How YouTube Changed My Anxiety Treatment (15 Million Views Later)

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My YouTube story

- I started making YouTube videos because I couldn't find a video to share with my patient that she might actually want to watch.
- It's completely changed the trajectory of my career, taking me to places I never imagined.
- But I started to feel stuck
- So I enrolled in an accelerator for educational YouTube channels
- Had to share our work and get feedback.
- I created a "psychographic" for my audience
- Another student said "wow I am exactly your avatar"
- Then she told me, "I'd never click on a video about overcoming anxiety…it makes me too anxious"
- Am I failing to reach a large population because of how I'm framing, or not framing, my videos?
- Is the way I'm talking about anxiety actually increasing anxiety?

The challenge

- Anxiety is the most common mental health problem in the world yet it remains largely invisible
- Many people with anxiety disorders don't seek help or wait years, sometimes decades, to get help
- While we have effective treatments, they require high levels of motivation and dropout rates can be high, and many therapists do not understand them
- There's an expert-public disconnect that must be bridged.

The opportunity

- Could we help people become more aware of anxiety, and its treatment, simply by changing the way we talk about it?
- I'm going to share how I've applied the REACH framework to anxiety disorders
  - R - Research your audience.
  - E - Engage through story.
  - A - Approach your audience
  - C - Connect to what they know.

- ○ H - Help them take action
- All of anxiety will be simplified to 7 core anxiety problems:
  - ○ How the public experiences it.
  - ○ How experts talk about it.
  - ○ How to apply the REACH framework.
- Each of these ideas has been developed and tested in collaboration with my YouTube community.

This is about framing, not training

- I'm not going to teach the treatments to you.
- Rather I'm going to focus on how to teach the treatments to your patients.
- The ideas here primarily come from the inhibitory learning model of anxiety, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, and Metacognitive Therapy. See references below to learn more.

Before you start

- Before I start, I always ask this:
  - ○ Imagine waking up tomorrow with your anxiety under control—not gone, just
  - ○ manageable. What's the first thing you'd want to do?
- This reveals motivation, values, and goals. Everything you need to get the treatment to its end point.

Problem #1: The problem with anxiety.

- What people say:
  - ○ "If I could get rid of my anxiety, I could live a 'normal' life."
- What people believe:
  - ○ Anxiety is harmful.
  - ○ If I could relax, my anxiety would go away.
  - ○ People with anxiety are weak.
  - ○ Avoiding anxiety helps manage anxiety.
  - ○ Anxiety is a flaw.
  - ○ Anxiety is destroying me.
- What we know:
  - ○ Biology, environment, experience all contribute to anxiety.
  - ○ Spectrum of adaptive to impairing anxiety.
  - ○ Emotional suppression makes anxiety worse.
  - ○ Reframing is help, particularly excitement
- Demo: How can we bridge this?
  - ○ Story: My first *Star Trek* convention
  - ○ Metaphor: Anxiety is an overly dramatic friend, like C-3PO. It's just trying to help.
- Action step:

- ○ Imagine your anxiety is like C-3PO. A well-intentioned friend who wants to help, even if they're a bit dramatic sometimes.
- ○ What would you like to say to your anxiety, your well-intentioned but overdramatic friend?

Problem #2: Feeling stuck.

