deal with it and get around it and heal from it.

Welcome Abs and Mags thank you for being here.

Maggie Sarachek: Oh, we're delighted to be here. Thank you so much for having us.

Gregory Anne: Oh yeah. So anxiety. When I think of anxiety. And you talk about this in your book, I think about panic attacks and then there's general anxiety. And maybe you could start us off with a little bit about the difference between anxiety I should worry about and general, like there's, COVID, the world's at war. All this that gives me a little bit of anxiety every day, but it's not like capital A anxiety. So give me some parameters.

Maggie Sarachek: So we like to say that anxiety's healthy, right? It's one of the human emotions that we all have and we all should have, um, anxiety is what gets us up in the morning.

What moves us forward. We're anxious that we can feed ourselves and take care of ourselves and be with other people. You mentioned anxiety about what's going on in the world. People who were anxious, appropriately anxious about COVID took precautions and tried to be careful and responsible toward the community.

So anxiety itself is not the problem and no one should strive to get rid of anxiety in any way. When anxiety disorder happens, when, our anxiety determines where we go, who we see and what we do in order to avoid the overwhelming feeling of panic or obsessive compulsive issues, or even just terrible generalized anxiety, we start to avoid activities and places and people.

And that's when we really consider it into the disorder. It interrupts your life.

Gregory Anne: And I know that you girls are best friends and have been best friends for like ever. And did you know that you each had anxiety and that's how you became best friends or did you grow up all of a sudden deciding that the world is an anxious place and we should stick together?

Abbe Greenberg: Well, we met when we were in our late teens in college. So we've been friends for about 35 years. We always say that we recognized a kindred spirit in each other. It must've been the panicked expression. We both always wore. You know, back in the 1980s, The conversation about mental health was not as robust as, as it is today.

And we still have a long way to go, but at least at this point, people know what anxiety is, what depression is. It's something that we can discuss. People understand, the different needs that we might have. to quell depression or anxiety, et cetera. Whereas when we were in college, people never talked about that.

Mental health was not in the mainstream conversation. So we had tons of symptoms. Maggie had stomach symptoms, like she always felt like she had the stomach flu. She couldn't eat. Sometimes she was nauseated. She just had a terrible stomach. It was anxiety, but I think that what she felt at the time, I know this is what she felt was that she had some sort of terrible stomach disease that she might eventually die from.

And I also had terrible symptoms, although mine were the cardiac symptoms. I had the racing heart and the dizziness and the, you know, the numbness. I did not know that it was anxiety at the time. I assumed it was something wrong with my heart, which I probably would die from.

We absolutely were suffering from anxiety, but we didn't know that's what it was. We just thought we weren't very well. And we became each other's touchstone in college. We went to student health, we went to the counseling centers, no one said to us in the student counseling center, oh, these are anxiety symptoms.

And here are some things you can do about that. That was not available to us. So then we spent the next two decades dealing with often crippling anxiety and depression. We were each other's community. We looked for a community to help us, but one doesn't exist back then. So we were a sorority of two. Maggie always calls our twenties the decade of -ists.

Because we spent the entire decade at the nutritionist, the cardiologist, the acupuncturist, the psychiatrist, the therapist, the hypnotist, I mean, any IST that would take our money. We were there because we were trying to figure out why we were having these symptoms and what that meant. And there were definitely excellent practitioners that we met along the way who did say to us, this is anxiety.

We kept saying, well, anxiety inside means you have butterflies in your stomach and or it makes you like afraid to speak in front of people. It doesn't make you not be able to breathe or it doesn't make you break out in hives. That's not anxiety. So we really experienced a lot of that skepticism that still to this day is the most popular thing we hear from anxiety sufferers all over the world.

Can this really be anxiety? And we felt that way too. It took us until we were in our early forties. And we were well into our careers at that point. And we were doing a lot of research in mental health and we were interested in it because we both were experiencing so many difficulties and it was at that point that we started to figure out, okay, this is anxiety, and now let's figure out how to live with it because clearly we can't make it go away.

Let's learn to live happily with it. And we've spent a long time interviewing people and doing research and we think we got it now. So we're hoping to save people some time.

