

Speaker Series – *Anxiety* with Dr Mark Cross

Interviewer: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner West Library Speaker series. We would like to start by acknowledging the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora nation on which this podcast is produced. Today, we're joined by consultant psychiatrist and author, Dr Mark Cross to discuss his latest book, *Anxiety*. Mark has worked in psychiatry for three decades and was first introduced to Australian viewing audiences in the landmark ABC docu series *Changing Minds*. Anxiety is the subject Mark knows quite a bit about. Many of his patients are sufferers, which is hardly surprising given anxiety is the most common mental health condition in Australia, affecting up to one in four people at some point in their lives. But Mark also knows about anxiety from another perspective because he too has suffered from anxiety all his life. Welcome Mark.

Dr Mark Cross: [00:00:50] Yes hello. Welcome everyone. Thank you for welcoming me.

Interviewer: [00:00:52] So as I mentioned in my introduction, anxiety is the most common mental health condition in Australia. However, anxiety is often underreported. Why is that?

Dr Mark Cross: [00:01:01] So we have mental health surveys every now and then and the figures mainly that are reported today in various websites or whatever come from the 2007 survey, where 14% percent of Australians stated that in the previous twelve months they'd had some form of anxiety disorder. But of course, that was only five, the five most common anxiety disorders, so namely PTSD, generalized anxiety disorder, phobias, OCD. And, of course, I'm always going to forget one aren't I? when I list things, and social phobia.

But it doesn't look at specific phobias. There was only agoraphobia, actually. And also, it doesn't look, these sort of figures often miss people with more than one condition. So, in my book as well I've got narratives from people with very complex mental health conditions, such as bipolar and schizophrenia, who also have anxiety. And that's often missed. And as I said, there are specific phobias that are underreported. And often also when people talk about anxiety, people don't understand

that anxiety is a disorder, because they go, okay, well, everyone gets anxious, right?, so what I'm feeling must be normal. Meanwhile, when you're getting horrible anxiety, fight or flight symptoms, when there's no exam or no external threat, then you may well have an anxiety condition.

Interviewer: [00:02:37] Yeah. So you also mentioned in your book about rejecting that binary notion of strong and weak, in relation to the perception of mental health. So not only for people with anxiety themselves, but also their significant others, family, friends and co-workers. Unfortunately, a large percentage of people report negative experiences after disclosing, particularly in the workplace. Can you speak a little bit about your experience and what workplaces can do to support their employees and co-workers?

Dr Mark Cross: [00:03:08] Sure. I mean, that whole binary notion, I don't like binary notions anyway. I like greys and in-betweens, and you know that, that speaks for that and it speaks to self stigma as well. And of course, that's played out in my work with doctors and nurses and other clinicians hiding ourselves. And of course, I found it very difficult to talk about my own issues, which is essentially a mental health condition, right? And, I quote now that I feel almost easier talking about my sexuality and believe me, that that was a long time in the making, and coming, and it's added to my anxiety, obviously, than actually having anxiety as a doctor, because it, it was seen as a weakness. So I still, on one level, perceive it as a weakness. Again, that self stigma's so horrible.

We were trained, to be of, you know, sound moral character and not to share ourselves because we had to always have a strong facade and way of interacting. And I think that, you know, you can translate that to a whole lot of jobs and organizations, and that, that's not really helpful. And, it's a very difficult one whether you come out at work or not, actually, in terms of how your sexuality, but also mental health condition. I was just saying I was talking at an IBM diversity webinar the other day, for my friend heads the diversity program there. And there's a diversity awards luncheon for the LGBTQ community. I went to it a couple of years ago with my other hat on in a way, the Rainbow Families Network that I'm a member of. And it's amazing. All the luminaries are there, all the bigwigs in town, giving bronze to platinum awards for, diversity in companies, which is amazing, as a gay man.

But then I sat there as a psychiatrist and someone who, you know, has his own mental health issues. And I went, we don't have that for mental health. People don't talk about these issues in the workplace.

And I take it with a case by case basis with my patients and whether they do, you know, come out at work, and I say come out, you know, in terms of disclosing. Mostly I've had good, a good sort of interaction, because you are, under Australian law, protected.

