# Transcript

**Under the surface: Anxiety in the classroom with Dr Jodi Richardson**

Kara Williams:
You are listening to the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership's Thought Leadership series podcast where we showcase conversations with prominent thought leaders in education. We also bring you the thoughts and reflections of teachers and school leaders from across Victoria. Today we record this podcast on the lands of the Wurundjeri Peoples of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to their elders past and present, and extend that to the elders of the lands you're listening from. Hello everyone. My name is Kara Williams. I am a manager here at the Academy responsible for leading the delivery of statewide professional learning, including the thought leadership series. Prior to joining the Academy, I spent many years working in education, firstly as a classroom teacher, then in a number of well-being, inclusion, engagement, and leadership roles. I'm very pleased to be hosting this podcast and unpacking a topic that I'm very passionate about.

Today we are lucky to be joined by Dr. Jodi Richardson, who is a renowned speaker, author, and wellbeing expert, specializing in empowering students, educators, parents, and school leaders to manage anxiety, reduce stress, and enhance wellbeing. A former secondary teacher, Dr. Jodi, brings a deep understanding of the challenges facing school communities, including student anxiety and educated burnout. Her warm, compassionate, and engaging approach is rooted in research and complimented by her clinical work and personal experiences. Dr. Jodi is a bestselling author of Anxious Kids and Anxious Mums, creator of the Anxiety Toolkit, creator of the top ranked award-winning podcast. Well, hello, anxiety, and a regular media commentator. Jodi may be known to some of our listeners today for her work in schools and for the work that Jodi has done with the Academy in the past. Today we are discussing student wellbeing, specifically anxiety, and how this relates to behaviors teachers may see in the classroom. Thanks for joining us, Dr. Jodi. Let's get started. Thanks, Kara. Thank you for that lovely introduction. Okay, so anxiety, Jodi is something I think of as an umbrella term and something that tends to be more than it appears on the surface, often interrelated with other things that are going on. Can you set the scene for us a little bit and talk about what anxiety is, what's happening in the body and the brain of someone who is experiencing anxiety and perhaps maybe talk a bit about your personal experience first.

Jodi Richardson:
Oh, I'd be so happy to talk about my personal experience. I was that little kid in prep and primary school and high school who had anxiety and didn't understand, and it's so true what you said about it. What we see on the surface doesn't really show what's happening underneath. So for me, when I was a little four year-old in prep, I was the model student. I was conscientious. I was a rule follower. I wouldn't step a foot out of line and you would've just looked at me and thought, Jodi will get to work. There's nothing that I need to be too concerned about. But underneath all that, I just felt sick all the time. I had trouble with my breathing, which if you're watching this on video today, you might notice a little bit of that. I still live with anxiety, although I like to say I thrive with it now. Love that. Yeah, it's, I've got all the skills I need and the supports and it makes such a difference. But I would go home from primary school and I would just say to my mom, I feel sick and I don't want to go to school, which a lot of teachers will see. We know that there's a lot of lateness in school, refusal and absence and avoidance. In high school, it was just the same. I was just, perfectionism started to show through and I would be at the staff room at lunchtime. I just remember Mr. Dixon, if you're listening, I used to go and ask for extra help because I just needed to achieve and perform at a high level, and I just needed to get things right, but now still with anxiety and I'm medicated for it. The thing is, often if we have a disorder, it's with us just we can learn to manage it. I can cope really well, and it's really kind of why I do the work that I do to help other young people so the parents and their teachers know how to support them. In terms of the brain and the body, a good way to think about it is an alarm in the brain. So really our brain is always considering what's in our environment and are we safe or are we in danger? There's a part of the brain that will sort of sound the alarm, like a smoke alarm if danger is detected, and that could be in a classroom, and it's often, it's unconscious. It's not something the person who has anxiety can really control or understand. But if you're an anxious student and a teacher sort of approaches you from the front and kind of puts their hands on the table and leans over in a kind, even if there's kindness and warmth, sometimes even just that posture can sound that alarm and the alarm goes off and the body responds, and that fight or flight response is activated and that can trigger thoughts, anxious thoughts and worries, emotions like anger, that sort of the fight side tears and that kind of feeling really fragile.

The physical sensations, racing heart can't breathe properly, numbness, tingling, sweating, feeling sick and wanting to race out of the room. That's more a behavior. And then the behaviors we see are everything from rubbing out and perfectionism to wanting to frequently go to the nurse, to being disruptive, to not being able to start work. So essentially when anxiety is present, there's a threat. The alarm in the brain has activated, and until we can sort of help that young person feel safe and help that alarm settle, then they won't be able to engage in their learning. And one other example could be you might have a young person who just really feels like they just can't cope with maths. I don't like it. I hate maths. And when the maths session is coming up, the anxiety builds these thoughts of I can't do it. Math, anxiety, maths, anxiety, such a big challenge. And so this child is stuck in their head, and so they might need a strategy that helps them circuit break those thoughts. And so there's so much that we can do, but until we address the anxiety, we can't help the student to really get back into the learning. That is why they're there in school and they want to learn. They want to engage. They just sometimes just don't have what they need to be able to do.