Gregory Anne: Talk about 10,000 hours gets to, to mastery. I'm sure you've got way more than that.

Abbe Greenberg: We figured 30,000 hours .

Maggie Sarachek: And we said, if it takes 10,000 hours, you know, we have PhDs then.

Gregory Anne: . I'll bet. So doctors define anxiety, all along all these practitioners, you've probably got lots of labels. Outside of anxiety, multiple variations of what they could diagnose you with, but you have a more human way of describing certain aspects of anxiety.

And I know you don't like to use the word panic attack because panic tells the brain to panic, which I love. Let's talk about bouillabaise and then the worry cloud. I'd love your examples. As a way of helping the listeners understand that there are differences within the anxiety bubble, right? That thing that's called anxiety. Lots of people will experience different symptoms. Meg's had a stomach thing. You had the heart thing.

Abbe Greenberg: Well, bouillabaise that kind of dish, that everybody, you tasted it, you'd recognize it. But if someone said to you, well, what goes in it? You would say

Maggie Sarachek: We had a whole fight about it.

Abbe Greenberg: We did, we were like fighting over.

So there's, there's definitely seafood in there and how do you make that broth? There's definitely some tomato based stuff going on, but what are the seasonings? And you know, how do you get that crusty, yummy bread on top. We're foodies. So we were arguing over it and I turned around and I said, it's just like anxiety.

We could argue all day about what are the ingredients. Right. But you recognize them, but everyone's going to have a slightly different stew. So for some people it will be very acute, more like a panic. And that is a little easier to recognize for some folks because it just, you can not do anything else when you are panicking, right.

That's the activity your body is engaged in. And for other folks, there's sort of this feeling of restlessness, we call it the worry cloud. That's a sense of doom hanging over your head a little bit, but things are not right. You can't find a good place to put yourself. You feel a little bit restless, not quite sure what to make of it, but you're not feeling right.

And that's the worry cloud, right. It kind of hangs over you. So that's maybe more like a generalized anxiety feeling. And then there's folks like me who are blessed with obsessive compulsive disorder. We're very big into ruminating and, obsessively thinking, repeating the same thoughts over and over and over in our heads.

And then coming up with fun rituals to sooth ourselves from all of the worry we've created in our brains. And I'm saying this tongue in cheek, but it is a very difficult illness to live with. Then there's phobias. That's different fear, fear is protective and fear is normal human emotion.

Phobia is an anxiety disorder that 9% of the population has. When a very specific thing causes all the panic symptoms and it can be anything. You know, people who have this have a phobia of mushrooms. It can be anything that triggers panic. So there's phobias and then there's health anxiety.

It used to be called hypochondria. Now it's called illness anxiety disorder. It's a disorder where you tend to obsess about health issues. What am I missing Mags?

There's people who are catastrophizers. This idea that something small happens and you immediately go to the worst case scenario of what could happen.

So a sneeze might become the beginning of COVID with no other symptoms. People catastrophize about money, about health, about what's going on with their kids. We actually have a chapter in our book and we call it Labels Are For Jeans.

We don't always love the labels, but it is important for people if you are diagnosed with something to understand what it means. Mainly because treatment is different for different types of anxiety.

It's just important to know, what has been your diagnosis, does that make sense to you? Is it right for you?

Gregory Anne: Yeah. Yeah. I think that's true of any time we'd go in search of a solution to a physical or mental problem

Maggie Sarachek: yes.

Gregory Anne: We almost want a label. I want to know what this is. When, in fact it's generally not just a this the body is holistic, but we tend to look at the organ or the brain , where it's emanating from. Then when we get the label that can become its own form of

anxiety. We'll just say detriment to the psyche of the person, because as you said, Mags, maybe the diagnosis doesn't exactly feel like what you're experiencing, but it's the one that gave you. And they've got a white coat on and they have all the power, not so much with my listeners, because I know that as I've said, a million times, rebellious wellness means it's an act of rebellion to stand up for your health and how you want to be

within that medical conversation.

Abbe Greenberg: We always tell followers that doctors work for you. And we're very big into, advocating for yourselves medically and, and listen, I'll tell you a quick story. I was diagnosed the first real diagnosis that I received when I was in early forties was for panic disorder because I was having a lot of panic attacks.