- What people say:
  - ○ "Anxiety keeps me stuck. I'm not moving forward. I procrastinate. People think I don't care but I do. I just feel powerless to do anything about it."
  - ○ "Anxiety holds me back from taking risks. I'm not improving myself because I'm too scared to do the things that will improve my future."
  - ○ "I can't get started. I can do my work. I can't talk to the people I need to."
- What people believe:
  - ○ Anxiety defines me.
  - ○ I can't pursue my goals until my anxiety goes away.
  - ○ My anxiety means I'm not cut out for challenging or important work.
  - ○ My past failures mean I'll always fail in the future.
- What we know:
  - ○ People need something worth feeling anxious for.
  - ○ People get unstuck with they understand their motivations, clarify their values, and take small steps forward aligned with their values.
- Demo: How can we bridge this?
  - ○ Story: Alex's grandmother
  - ○ Metaphor:
    - Imagine you're driving, and that friend is commenting on the weather—sometimes clear, sometimes stormy. When a storm hits, C-3PO calculates every possible disaster while the rain blurs your vision and wind pushes against your car.
    - Without values there's no clear direction. When the storm comes and C-3PO is listing all the dangers, the clear choice seems to be returning home to safety.
    - But values? They're like Google Maps for what matters most. Just as your GPS breaks a journey into simple steps—"turn left here", "take this exit"—values help you find your next meaningful move, even while C-3PO continues listing the dangers ahead.
    - The storm doesn't need to clear for you to keep moving. You might drive slower, grip the wheel tighter, turn your wipers up—but you can still navigate toward what matters, even when it's uncomfortable.
    - Most of us instinctively seek safety when anxiety appears. But living by our values often means driving through some storms—not because we enjoy the weather, but because our destination matters more than staying comfortable.

- ■ The question isn't "How do I avoid this storm?" but "What direction is worth traveling, even when the weather is rough?"
- ● Action step:
  - ○ Imagine it's your 75th birthday. You've lived the life you've always wanted, and your closest friends, family, and colleagues have gathered to celebrate. What are they saying about you?

Problem #3: Worries.

- ● What people say:
  - ○ "I keep feeling like I'm on the verge of a breakdown, but I have no idea why or how to stop my thoughts."
  - ○ "I'm always worrying about what's coming next."
  - ○ "My muscles are always tight and achy. I'm grumpy."
  - ○ "I feel fear about every decision I make in life. It freezes me to the point where I have done nothing with my life. I fear everything."
- ● What people believe:
  - ○ I should be able to control all of my thoughts.
  - ○ Worrying helps me prepare for the worst-case scenario.
  - ○ If I can just figure out why I'm anxious, it will go away.
  - ○ Physical symptoms of anxiety are dangerous and need immediate attention.
  - ○ If I'm not constantly vigilant, something terrible will happen.
- ● What we know:
  - ○ Attentional focus is a problem with anxiety.
  - ○ Cognitive attentional syndrome maintains worry, rumination, unhelpful self-regulation
  - ○ Most thoughts are meaningless and random but anxiety people attach meaning to them.
  - ○ Intolerance to uncertainty.
- ● Demo: How can we bridge this?
  - ○ Story: My daughter's first Christmas party.
  - ○ Metaphor: Your worried thoughts are like spam emails. They're SUPER EMOTIONAL. Always showing you urgent problems, catastrophic consequences, or disturbing content that makes you want to hit delete.
  - ○ But just like you don't need to read every spam email to stay safe, you don't need to engage with every worried thought to be okay. You can just let the junk sit in your spam folder while you focus on the valuable stuff in your inbox.
- ● Action step:
  - ○ 1. Step Back (Notice):
    - ■ When worry shows up, pause.
    - ■ Name it: "Ah, I'm in the spam folder again.
    - ■ Observe what this thought wants you to do.
  - ○ 2. Step Forward (Act):
    - ■ Ask: "Can I solve this problem right now?"

- If no, ask: "What would my values guide me to do instead?"
- Take one small step, bringing your worried thoughts along for the ride.

Problem #4: Exhaustion.