Kara Williams:
And I think it's really interesting, your experience, Jodi, at school. It's identical to mine, the student that gets the good results, that appears to be really high functioning and it just a high achiever really. But underneath all of that, there's the waves of feeling unwell and the worry and things that come with it. The perfectionism is a huge one, particularly for girls. I think that's really big. And also as a teacher myself, one of the first things I was taught as a special ed teacher was think of yourself as a mirror. So how you are presenting is sort of how the students are going to respond. So they're going to reflect the way you're presenting. And like you said, if your posture changes or the picture of your voice changes, it's really interesting to watch student behavior change.

Jodi Richardson:
It really is. And the pitch of your voice. One of the things that we know when people get anxious is the voice goes up, we get constricted. And so there's this, and I know we'll come to this later, but in terms of that co-regulation that a dysregulated adult cannot help a dysregulated child regulate when we are calming ourselves, which is easy to say, hard to do, teaching's tough. It's so many things happening. So yeah, what you've said about being a mirror is, and there's lots of things that teachers can do to support themselves, but even just sort of having that awareness. And I'll never forget when I was teaching, I backed into a post at school in my car when I was parking. Oh my gosh. Anyway, I hadn't had a great morning. And instinctively when I went to my first class, I'm like, oh my gosh, you won't believe what I did this morning.

I figured someone saw, so it was someone would've had to have seen. But in just sort of saying it out loud, oh my gosh, I can't believe I did that. I feel so annoyed at myself. I wasn't concentrating, almost just kind by being a little bit vulnerable and just sharing a little bit sort of humanness, and you can kind of name it to tame it, which we know we've sort of said it out loud. It can reduce our distress and help us calm ourselves down. But also the kids go, well, she's not perfect. And then they start to relate to better as well. And you can calm a bit more quickly instead of trying to hold it all together and put this face on, which we have to do of course, sometimes as well.

Kara Williams:
And it's really tricky. And often I found teaching if a student was experiencing anxiety, more often than not, the parent was too. And that's a whole nother kettle of fish. But I guess that's something as a teacher to be aware of, is that it's not just the anxiety of the student in the classroom, but it's managing the parent anxiety. And that comes through in lots of different ways as well.

Jodi Richardson:
Oh my gosh. It really does. It really does. And as a parent with anxiety and teenage kids who have grown up with that, then I have even had feedback from my son said to me, not that long ago, it was almost, it was nonverbal. It was just like, if you can see me on the video, I'm just putting my hands at just that slow, just that calming sort of gesture, just he recognized. And when we get anxious and as expert as I am in terms of my understanding and my experience of it.

When we are anxious, the prefrontal cortex is not available. It becomes disengaged. And no matter what we know, we can't always draw on what we need. And so hence the important role of teachers. But also when we're anxious ourselves, sometimes we might need a colleague or somebody, not necessarily a child. We don't want our kids being there in that role, but just for that recognition and awareness and just for someone to help us out. And it runs in families, much of it is genetic, not all of it, but

Kara Williams:
Oh, for sure. And from my experience as well, someone who's had anxiety and a child with anxiety as well, and your book, raising Anxious Kids is something that we've relied on a lot. And you spoke about co-regulation and it just spending a few minutes doing those breathing exercises and things, which breathing sounds very simple, but it's so grounding and it just makes such a difference. It does.

Jodi Richardson:
Having a toolkit of strategies and practical go-to strategies that are quick and available, and I love that you love the breathing strategy. And we talked, didn't we before about another one my go-to is the lengthening of the exhale hail. The second inhalation can help inflate the lungs. We breathe so short and shallow, and it's a window into our nervous system that can sort of reset us and help us kind of then reengage and then be able to think. And our thinking brain comes back and we're like, okay, now what do I do next?

Kara Williams:
Yeah, yeah. And it is, it's about building in those opportunities in the classroom because it may be for the benefit of one student that the teacher is implementing a strategy, but it's going to be positive for the whole class. So those brain breaks and things, the breathing exercises you can do in the classroom, all of that there might be for a handful of students, but it's going to benefit everybody.

Jodi Richardson:
You are exactly right. And I think as a teacher sometimes, because it's about skills as a teacher in terms of mental health, challenges in the classroom, behavioral challenges in the classroom. And you can have children who are struggling with depression, with anxiety, with A DHD, with oppositional defiance and other behaviors. There's so many, and you can't know everything about all of those. And so just to sort of know, right, what's going to work, and we learn about the students in our classes too, and we learn what works more effectively. But knowing that if you put a strategy into place and the whole class is engaged in it, that it's going to benefit those who really need it and it's going to benefit those who might not be really needing it in the moment. You can't do that harm with those strategies. Some of the strategies like mindfulness is one to be mindful of. And one of the things I really want to reinforce today is that anxiety is so physical. We just get this overwhelming physical sensations. So we need to be able to calm the body, but the thinking that can run away with us when we are anxious. You might have a child who twists their hair, pulls their head, skin picks. I used to do that so much. I was a skin picker. Lips for me. Pick the lips. Yes, yes. So lips, fingernails, toenails. Vanity got the better of me. That was something that sort of helped me, but I still do do it a little bit. It's a little bit of evidence. Often that's because there's a lot of worry. And so a body-based strategy or leaving the class to go for a short walk to get a drink of water could be the break one child needs, but a child who's got a head full of worries and ruminating, and you know what it's like with anxiety? You might've said something to your friendship group before school and then you just spend the next hour just going, why did I say that? And so we need those opportunities to sort of interrupt the thinking as well. A child who's really worried that goes to the bathroom for a drink of water or a quick walk will be taking all those worries with them and won't come back feeling more regulated. And so that's something that we can talk about more as well.