About five years later, I was seeing a new psychiatrist. And this particular psychiatrist spent about 45 minutes asking me many deep detailed questions. And at the end of our conversation, he said, I see the panic thing. You definitely have panic attacks, but I think the main symptom that's wreaking havoc in your life is your obsessive compulsive thinking.

I really think that your primary diagnosis should be OCD, specifically around medical issues. And I'm going to put you on a different medication. One that's more suited for that. And not only was that a brilliant diagnosis and I have been having obsessive obsessions and compulsions since I'm five years old and was not diagnosed until 46.

But what I switched to that medication and started following this particular psychiatrist treatment plan, where we focused on the obsessions and compulsions, my panic attacks also went away. There is an art to it. You really want to focus on what's the primary thing that's keeping me from living my best life.

What is the most interrupted that's going on? We try to teach our members to, to advocate for themselves. We have a list of questions to take to your prescriber. Not an easy decision to go on anxiety medication. It's not for everyone. But if that is something that you need, then we have a list of questions that you need to ask your prescribers so that you are informed about what you're putting in your body, what you can expect, et cetera.

Gregory Anne: It's amazing how little we often know about what goes into our bodies. If we don't ask questions. I was going to ask you about medication. I'm glad you brought that up and also I'm glad you have questions because many times, and I firsthand with my clients, members of my family, they go and they get maybe a heart medication or a cholesterol, and then they need it raised and they don't ask, how am I going to feel different?

Are there any different side effects or different feelings? And often I'm the one advocating on the phone. The doctor, and they asked me, why are you asking me this? You're not even the patient, I'm the patient advocate. And I would like to know. I remember client, they said, well, you're 150 pounds and five, seven, this is the dose.

So the woman took that and was feeling absolutely wretched within about seven or eight days, called the doctor. And he said, oh, well maybe you need to turn it down. I understand it's hard for them to make exact diagnoses because most of the medication comes in preset amounts in per tablet or per capsule.

I know that it's not a perfect science. Like you said, it's an art. But people, you have to be willing to ask questions and not be afraid to ask questions or feel like you're not smart enough or something.

Maggie Sarachek: Oh yes. I grew up with a father who had a chronic illness. And, my mother, she might've tortured those doctors a little, they were afraid of her. I remember my father's cardiologist one time turned to me and said, If only my interns knew as much as your mother does, I would be in great shape.

And it was true. It was like, everything has to be questioned and re-questioned and that's the same thing when your doctor's giving you psychiatric medicine of any type?

Gregory Anne: Yeah, I would imagine. I mean, we are holistic it's one body, so it goes in our mouth, it goes metabolized to the liver or the brain or the whatever.

So we really do have to understand our physiology going into a medication and then listen to our body. I think people don't get in the habit of listening to their body, but the body usually sends pretty reliable signals if something's off.

But you guys have ways for people who may not need an anxiety medication or who may, but to deal with things in the day-to-day life.

And I think one of them's called a spin kit. What's a spin kit?

Maggie Sarachek: So a spin kit is a first aid kit, for instance. So, first of all, I'll tell you why we call it spin. Because as you said earlier my brain hears the word panic, they think it's a command. So we have renamed panic and severe anxiety, to spinning, which we think is a really apt metaphor.

Abbe Greenberg: Um, our podcast is called The Spin Cycle because if you've ever had an anxiety attack, it does feel like you have been in your washing machine for the spin cycle. It's a very good metaphor. So we call it spin. Which is a little bit easier on the brain. And so therefore, if you suffer from anxiety, then you might want to carry a spin kit.

It's a first aid kit for anxiety. Just like you might carry an epi pen. If you had an allergy. So you're being prepared. And the types of things that would go in your spin kit, and it would be different for everyone, but you want to have things that could distract you. We don't believe in fighting anxiety because what you pay attention to grows.

So if we're fighting our anxiety and we're using all our energy to try to stop the anxiety, we're actually going to make it hold on tighter. And anxiety will pass. It doesn't seem like it will, but it does. So it's good to have something in your spin kit to keep you busy while you're experiencing your anxiety so that it'll eventually let go of you.