You can't be discriminated against. But of course, there are different ways you can be, obviously. The problem is, and you ask me what workplaces can do. Well, first of all, we can all start by being kind to each other. I mean, that's a nice one. It doesn't cost anything. And, change has to come from the top. So when I give talks to corporates and whatever, which I sometimes do, mainly through friends or whatever, I always ask who the most senior person is in the room, so I can get away with it. Right?

So, you know, you have your young staff, they're all looking because, hey, let's face it, any organisation has hierarchy and they have rules.

And if you have a psychopathic narcissist as your boss, your mental health in the workplace is going to be awful. You know, it's, it's very important. It's work, health and safety. And so workplaces can put things in place like check ins, flexible work hours, a great return to work flexibility when people, when somebody's off. You know, openness, because often people are told, oh, Mark's off, when he comes back, you can't tell, you can't talk about it. Meanwhile, Mark's at home, absolutely, worried sick, about people talking about him, and then returning to work before he's well because he's run out of sick leave.

And, then of course, people are looking and then look down at their desks and it adds to his sensitivity and feeling of difference and not being accepted, because, if you're off for a long period of time, you're either pregnant, you've got a broken leg or you've got cancer.

And everyone talks about that.

Interviewer: [00:07:27] Do you think that perception is improving at all? Do you think those conditions are improving for people after they disclose? That society's moving in the direction of being more accepting of people?

Dr Mark Cross [00:07:43] We are. And I think, you know, I have to be positive. But of course, people have different experiences. And I will say though, it's difficult in the mental health world, in the workplace, because we talk about anxiety and depression, so most people, at work will have an anxiety, depressed/depression, stress and anxiety.

And people are more open about that now, but less so for the more severe end of the spectrum. And I think people with bipolar and schizophrenia, PTSD, they find it harder, and I think we have to open the conversation much more, about that, because people still have a lot of stigma about those sorts of conditions. And of course, that raises anxiety generally. On a positive note, I have to say, I've been thinking about this, in this time of COVID. A friend of mine phoned me the other day and I won't use all the expletives he did because he had a panic attack for the first time in his life. And he knew it was a panic attack, and he called me to, to help him through it. And I was like, I was glad that I could at the time. And he said, do you and people you treat go through this B.S. all the time?

And I said, yes. And he said, I'm donating to **SANE** immediately. This is ridiculous. Because it's sad that people have to experience it, in order to have, understanding. But you know what?

After this time, you know people in the government, whatever, think and then the Black Dog Institute, are talking about a tsunami of mental health issues. Never mind about all the people already with mental health issues. And I think, we have to talk about it more. We've had, such movements there already.

So, whilst this has not been a great time for a lot of people, I think we need to learn from it. And I think personally, our dialogues going to shift, and we definitely can now talk more about it, which is really the way forward in order to reduce stigma and people's negative experiences.

Interviewer: [00:09:48] That's the few positives that have come out of this situation. But in chapter two of the book, you go through some of the external risk factors for anxiety. Obviously, a lot of them are very relevant to the environment that we find ourselves in now, so, some of them include loneliness, financial stress and fear of terror and environmental disaster. And I'm sure COVID-19 and the lockdown and the associated social implications, I don't think even you could have imagined that as you were writing this book. Can you speak a little bit about the impact of the current environment? I know we sort of touched on it in the last question, but just the impact on our individual and collective mental health.

Dr Mark Cross: [00:10:41] Yeah, absolutely. And, of course, bringing out a book on anxiety at this time is very compelling. And I sure was asked whether I knew about it by one interviewer, and I said, us gays have been told that we can cause earthquakes. So, you know, hey, maybe the virus is in my remit. But no, but again, it's dovetailed, and of course a lot of anxiety is being felt by a whole lot of people now. I have used that term, hey, we're all in this together, but in fact, with a caveat, we're not all in this equally together. So it's wonderful. I'm in the mountains. My husband and I've got on much better.