Kara Williams:
Yeah, great. Okay. So as we know, anxiety can show up in many different ways. Can you tell us a little bit about how it shapes learning behavior and engagement in ways that might not necessarily be clear on the surface?

Jodi Richardson:
Yes, yes. So many ways. So we think about the VTLM two one elements of learning. All of them are affected because of the way focus and attention are drawn away from learning and engagement and onto the threat. And it could be worrying about mum dad separating. It could be about something you say in the morning that you're ruminating on, who am I going to play with at recess, who I'm going to play with at recess, masses coming, or I've got that test or so much, it's unlimited. What sort of things can trigger it? So it will affect, obviously the attention and focus, it will affect the working memory is really affected. And I find that sometimes that, you know what? When you're reading a book and you're like, you're so anxious because your mind keeps drifting and you can't remember what it is that you were doing a moment ago, you have to sort of go back. So working memory is affected. So retention of knowledge, recall, all of those are affected. And so when it comes to learning, it makes sense that some anxious students can be behind their peers because they're just not there in the room a lot of the time. Yeah, they're in person, aren't they? Yeah. They're there in person. Their attention is somewhere else. And the threat, because even though they're safe physically, they're not in danger, we know that they're safely seated in their classroom. The brain has detected a threat, and it's as if they're in danger. It's as if there's a snake slithering on the floor. That's how the body and brain are responding.

And so it's like an all or nothing, there's no half measures. And so with a mind that's so focused on threat, whatever it's being, no matter how engaging, interactive, and wonderful the lesson plan is, that's where it's going to be affecting learning. So in terms of engagement, avoidance and anxiety go hand in hand. When you feel anxious, you become activated, you want to fight or you want to flee, will usually flee. So escape and avoidance. And so it could be anxious, young person could literally just put their head down on the table. And that could be construed as being disrespectful.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
Being rude, as being belligerent. If they've been asked to pay attention, put your head up, sit up straight, and so on. Whereas the behaviors, they all serve a function.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
I think that that's really important to think about it. Again, when you're in the thick of it and there is a behavior that is really upsetting the class, it's really causing disruption. Well, as the adult in the room, you're going to get activated as well. And so it's hard to sort of think in the moment that, okay, what is the function of this behavior? But I think that that's worth understanding. So initiating, even just initiating a task can be a sign of anxiety that might be construed to be laziness or just mucking around or Johnny, little Johnny who gets up and he's always wanting to find a pencil or talk to someone or walking around the class.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
He's anxious, he might be feeling like, oh my gosh, this is way too hard, doesn't have the skills, and therefore gets up to mischief.

Kara Williams:
That's probably how he's regulating as well, taking that step away from the situation, going for that walk, taking that circuit breaker without deliberately even realizing they're doing it. That's right.

Jodi Richardson:
Exactly. And one of the things to know too is when anxiety, if we think about it like a seesaw, when anxiety goes up, there are neurobiological skills that go down. And we talked before about the brain becoming the prefrontal cortex, just simply. And the reason I think it's good to know why, the reason we can't engage that prefrontal cortex in the moment when we're in danger saying quotation marks is because it would be a committee meeting of the mind for the prefrontal cortex to make decisions about what's the best next step to stay safe. Whereas they just fight or they flee and they can be quite reflexive and abrupt. So we know executive function goes down, we know that self-regulation goes down, perspective taking. So those social skills like understanding the perspective and usually anxious, and I do this too, and I imagine you can relate, you think the worst case scenario. So you might not have been at school the day before and you come back and you're feeling anxious because you've been disconnected, you're worried, maybe someone was talking about you, you've missed work, you're not going to be able to do the work. And then that perspective changes. And so you read cues differently because you not only have this different perspective, but your accuracy in your thinking goes down and your flexibility in your thinking goes down as well. It makes sense that with all of those skills dropping as anxiety goes up, that learning and engagement, and then of course behavior is what we see, the thoughts, the feelings, the emotions that the sensations are kind of under the surface. And then the behaviors are what we see on top. But they serve a purpose. They do. There is a function to behavior. Yes, they would behave if they could. There's often a lot of skills they need and behavior. Those skills can be taught and we can see improvements. But it's recognizing that sometimes what you see in the class is not the child being naughty and trying to be disruptive. They're anxious and they're doing all they know with the skills they have as to how to cope.

Kara Williams:
And for some students being in the classroom, being physically there is the hard work in itself. So that's another element of it to think about as well. And listening to what you were saying, Jodi, around the brain, it sounds like a brain that's in a state of anxiety can't differentiate between a catastrophic event or something that we might think is minor, but is still causing really high levels of anxiety in the student and presenting in the same way as it may do if there was an emergency or something like that. So is that something that you see in classrooms as well?