- What people say:
  - "I'm tired. All the time. Being in fight or flight mode during almost every waking moment is draining me"
  - "I don't want anxiety to control me anymore. I just want to feel confident."
  - "What do I do when my anxiety is running the show?"
- What people believe:
  - Confidence means never feeling anxious or unsure.
  - I need to feel 100% ready before I can take action.
  - Confident people don't experience self-doubt or insecurity.
  - I need to overcome my anxiety completely before I can feel confident.
  - Confidence is something you're born with, not something you can develop.
- What we know:
  - Broaden and build theory of emotions.
    - Some emotions narrow your focus and activate your sympathetic nervous system.
    - Other emotions expand your focus and activate your parasympathetic nervous system.
- Demo: How can we bridge this?
  - Story: My crystal light cure.
  - Metaphor:
    - Imagine anxiety is like viewing life through a microscope - everything looks alien and kinda freaky when you look at it with such intense magnification.
    - Widening emotions are like backing off from the microscope. You see the bigger picture and larger patterns.
    - These activities aren't about escaping anxiety or calming down.
    - They're tools to help you shift from tunnel vision to a wider perspective.
    - Think of them like windshield wipers - they don't make the storm go away, but they help you see clearly enough to keep driving.
- Action step:
  - Watch something that makes you laugh.
  - Send a quick "thanks!" text to someone who helped you recently and share why you're grateful.
  - Look at silly memes.
  - Look at photos of happy memories or reread supportive texts.
  - Spend a few minutes petting an animal (or stuffed animal) or watch cute animal videos.
  - Put on music that pumps you up.
  - Do a small act of kindness for someone.

- ○ Go for a walk and try to focus on the natural world around you.
- ○ Write down something that went well today (or something that could have gone bad but didn't).
- ○ Savor a food or drink you enjoy.

Problem #5: Regretful urges.

- What people say:
  - ○ "If I go back there again I'm going to have a panic attack."
  - ○ "I don't have any control over my mind anymore."
  - ○ "I just lose it when my anxiety kicks in."
  - ○ "I don't feel safe when it's that bad."
- What people believe:
  - ○ They have no control over their minds and bodies.
  - ○ Anxiety and panic will increase and keep increasing.
  - ○ Escape and avoidance are the only tools to deal with this.
- What we know:
  - ○ Fear exists to encourage action.
  - ○ We need to do something when we are highly anxious.
  - ○ Distress tolerance skills can bring down the risk of problematic behaviors.
- Demo: How can we bridge this?
  - ○ Story: Viking Kramer.
  - ○ Metaphor:
    - ■ Anxiety attacks are like a covered pot of water about to boil over. You have three choices:
      - ● Remove it from heat (escape the situation)
      - ● Let it boil over and make a mess (regrettable reactions)
      - ● Remove the lid to release steam (quick response skills)
    - ■ Most people choose 1 or 2 because they haven't practiced option 3 enough to trust it.
- Action step:
  - ○ Big physical movements.
  - ○ Progressive muscle relaxation.
  - ○ Grounding techniques.
  - ○ The dive reflex.
  - ○ Sensory overload.
  - ○ Slow breathing.

Problem #6:

- What people say:
  - ○ "I avoid doing all the things I want to do."
  - ○ "I don't even recognize myself anymore—anxiety has completely taken over my life."

- ○ "I want to stop it from stopping me."
  - ○ "It's hard for me to interact with anyone. Even at the grocery check out or passing a stranger in the street. I don't know where to look or what to say."
- What people believe:
  - ○ Exposure to anxiety-inducing situations will always make my anxiety worse.
  - ○ I need to feel completely calm before I can face my fears.
  - ○ If I avoid what makes me anxious, my anxiety will eventually disappear.
  - ○ If I have a panic attack while facing my fears, it means I've failed.
  - ○ Other people don't feel anxious when they try new things.
  - ○ My comfort zone is the only safe place for me.
  - ○ If I push myself too hard, I'll have a complete breakdown.
  - ○ I should be able to overcome my anxiety through willpower alone.
- What we know:
  - ○ The fastest way to change anxiety is to intentionally trigger it.
  - ○ Not because of habituation, but because of learning.
  - ○ Anxious memories are powerful and can only be updated through equally strong experiences that surprise us and teach something new.
- Demo: How can we bridge this?
  - ○ Story: Bathtub anxiety.
  - ○ Metaphor:
    - ■ Imagine your comfort zone as a garden, with anxiety as the weeds—always present.
    - ■ You have three choices:
      - Abandon the garden (avoid everything that makes you anxious). Each time you avoid, the weeds grow stronger.
      - Use harsh chemicals (try to eliminate anxiety completely). This may work briefly but it harms the good stuff too (re-read lesson 1 for more on that).
      - Learn to garden with the weeds (expand alongside anxiety). Plant experiences powerful enough to grow beside the anxiety.
    - ■ The goal of exposure isn't to remove weeds but to grow a vibrant garden: tall sunflowers that overshadow the weeds, pollinators that bring butterflies, succulents that compete and thrive.
- Action step:
  - ○ Pick ONE small situation that makes you anxious.
  - ○ Write down:
    - ■ What are you afraid might happen?
    - ■ How sure are you, 0-100%, that your fear will come true?
    - ■ What coping skills you'll use to enter and stay present (from lessons 3-5)?
    - ■ What do you need to focus on to learn about your fear?
  - ○ Do the thing!
    - ■ Stay in the situation until you learn what actually happens. Then, reflect:
      - Did your worry come true?
      - What surprised you about this exposure?