But I reckon there's gonna be higher divorce rates after all this. So, that's been quite amazing cause I've had time to sit and look at what's important. So, again, those are the positive things. But domestic violence, alcoholism, an increasing sense of isolation, has been an issue and is still an issue with a lot of people. And we'll come to what I think we should do about that. But, you know, staying connected and all those things are important. But external factors are going to play out further down the track. So it's not only just about dealing with COVID now, but it's the fallout. So, I chatted to a director/producer the other day, we were doing some podcasting, but he hasn't had paid work since February.

I've had, I've got friends in the arts industry. The mother of my, one of the mothers of my children, has had to go get a Centrelink payment for the first time in 30 years. She's an actress, and that that's really affected her. People in retail and contracted businesses, it's going to be a very anxious time for Australia, where you know, we are a lucky country, but we haven't had a recession for over 30 years. So

that's going to have impacts. And, you know, in terms of other external things, again, I keep on saying this, and I really mean it though, we have to be kind to each other. So at least social media has been, I think, a bit kinder. But when you look at all these external things, that causes pressure, so, you know, obviously in a more equal society, people are, less likely to have anxiety and other mental health conditions. Well, we have to be aware of how we deal with each other. And we're all stressed. There's no doubt about it. There's a high level of stress.

So, for today for instance, I had to put my air in my tyres, and because I didn't have gloves in the car so as I was getting some, and I was using paper towels to try and, you know, not touch the metal and then not touch the metal. And I thought, oh, God, now I've got to go inside and use their, you know, spray for my hand. And it's such, so constantly with us. And that obviously is having, is going to have a toll. And we've got to watch out as it plays out in road rage. It plays out in, you know, fighting over toilet rolls and maybe something else in the supermarket.

We've got to keep that in check. And just, always I, lets not get into what we should do now. But it's, you know, bad harsh words are enough to actually make someone harm themselves. So we've got to be so careful about how we interact.

And those are some of the external things. You know, media has a large part to play in that, you know. So, as with mental health issues, people who suicide don't make the front page, but people who hear voices and go into the lion's den at the zoo do. And it's this constant, you know, seen as a stigma watch, for instance, media watch. And we're to be careful because that's what's portrayed. But I like to think that we are better than America. Well, that's not hard, I don't think.

But, you know, I have to say. But in terms of the percentage of us, I look at the marriage equality figure and I always use that, as I think that's a good measure. So about 65 to 70 percent of us are decent, good, kind people. With our own stresses, and at times we snap, and we say things we don't want to, and foot and mouth disease runs large with me, but, at the end of the day, we are kind to each other. We look after our neighbours, we connect. But the problem is, in that 30 percent, you have such meanness and horribleness, but also, you know, the shock value. That's what makes the news. And I think it gets skewed in its reporting, because we must be doing

something right, in this country, for us to have done so well, comparatively. Apart from obviously we all want Jacinda as our prime minister.

Interviewer: [00:15:35] Yeah. And so you also mentioned the book, some sort of external measures people can undertake, to help control their anxiety or the symptoms of anxiety. Can you suggest some lifestyle changes that may help to alleviate these symptoms, just particularly in this climate of uncertainty and social distance?

Dr Mark Cross: [00:15:57] Yes. So, it's always good when you feel in control, and what you can control, and really you can only control you, right? So that's a useful one to remember when you wake up in the morning, do some gratefulness, stretches and thinking, and of course, then reach for the coffee. Who can start without coffee, right? But exercise, and I must say, and let me be very honest with you, I would say all these things diet, sleep, exercise. On the one hand, we know what we want to do and we need to do, and then we have to adapt it to ourselves. So, I don't want to sound as if I'm holier than thou because I've been eating chips and chocolate all the way through, and loving it. But I've been walking, and it's been wonderful. I've done more walking, in the last six weeks than I have all year. And it just clears your mind. So, when you're talking about mindfulness, and that underpins anything really that's useful. Even drinking. And, you know, I've had a few wines here and there, as long as you do it mindfully.

So what mindfulness means, is just concentrating on what you're doing, concentrating on being, concentrating on actually staying in the moment, and then, doing things in the here and now. And that's so beautiful, when you just concentrate on your breathing, and just go, you know what?