Jodi Richardson:
Yeah, absolutely. And it's awful when you are that student, and it could be the student, we were the quiet one who's afraid to set a foot out of line. I wrote a post recently and I said, I wish I'd made more mistakes and challenged myself more, maybe broken a few more rules. I was such a rule follower. I dunno that I would've ever done that. But I remember being a teacher and then thinking, oh, I just thought the world would come to an end if I got in trouble.

And I realized as a teacher, the world does not come to the end. That you might have a word with a student about something, but it's not personal. And I saw it from that different lens. But knowing that yes, inside the quiet student who is, it's like the squeaky wheel gets the grease wing. Do we know that? Yes. That, yeah. What you see does not reflect what can be going on. And particularly if depending on the symptoms, because it's so different for every student, my breathing is really affected. And when you're watching the video of this, you'll notice that because anxiety shows up around what we care about. So I care about this, I'm going to be anxious, of course, but at the moment, I've got enough regulation and skills and everything to be able to manage and still think and talk. But the student who is really overwhelmed might be having that racing heart.

They're starting to feel sick in the tummy. And then if they start to worry about those signs, then that can build more anxiety about the anxiety that's happening. Yes, they've had panic. I dunno if you've ever had a panic attack. I have. They're not fun. It's terrible. It's terrible. And if you feel the panic coming and you are anxious about that, it can just drive this terrible spiral because when you have a panic attack, it becomes obvious to other people and it's embarrassing. So yeah. So I think that compassion, which I think when as teachers, we have a good understanding of behavior, the kids would behave if they could really, they want to do the right thing. They just don't have the skills, is a good way to think about it. It's not personal. It can feel personal sometimes. Particularly because a student might be a very different student in the class with their English teacher than they are with their history teacher.

Kara Williams:
Oh, for sure.

Jodi Richardson:
So different. It's person dependent a lot of the time. And a different student might be great with the history teacher and not so great with the English teacher. And so yeah, I think just having that compassion and knowing that what's going on underneath feels really overwhelming. And even just having that compassion can help a teacher stay, I think a little bit more regulated in the moment when it's really difficult because the classroom's being disrupted and other kids are being disrupted in their work as well.

Kara Williams:
So Jodi, what are some ways that teachers and schools can support students experiencing anxiety? We have the Department of Education, positive classroom management strategies. Perhaps we could start there.

Jodi Richardson:
It's such a good place to start because anxious students, and we're talking primary school, we're talking secondary need, a psychologically safe environment, an environment where that alarm is not being sounded all the time. Safe, predictable, consistent learning environment where there are routines and clear expectations. And so one of the things to, so for example, the PCMs one where we are looking at expectations in the classroom, one of the things that I think it's helpful for teachers to know is that sometimes with anxious kids, they need a little bit extra. So raising your hand to ask for help is that classroom expectation. But for some students that's hard to do. They're a bit embarrassed. They just might shut down because they're so filled with anxiety that their head goes down the table or the shoulders slump, they start drawing or doodling or talking or disrupting. And whilst for neurotypical kids and for kids who are confident, comfortable raising a hand, you and me, we would've put our hand up. We would've waited for half an hour to be asked to answer a question if we needed to.

Kara Williams:
Yeah, probably.

Jodi Richardson:
We would never have called out. So I'm making assumptions, but

Kara Williams:
Correct, yes.

Jodi Richardson:
And so the expectations in the class is fantastic because then the students have that certainty. An anxious brain wants certainty and predictability. The structure, the structure is so, and that's why kind of calendars of what's coming if you're in primary school. So students know exactly what's happening. But some of the skills, we can sometimes make assumptions like I did when I was teaching, when I was in my first class, that was one of the expectations in my class.

Kara Williams:
Yeah.

Jodi Richardson:
I didn't know that that was hard for some kids because hard I hadn't been taught that. Yes. And so when we come to PCMs two and we look at the procedures, that is everything. So predictability and routine because when there's novelty, that can be one of those times when there can be anxious behaviors come to the fore. And one of the things, say for example, in a primary school class, I'll use a science example, maybe science is just something that just feels difficult for a grade four girl. She just thinks every time science, and maybe she just doesn't like putting on the gloves or whatever it is about, and it just makes her feel anxious and overwhelmed.

So the routine, we know that this is the structure of the day and science is after lunch. Now she might spend the whole day being anxious about science coming. She knows it's coming. So we've got that predictability, but what's going to happen in science? And oh, not even probably asking that question, just feeling a bit overwhelmed and anxious. And so a strategy that a teacher could do just to sort of build the capacity in the student is to cope and to tolerate the discomfort is to say, you know what? I know we have science today. I know it's not your favorite. I'm going to tell you today. Today we are planting some seedlings and we are going to be, so I just wanted to let you know this is the worksheet. This is kind of like what we're going to be doing. I'm going to pair you with Jane. And that way then you've just given that little bit more information, reduced the uncertainty. And now science after lunch isn't going to feel so overwhelming.

Kara Williams:
And there might be space in that little person's brain to learn more as well in that session. Yeah. And it's around that front loading students, and it's really quite a simple strategy. But that could make a huge difference in someone's learning experience.