And that could be like a fidget spinner or Mags loves to crochet. So she always keeps needles with her and yarn. Maybe it's a mint or the smell of lavender, an essential oil, something that can be soothing to your senses and keep you grounded.

If you happen to be a floaty sister and some of us tend to dissociate when we're experiencing acute anxiety. So we want something to keep our feet on the ground. that could be music that soothes you . Pictures of my cats are very soothing to me. Then again, if they were in Mag's spin kit, she would panic seeing the cat.

So it's different for everybody, but the good news about a spin kit, what's really great about it is that if you're carrying a spin kit with you, what you're really saying is that I am ready for this anxiety. And guess what? It can't sneak up on me. And the most insidious part about anxiety is when it does that when it's a sneak attack

and you spend the first 10 minutes saying what happened? I was minding my own business. I was standing in line at the grocery store. Now, all of a sudden I'm sweating and I have hives and I'm itching and I can't breathe. Why what's going on? If you're carrying a spin kit, you aren't going to ask why, you'll say, oh, anxiety and I have a spin kit to handle it.

And that will take away a lot of the power and the intensity of the anxiety.

Gregory Anne: Now you talk about, community support as a big deal. I think from what I've read on your site, on your blog and your book, why is it important?

I know you guys said in the old days, you couldn't find the kinds of people that you want to hang out with, or who knew what you were talking about. Um, and I know that groups can be extremely important and even every great doc that I have met, interviewed here talk about the importance, as we age, of connection with people that get us and who'll just let us be who we are.

So you started a community.

Maggie Sarachek: Yes. That's what the anxiety sisters is. We have a very strong community, particularly on Facebook. We also have Instagram, we do workshops and we have sort of smaller groups that we run and all of those are toward creating community.

You know, the thing about community is, we both think it's so under discussed and utilized like the importance to our health of having both like a loose community people, people that you sort of know, your dry cleaner, or, the guy, you know, barista like knowing people in your neighborhood, your mailman and maybe have friendly relations with your neighbors.

And then having a bigger community and some closer ties too. Study after study, is showing the importance, in terms of how we come out of trauma, in terms of how our health is in the long-term, how healthy we are in terms of anxiety and depression.

It's one of the most powerful tools. And because so many of us now in this country, I think, feel fairly alienated or alone. It's not something that people love to talk about. It's kind of like, no, I want to talk about how I can get on my Peloton how I can exercise or how I can eat. And all those things are so are important.

But they are not more important than having community. That's at least not what the research is saying. So it's something that we wish was discussed a lot more. And you know, what we say to people is that. You can start small and you know, that community can mean that you sort of say hi to the people in the dog park when you're with your dog or when you're walking your dog, you know, community could mean you volunteer and kind of get to know the people that you're volunteering with even a little bit like, and we tell people it's not about making a hundred best friends.

It's about feeling like there are people that you have some level of connection with,

Abbe Greenberg: yeah. Human beings are hardwired to connect with one another. We have mirror neurons, which are activated when we make eye contact with one another. When we smile at one another.

They have found that people who have connections in their lives and they don't have to be tight, intimate connections, just connectiveness in general. And it can also be with animals, people who have that, their informal inflammation is significantly lower than people with all the other same markers who are not connected. And Mags talks about, there was a community in Pennsylvania, right Mags? That was just like the surrounding communities in every way. Like there are biomarkers, they all have the same amount of cholesterol and all those other things, blood pressure was all normal or whatever the same, but yet this one community

had 50%, less heart disease and heart attacks than any surrounding community. And researchers couldn't figure it out because everything else was the same. Socioeconomic status was the same, everything. It turns out that this was a particularly connected community. It was an Italian community that really focused on being neighborly.

And it was very communal environment and that was the only difference. And these people had 50%, less heart disease. So we know that being connected. It's part of our treatment plan for anxiety. We don't just say you should try to be more connected. We say, make it part of your treatment.

Yeah. That's very powerful. And in a disconnected world, such as it is, it is more important than ever. And I've read, you probably have too, how people are having a hard time getting back into being social because of COVID we've all been locked down to a certain degree. Um, but I want to encourage anybody who might be feeling this and you girls can speak to the possible link to anxiety.