- How much do you believe in your worry now, 0-100%?
- What would help you with this situation next time?

Problem #7: Isolation.

- What people say:
  - "I'm scared that no one will understand what I'm going through, and I'll always feel alone in this."
  - It feels like I'm watching my life from the sidelines while everyone else seems to be living theirs."
  - "I feel like a failure because I can't seem to control my anxiety when other people can just push through."
- What people believe:
  - Other people can tell how anxious I am just by looking at me.
  - People will reject me if they know about my anxiety.
  - I'm the only one who struggles with anxiety this much.
  - Talking about my anxiety will make people think I'm weak or crazy.
  - If I open up about my anxiety, I'll be burdening others.
  - Being vulnerable about my anxiety will only make things worse.
  - I should be able to handle everything on my own.
- What we know:
  - Social support seems to be the most critical factor in mental health
  - Anxious people overestimate how much others are thinking about them, judging them, and believe people will not help them.
- Demo: How can we bridge this?
  - Story: Scientist at a kids party
  - Metaphor:
    - Social support is like a WiFi network for humans. When you're connected, you can access resources and information, learn how others have dealt with similar problems, and find understanding that reminds you you're not alone. Just like WiFi, you don't need perfect signal strength - even one bar of connection can make a difference.
- Action step:
  - "You know how [thing that makes everyone anxious]? For me, it's like that, but with [things that makes me anxious]."
    - Panic: When you exercise, your heart races, your breath quickens, and you sweat. A panic attack feels like that - EXCEPT IT COMES OUT OF NOWHERE! Imagine relaxing on your couch when suddenly your heart rate doubles, you can't catch your breath, and you're drenched in sweat for no reason at all.
    - Agoraphobia: It's like being thrown into the middle of a giant maze. You keep trying to find a way out but remain stuck. Now you're panicking, trying to climb the walls, worried you might embarrass yourself at best or gravely injure yourself at worst.

- Phobias & Separation Anxiety: You're scared of everyday situations, so you look at them through binoculars. It's a distorted view, hyperfocused on specific details, losing all context of the surrounding world. So you never really learn how to be in that situation.
- Social Anxiety: Everyone feels like they have x-ray vision. They can see through you. Every awkwardness. Every detail. It's all exposed.
- OCD & Generalized Anxiety: It's like walking through a minefield in thick fog. You can't see what's to come, and you can't retrace your steps. Everything is uncertain. Simple decisions seem overwhelming. One wrong move could lead to disaster.

What you can do today:

- Make it your own (after downloading mine first).
- Write down the good stuff (your stories and the way your patients describe their problems).
- Collaborate with your patients to develop metaphors that fit them related to these 7 core lessons.

Conclusion

- Recently I got an email asking if I knew anyone who did what I do but had expertise in stress, not anxiety
- Clearly I have a lot of work still to do
- The ultimate lesson I've learned is that real is better than perfect. Imperfection moves us forward.
  - Try. Learn. Revise. Try again.
  - And do it collaboratively with communities you are connected to.

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