Jodi Richardson:
It really can. Oh my gosh. It really can. Because that's what we want them to have, like you say, we want them to have that opportunity to learn that we're teachers, we're in classrooms, that's our craft, that's our calling. And yet when so many of the students in the class could be disengaged for different reasons, anxiety being a large one, then we set them up for more success and we reduce those behaviors that can be disruptive. When the shutting down occurs. When the avoidance occurs, it can be really embarrassing to have behavior called out in front of your peers.

Kara Williams:
Oh yes.

Jodi Richardson:
It's so embarrassing. And sometimes the function of behavior is a tension because the student feels really dysregulated and they know when Ms. Williams is nearby or comes and gives them some attention. That's they like Ms. Williams, even though they're being a bit disruptive. Well, how's a quick way to get attention is to muck around. And then you get that need met because that need is, I need some attention, I need some co-regulation. They don't know that they're not thinking about it.

Kara Williams:
No. Or the silly little quips that might get the giggles out of the friends and things that spike in dopamine from having their friends laugh at their joke. I guess another example of regulation

Jodi Richardson:
It is, it really is. And if they're having that need for attention, and as a teacher you're sort of thinking, well, how can I discourage this?
Let's say the laptops are open and we say, okay, time to close your laptop because we're going to set that aside. Now moving on to something else, or as I said earlier, because if we're forewarning about a transition that can help anxious kids as well, giving them a stopping point, a really clear stopping point can be helpful in transitions. And then one of the students does not close the laptop. Well, you could say from the front of the room, I've asked you to close the laptop, please, can you shut the laptop down? And they just ignore it. And then, okay, here comes a power struggle.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
Yes. I'll never forget the one power struggle I got myself into as an emergency teacher with a six foot tall year 10 boy. And I was so anxious and so wound up myself. I didn't see it coming and I lost You always lose. Yeah. Anyway, so yes, as I say, so you might then sort of step towards the child to sort say, Hey, I've asked you to shut the laptop. Could you please shut the laptop? Well, then you might go up to the table and then they're just like, I'm not doing it. And so because they don't want to lose face. And so you could simply as in discouraging this kind of paper, just write a quick little sticky note when the student hasn't, please shut your laptop, walk past, don't say anything. Stick it on their table, keep walking, keep talking, move away, engage with someone else. They've got an opportunity to do the right thing. It's nonverbal. It's not drawing attention. There was another example. Oh yes. Actively active supervision. Yes. That it's coming back to what I was saying before about getting attention. Sometimes an anxious student will constantly ask questions. And so that's not a behavior that we would think necessarily could be anxiety related, but it's that reassurance, am I doing the right thing? Have I got it right? Have I stopped in the right place? Have I done enough? And that can be that perfectionism, but it can also be I need the teacher close to me.

So for an anxious kid, in terms of the supervision, you might recognize that Claudia's always asking for this kind of reassurance. I could say to Claudia, okay, how are you going? Alright, checking where you're up to. Yep, you're on track. Don't focus on this or remember that. I'm going to be back to check and see. Check in about three or four minutes. And then that will deter that question asking and give her some time to build the capacity and the skill to focus without as much reassurance seeking. So the management strategies are excellent. Sometimes with anxious kids, we just need to just go a little step further. And it's easy to make assumptions as to we know better. We do. What is it? We know better. We do better. We learn. We are learning all the time always. And that's what this is about. So there are other things that schools can do. Would you like me to share some other things schools can do? I think they'd be great help. Yes. Number one is understand anxiety. So this is perfect. Make sure everybody has that psychoeducation, because it removes a lot of assumptions about behavior in the classroom. It helps everybody be on the same page. Look, a lot of adults are anxious as well. So when you are upskilling yourself in terms of understanding anxiety, it helps you as a staff member, helps you relate better, helps build empathy and compassion and builds your toolkit. Secondly, please, it's really important to know that anxiety is so different.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
My goodness. So what I would've needed as a student who was stuck in my head, quiet as a mouse, stuck in my head would be if I was struggling, I was picking at the skin at my fingers whilst I'm trying to do a task, I would've really been So, because it's different for different kids who need the different solutions. So whilst a whole class movement break could benefit a great number of the students for those that are stuck in their heads, I would dread that. I know. Yeah, you've just taken your worries with you. Yes. And you've had less distraction. You haven't at least got your work in front of you. So some of the things teachers can do is depending on the student, the age, the class, if it's a maths class, you might have a little Sudoku sheet. Sudoku. Sudoku. Yes.

Kara Williams:
Sudoku I think.

Jodi Richardson:
Yes. Sudoku sheet. So there's a little kind of interruption. Yes. So it sort of can help them. Oh, this is easy. It's like a bridge back to working.

Kara Williams:
Funny. I do that as an adult when if I'm having a really sort of stressful moment at work or I just need that brain break, I just do a quick sodoku and yeah, it just refocus. And it's a nice tool to have.

Jodi Richardson:
It really is. It really is. It could be that, it could be a word search, it could be a little sticky note just to sort of say, count backwards from 30 by fours or just something that requires a shift in the channel of the thinking, refocus the attention. And another, we did speak about this, but the safety, psychological safety in the classroom. And that starts with connection. It's like connection before content is a good way to think about it. Because we know overwhelmingly from the research when the child is in a calm state, when they're regulated, they're connected, and that's when the optimal conditions for learning.