When does it cross over from a little bit anxious about getting back into social settings and being with my friends or going to the gym and seeing those people again? When is that just a normal feeling after this strange pandemic experience that none of us were prepared for. I don't understand how anxiety develops versus just as I started at the top of the call, the normal anxiety of everyday.

Maggie Sarachek: I think most of us are going to have some anxiety about getting back out there, right? Because we're habitual creatures and you know, and those of us who are anxious were told, stay home to be safe,

and those of us who tend to have anxiety, you want to stay safe. That's one of the pluses of anxieties that we want. We want to take care of ourselves in that way. It is anxiety provoking to get back out there. And it's particularly hard for people who struggled with social anxiety or struggled with agoraphobia.

Which is the fear of having a panic attack or getting sick outside your house and not being able to get home. So you sort of end up staying near your house. There are a lot of people who've told us they struggled with it before the pandemic, and then they had gotten a little bit better at some point, and now it's gotten worse again.

I think your question was more about when it becomes really part of an anxiety disorder and, that's a hard one to answer, but basically we say, if you start avoiding things, not out of an abundance of caution, your doctor or you're deciding it's not yet

Okay for me to go back to the gym say, but if you're really starting to avoid things, because you're so uncomfortable, then your anxiety is making the decision about where you go, what you do. And that's when we think that it becomes a disorder because you no longer have agency over yourself, your anxiety is saying like, you can't go do this.

Abbe Greenberg: We talk a lot about something called shrinking world syndrome which is our terminology for when anxiety starts deciding where you'll go, who you'll see, what you'll do. Your world gets smaller and it's not just the geographical shrinking, right. It's also an emotional one.

Now we have this pandemic come along where there were not that many places to be safe for a long time. Before vaccines, we really had to hunker down and stay away from people which was terrible for us psychologically and terrible for us physically, for all the reasons we've talked about.

Now, we're starting to move toward the concept that unless another variant comes along, this is something we're going to have to learn how to live. And so we're going to have to learn how to reconnect with each other, because we know that's so important for our health, but also try not to get sick because that's also important for our health.

And so Maggie and I have been telling people it's okay if you are a little bit on the side of anxious because we all are. This thing has created more anxiety. I read a statistic the other day that was put out by the national Institute of health saying that they're guessing that anxiety

skyrocketed at least 50% during the pandemic. That's a big number considering that we're talking about 43 million adults in America a year. So it definitely is not an easy line to navigate. What we say is if your world is shrinking, Question it, ask yourself,

is my world shrinking? Is there something that I can do to expand my world and grow it a little bit so that I'm not stuck on an island all by myself?

Maggie Sarachek: I'm one of those people that the height of the pandemic was not so terrible. I was home with my family and I suffered from agoraphobia many years ago and I can get very comfortable being at home. You know, I had my kids and my husband there .

Abby is an extrovert and she was like, I can't take this anymore. And she would call me and I'd be well, I'm kind of digging this, you know,

Abbe Greenberg: I had to drag her and screaming out her door. It's time to get back to work.

We have to get back to the world now. Yeah.

Maggie Sarachek: I also knew that I am someone who has a lot of phobias so even during that time, I had to be a little more careful than other people. So there were things I would do. I would see my neighbors outside, we would meet for coffee or wine outside, or I would take a drive, not even to go anywhere, really just take a drive because I knew that I have this tendency toward, um, withdrawing and wanting to be home and it can really take over very quickly.

And I think that's what a lot of people are experiencing now.

Gregory Anne: Yeah, you bring up an interesting point. It sounds to me like there's a self-awareness mindfulness piece to this process of whether somebody wants to go get a diagnosis or whether they want to manage it, get help from a couple like you , but I sounds like a little bit of self-introspection.

Don't know the science yet. Maybe we do that when hormones shift and decline it's possible for women, especially to experience anxiety differently. More so, you're shaking your heads.

Maggie Sarachek: Yes.

Gregory Anne: Okay. So at that point, We have to sort out, is it a menopause issue? Is it real anxiety? Is that something your book can help with?