I'm not going to worry about what's going to happen in the future because that's useless. I'm not going to concentrate too much on what I should have done or regret what I've done yesterday, because that's in the past. And if you go down those wormholes, there's no way out. And it's just, sipping that wine, or eating a nice healthy meal, after your walk and go, hey, I can do this, and actually, you know what? This is, this is something that I can really concentrate on, and focus on. And at the end of the day, we are not asked to be better versions of ourselves, although, hey, if it comes out like that, that's great. At the end of the day, we've been asked to go to couch, not to

board (?). We've just had to endure. And it's been hard for people. But, there is a way out, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. And just take day by day, structure, routine and make sure you sleep.

Interviewer: [00:18:21] Do you have time for one more question? And this is a library podcast. So, you mentioned in your book that you've been an avid reader of science fiction from about the age of 30.

And you made some pretty interesting sort of comparison between the more dystopian aspects of science fiction and modern Australian life, and obviously, those comparisons have become a little less metaphorical in the last few weeks. But do you have any reading recommendations for people who may be spending a little bit more time at home at the moment?

Dr Mark Cross: [00:19:02] It's a year, so, you know, in my 50s, I think you go through reading phases and of course, in focus and attention in this time, reading a book. I mean, reading is the most wonderful thing. It's the most wonderful, mindful thing that you can possibly engage in, you know? But in terms of the science fiction, that dystopian stuff, of course, Margaret Atwood hates being called a science fiction writer. But I've been reading her since I was 16 and her *Oryx and Crake* series has stayed with me. Unfortunately it's lodged in my brain. I can't get it out. It's so true to what's going on now in the world. And she writes so searingly and preciently.

I think that's a word, presciently. That's it.

[00:19:52] But Ursula K. Le Guin is just so beautiful. And I, a friend of ours knew someone who was writing an opera for her, before she died, on one of her *Earthsea* books. But, you know, *Lord of the Rings*, I just, you know, that's still my mainstay there.

But what I'm currently reading is the new Hillary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* trilogy, the third one. And her book, *A Change of Climate*, is very evocative for me of colonial Africa and, she writes beautifully. And I've just also finished a trilogy by the writer of *Altered Carbon*.

I don't know if you've seen that amazing show on Netflix and he writes, you know, his Takeshi Kovacs characters is real straight pheromonal guy. But as Richard K.

Morgan, he's just bought out a fantasy series called *The Steel Remains* with a gay antihero. And I suppose in my 50s now and I've been, you know, out and I look for a lot of books with gay characters, positive LGBTQ or queer characters. Of course, when you, when you search on Amazon, you come across all these male to male romances written by straight women who live in the midwest with cats.

It's incredible. And they're writing incredibly steamy sex scenes. They've obviously done their research well.

But science fiction and fantasy is also gender bending and, apart from dystopian sort of stuff, you know, Philip K. Dick is one of my all time favourite authors. His is amazing, but it's also what a world, what our world could be.

And interestingly, for your readers and listeners, Australasia features large and a whole lot of science fiction work as being an incredibly big and powerful bloc in the future world. It's very interesting, that part anyway, and we can do so much better as a country. I think we've got so much potential in Australia and hopefully post COVID we'll get there. So hopefully my reading will come true.

Interviewer: [00:22:11] It will. And actually, I went to see Margaret Atwood recently, on her recent author tour, and *Oryx and Crake* was actually written in Australia.

Dr Mark Cross: Oh, wow. I didn't know that.

Interviewer: Yes.

Dr Mark Cross: [00:22:22] Was she using her machine, I know she's got a signing machine.

Interviewer: I didn't actually. The queue was too long, but I probably would have hung around if I had've known that.

Dr Mark Cross: [00:22:37] I didn't know she was here. I would have, I mean, really I mean, she's one of the most, you know, seminal authors that I have read through my decades.

Interviewer: [00:22:44] Yeah, well she definitely didn't disappoint. Next time.

Dr Mark Cross: Next time, indeed.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for your time Mark. If you'd like to hear more from Mark, *Anxiety* has been recently published by Harper Collins and is available at all good local book stores. Thank you for listening and look out for more upcoming digital content through the Inner West Library What's On, and social media accounts.