Kara Williams:
And if you think of it in an adult context, in a workplace, until you've got that foundation of trust and respect and that really positive working relationship in place, the work's not going to progress. And I think that's very similar to a classroom. You've got to know your students and bringing in student voice, bringing in parent voice as well. All of that is so important. And I think anxiety is really, it's a challenging one because like you say, it shows up so differently in different people. And often children are experiencing anxiety and don't even realize what it is, or their parents may not realize what it is, which that's another challenge as well.

Jodi Richardson:
Look, for me, it was 20 years of undiagnosed anxiety. Likewise, was it really? Yes. Yes. You're so lucky now. I think. Yes, it can be so debilitating.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
Incredibly debilitating. And some people will say, I can't relate, but you can relate because anxiety is so normal, important to note that everybody feels anxious every day. Like we're doing a podcast, we're being videoed, we are recording, we're going to feel anxious. Of course that's normal. But then we'll finish and then we'll relax and then we'll head off. I'll head off this afternoon, do school, pick up and take my kid to the physio. You'll head off. And that anxiety will settle because that's responding to a stressful situation. It'll settle back down. That's normal. That happens multiple times a day. Anxiety, that's a problem, is getting in the way of functioning. It's frequent, it's extreme. It's hard to settle down. It's just stopping kids from, or adults from, my mom doesn't mind if I talk about her. Her anxiety is so debilitating. She finds it so hard to even make a phone call sometimes.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
Pick up the phone just to ring the insurance company.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
I mean, nobody likes that.

Kara Williams:
No, very, very true. But with anxiety in the mix as well, it becomes almost as a bigger task as, I dunno, putting out a massive fire or something like that, doesn't it?

Jodi Richardson:
Yeah, it does. And we know when we've done it, you go, oh, I waited so long and it was so much easier. And that is a strategy in classroom I have to share is the inaccuracy in the thinking, the accuracy and thinking goes down.

And so you think something's going to be so much harder than it is. Can I share a practical strategy? Yes, please do. Please do. So one of the things that you can do is if you've got a student that just shuts down, doesn't want to start work, because maths is poor maths teachers, I'll use writing. So writing an essay, writing or writing about a character that they've been reading in their class, text is hard for them. And so that student says, oh, I can't do this. I hate this. I'm hopeless. And you could just simply say to the student, and you might just keep a little note with you, two columns, how hard do you think this is going to be out of five? And the student might say, five. And you go, okay. And then the student will be supported with initiation, maybe a sentence starter, some sort of skill building opportunity.

And then a couple of hours later in a primary school setting, the same teacher might come back and say, Hey, you were writing about that. How hard was it out of five after you've done it? And they might say four or three. And then over a few weeks, if you've asked that question and you just sort of make a note of it, don't make a big deal of it. Oh, did you notice it's Don't have to say that. Just point it out three weeks later when you hand them that sheet of paper and says, you know what? Every time I asked you, you said five. But every time I asked you how it actually was, what was it? You're disproving that inaccurate thinking. You've got the evidence, it's the data. And it could be five or six, and you just pop it on the table and say, you know what? I've noticed, I've just noticed this. Isn't that interesting? And just walk away. And then they go, oh, actually, oh, it's never as hard as I think it is.

Kara Williams:
Yes. I remember as a child, I was a big worrier and my dad used to always say to me, no matter how bad you think things are going to be, it's never going to be anywhere near what you're worried about. So I love that though, bringing in the scoring. It's a tangible way, isn't it, of measuring it. And I think kids relate well to being able to rank and score things and then to have that data to reflect back on. Yeah, that's a positive tool to have in the kid, isn't It?

Jodi Richardson:
It is. It really is. And then they start to learn, oh, I overestimate how hard something is going to be. And so then eventually we want them to be independent. We want to equip them, upskill them, so eventually they can do these things on their own.

Kara Williams:
And it is all about building that toolkit, isn't it? I know my daughter, she's in grade five at the moment, and they're working on building a toolkit of strategies that they can be independent within the classroom. And she was working on a PowerPoint presentation on the weekend where they had to select some different songs that they could listen to depending on how they're feeling in the classroom. And then independently go and listen to whichever song they felt matched how they were feeling to regulate and bring them down.

Jodi Richardson:
Oh wow. A little Spotify playlist. Yes. Music is a beautiful tool. It's a beautiful tool.

Kara Williams:
Yeah. And so I guess having that student voice and the agency around what that looks like for them, it's so important.

Jodi Richardson:
Agency is such a good word because an anxious brain wants predictability and control. We want to control things. We want to know it's going to be okay. But the best stuff in life is on the outside of that sort of sense of comfort. The great stuff happens when we don't always know what's going to happen and we learn that, oh, I can actually experience this where it's outside of my control. And that's why risk taking in play is so important, which is another podcast with another person. It's not my expertise, but we do know that when they can take risks age appropriately, that that can teach them that, oh, I can feel these feelings. I know that this is risky, but I'm in control. I can go this far, then I can come back. So yeah, agency and choice. It's like when we are getting our kids something to wear, it's like, you can wear this or this. My daughter, she was like, forget that she have it all works. I'm going for something else completely. But yeah, choice is important.