Abbe Greenberg: . We talk a lot about causes of anxiety. In our book, we have a long chapter listing potential causes for anxiety.

And we always say that, trying to pinpoint exactly what caused your anxiety is sort of like standing in an anthill and figuring out which ant bit you there. There are many causes. I've had a bad thyroid my whole life, so that's definitely one thing.

And then I've had hormone issues. I had postpartum depression, hormonal flux for me, causes changes in brain chemicals. You can pick and choose what you think your causes are. You're not going to probably know for sure, unless there's a real, a traumatic event that happened in your life that you can point to. For most women

when our hormones are in flux, puberty, pregnancy, postpartum or perimenopause, menopause those times in our lives are when we're most susceptible to our neurotransmitters going a little wonky. Those are times when the balance changes a bit with dopamine and serotonin and norepinephrine, and those are chemical messengers in our hormones.

They're all intertwined. When one little thing goes off, it tends to wreak a little havoc. And that is very often the case women in menopause like myself.

In other words, there's a lot of anxiety disorders that come about right after those events or during that time of fluctuation. Yeah. We talk a lot about, making sure that you've had your thyroid tested properly and that there's certain vitamins that we know, of us are deficient in and those vitamins really make a difference in anxiety and depression.

There's a lot that we can do. Our soil has gotten so depleted in the last 50 years. So really even if we're eating a lot of healthy fruits and vegetables, they don't pack the same nutrient punch that they used to do.

We've become more accustomed to supplementation because that's what the research is pointing towards. It's necessary since we don't get what we need, particularly with magnesium. Even when you eat loads of spinach and dark chocolate, you're not getting enough.

We also know that more and more studies are coming out, showing places with high pollution levels people have more anxiety and depression.

Mental health is definitely physical health. It's all the same.

Gregory Anne: It's funny how the phrase, mind, body was such a hot topic for a long time.

And now it's all one thing.

Maggie Sarachek: We even say that in the book we say the whole mind, body connection thing doesn't make sense.

They're the same.

Gregory Anne: Your website is the anxiety, sisters.com,

Abbe Greenberg: Anxiety, sisters.com.

Gregory Anne: And your book is the sister survival guide. You can get it absolutely anywhere you buy your books, your local bookstore or on the computer.

Abbe Greenberg: Book people we're going to plug the independent bookstores.

We're probably going to put out a new one this coming year. Some time during 2022. because we're constantly reading research and everything is updating.

And so even courses that we were so proud of because they were so correct research wise, now there's more there's new stuff. But we do a Tuesday night group Facebook live.

That's free. We pick a different topic every week and show slides and tell stories. And illuminate as much as we can for, for people. We have support group that meets on Sunday nights. We call it our coping group. It's a smaller group where we work together to manage anxiety.

It's more of a coaching type program. And, um, and now we're starting to get back out on the road.

Maggie Sarachek: Yeah. We really love doing workshops and retreats and we've missed that a lot.

Gregory Anne: I really miss being in rooms. Like any entrepreneurs that you are too, you have to meet people. You have to network. And I used to just think at one point, if I have to go to another networking thing, I'm going to shoot myself.

And now I'm like, when do I get to go networking again? Wait a minute. Where are the rooms?

Were supposed to do a live book tour when our book came out in September, but of course that was during the pandemic.

And so we did a zoom tour. Hmm.

Well, you guys, this has been really great. I want to recommend to anybody who feels like the anxiety is smallening, and I just made up a word, making your world smaller, drop into the Facebook group for the anxiety sisters and see what they're talking about.

Get comfortable. See what other people are saying and experiencing, and.

Abbe Greenberg: You will definitely not feel alone. And Maggie starts a new conversation every day about something different.

And it's just so heartwarming, how kind and compassionate and supportive the 200,000 people that come to that page are they are amazing. They're amazing kindest group of people. Everyone is so supportive. Everyone reaches out and helps everybody else. It's just a it's magic for us.

Gregory Anne: That's great to hear. Mags, Abbs thank you so much for your time. This has been super informative. I learned a lot , we will hopefully see you on the road. Follow you along on Instagram and Facebook and see what's happening.

Thanks very much and be well until next time everybody I'll be back in a week.

Take care.