Kara Williams:
Oh, so important. And Jodi, you mentioned psychological safety. So why does that matter and how can schools ensure they're building psychologically safe learning environments?

Jodi Richardson:
I'm so glad you asked that. We can spend a little bit more time on this because it comes back to that alarm system in the brain and that a beautiful way to help a student with anxiety settle that alarm down is that co-regulation and shaping the environment is important. So having the predictability of routines, students knowing what is expected of them and so on. But also having that person in the room because really that's the safety of an environment depends on the people who are in the room. Absolutely. And as we said before, it can be so different with different personalities and different teachers. So I'll share some ways that teachers can build more psychological safety in the classroom. So one is modeling some vulnerability. So I shared before about when I backed into that post, still embarrassing at school, even if a good way to share a little bit of humanness but also connect with kids in the class at the same time is if I'm such a dog lover, I would know that all the kids and their dogs, if I was still in a classroom.

Kara Williams:
Know all the pets.

Jodi Richardson:
Oh know all the pets. Totally. And so if you've kind of shared that you've got a dog and then you come to your class and you're like, dusty got out the gate, oh my gosh, I was running so late for work. I'm feeling so stressed because Dusty is so annoying that got out the gate and I had to go chasing him down the road this morning. And so what I'm going to do is I'm just going to take a couple of breaths. You might want to join me. I'm just going to use that breath we've talked about with that long exhale. I'm just going to settle myself down. And you've modeled a little bit of vulnerability, you're feeling a bit stressed. It's coping out loud strategy, which I learned through Dr. Chris McCurry, a podcast guest of mine, just this you are kind of saying, I experienced tough things as well. I have feelings as well, and this is how I cope with them.

Kara Williams:
Yeah, it's interesting because when I was in the classroom, I would say when I'm worried I will do this and that, but what you are talking about is taking it to the next and actually working through that with your students. They can see you working through that, which I think is so powerful.

Jodi Richardson:
It is. It is. And there's different levels of comfortability with staff. Of course. I'm probably, I guess I spend a lot of time talking about my own mental health, my own journey, and I'm more comfortable. So you just start where you're comfortable, but modeling some vulnerability can really help students connect with you. Another thing is just responding to doing your best to remain calm, respond when things, it's not personal. It can feel personal and sometimes it can be personal. Sometimes kids can say rude, nasty things. And so where possible, if we can maintain some calm, encourage that voice and choice amongst students so that they've got some sense of control in the classroom and connecting. There's a great strategy, the two by 10 strategy. Have you heard of that one before? I've heard of it. I'm not overly familiar with it though. Oh, so two minutes a day for 10 days. Talk about, so if there's particular student you trying to build a rapport with, talk about something non-school related just for a couple of minutes. So a couple of minutes, two minutes a day for 10 days and just look, I was a PE and a chemistry teacher, so I had students who I would see in science more regularly, but I had a huge number of PE students to get to know because of the small number of classes. So I had this fairly large load of classes, had lots and lots of kids. And I would back in the day where you'd have a written diary, I would just make a note beside every student, learn their names quickly.

Kara Williams:
So important, nothing to learn someone's name.

Jodi Richardson:
Oh my gosh. And nowadays you've got the access to the photographs of the student. We had house colors, so I would write down, it could have been way and way or yellow. I'm making these names up of course, and way loves horses. And it's just two little things. And I just would build this. And it takes time does. So it takes a few weeks, but all of a sudden you can see way and you can say, oh, how's your pony going? Or did your pony ride on the weekend? Greetings that don't include work related stuff. It can be easy. So much to do. You haven't handed in your homework the first time you see the student.

Kara Williams:
Hand. Yeah,

Jodi Richardson:
I haven't seen that homework yet. It's nice if you can connect before you redirect or connect before you kind of request. And it's investment that pays dividends. And so working on your own ability to calm and regulate, connect, really get to know the kids. Yes. Have a bit of fun bit of humor. Yeah. Oh, that's can go a long way.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
And getting engaged in out of school activities as well. If you can show up to the play if you can. I know again, I know that I know too, I felt it like we had Saturday morning sport and training up to school and just feel like I'm always at school and I have a very big kind of week. But just even if you can just turn up and you just be seen to be there for half an hour, Nick off quietly, they're the things that can really, they can cost a little in the short term, but pay dividends in terms of reducing your stress as well and just increasing that psychological safety in the classroom.

Kara Williams:
Yeah, it's so important. And really, like you say, it's a small investment, isn't it, for so much reward for not just the student but their family, the school, the culture that you're building. And for you as a teacher as well. I think looking after as teachers, we know that workload is huge. There's lots to manage and any little thing that we can do to look after ourselves and manage our own wellbeing is super important too.

Jodi Richardson:
It really is. It really is. Yes.

Kara Williams:
How can schools build independence and confidence in anxious students? I know you touched on this a little bit earlier, but are there some strategies you'd like to share with us before we wrap up?

Jodi Richardson:
Yeah, definitely. So they go hand in hand and it's what we want for every student, but it's not a switch that flicks. We can sometimes look at students and think, well chronologically, grade six student, they should be able to wait their turn for a few minutes before being called on to answer a question or we have expectations. And so the independence and the skills that don't always develop, obviously at the same age. And so I think it's important to know that we can build independence through skill development. It's a collection of skills in the same way that I'm teaching my kids to do the washing and cook. So they'll be independent, but I have to teach 'em the skills so that they can ultimately have that independence and have that confidence.

Kara Williams:
And it's like scaffolding, teaching them a math skill or literacy, writing, things like that. I think thinking of behavior and regulation and that sort of thing and how we teach.

Jodi Richardson:
It is what teachers do so well. That's teaching, isn't it? And so can't, kids won't naturally get there when it comes to independence if we don't teach them. So I like to think of three kind of key ways. One is look for patterns in behavior. And so if you are thinking about your class, you might be thinking, look, there's three kids who are particularly tricky kids. Ones that are sort of misbehaving so to speak. Maybe just start with one and start making a note of what's the pattern here, what is happening when I see this particular behavior? Because patterns are really often with behaviors, it can become quite clear quite quickly.

Kara Williams:
The antecedent and all of that looking at not just the behavior itself, but what's going on around the behavior before after that.

Jodi Richardson:
Exactly. Yeah, exactly. The antecedent. Exactly. And then you soon get a picture that the child that's always walking around the room looking for a pan or is ill-equipped with what they need for their class. It's always at the start of work, once they get into their work, they're okay. It's always at the beginning. And so what are the skills that might be missing there? So looking for the pattern and thinking what are the skills that are missing? And it could be initiation. Initiation, okay, well if it's getting started on maths, a whole empty worksheet can feel overwhelming.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
So could you have worked examples for the first two questions and then the student has, that's a different worksheet to everyone else, but you build your repertoire and you share with your colleagues. And then the students got, okay, it's not an empty worksheet, it's not so overwhelming. There's two worked examples and then they can fill in.

Kara Williams:
Or chunking tasks as well, breaking them down. You don't have to do it all in one go. I think for a lot of students, having a busy page is so overwhelming. And if you were to break that down and present it for one question per page, that could be something else as well.

Jodi Richardson:
Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And have it on the board so that they've got that visual kind of anchor to come back to. So I think the first thing is look for the patterns. And we know with the ABCs, we look at antecedents, we look at the behaviors and we look at the consequences, which is sort of the outcomes. So the antecedent could be can't start work behavior is walks around the class disrupts other people, and the consequences are the teacher says, you're out of your seat again. And then the child gets more wound up and more anxious and it's confrontation and it's difficult. It's a cycle. It's a cycle. It's a cycle. So the next thing is shaping the environment. And so we talked about the positive classroom management strategies. So what can you do? Knowing more about anxiety and how we can have the strategies in place and shape the environment. So does the student who is distracting others around them is shaping their environment, just giving them an opportunity to have somewhere to sit where they're not going to distract others or be as easily distracted. They're trying to escape or avoid work. It could be just about even when you're asking them to share publicly in the class.

Kara Williams:
Without notice.

Jodi Richardson:
Oh gosh, those common examples. So it's not just sort of the built environment. What are the expectations in the class? And knowing this, doing that for a child with anxiety, they would rather, I don't know, they would rather anything than having to speak publicly. Got So social anxiety, their fear of judgment and they'll just completely shut down. So just understanding that the environment and the expectations will influence the behavior.

Kara Williams:
It's the tangible and non-tangible environment, isn't it? And I know as a special ed teacher, something that I was always really conscious of was the physical classroom environment and how that can overwhelm students. And often classrooms look really pretty and busy. And for some students that itself can be really overwhelming.

Jodi Richardson:
It really can. It really can. And ultimately what we want to do is create some menus for students and they can create their own little menu.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
For the child that has trouble with persistence to build that independence. Moving on in terms of skill development. So I've talked about looking for patterns, shaping the environment. We really want to teach skills. We want them to ultimately have the menu of things to draw from. So if we know that the pattern is that they just can't assist, they get started, but they can't persist because they might find it so boring. A child with a DH, adhd, we're talking about anxiety. But sometimes it's just the thoughts just keep dragging you away from what it is that you're doing.

Do they need a little list of things for persistence? Could it be that I'm going to work for two minutes and then I'm going to take a one minute break and have something to do in that one minute break? Is it that I'm going to do what I can and when I find myself getting distracted, I'm going to do a Sudoku for 30 seconds because I need to interrupt the thought patterns. Do I need to ask the teacher for help? Do I need to ask a buddy for help to help me get going? If they get stuck or they just and so, or pair them with someone, who do I sit next to that helps me persist more?

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
So ultimately they're building this little checklist and we want to reward the use of this strategy. So we want to build the independence. It's not, oh, you got the work done. We want to say, which strategy did you use? Oh, fantastic. Okay. You were struggling and that you said to a person next to you, I'm struggling to persist, not I'm struggling to persist. They're not going to say that, but you turned to your friend. Can you help me just keep moving forward with this? Can you help me with this next question? Or just, what strategy did you use? So then they have these skills that they build and then they might forget to use them and then we can revert them or refer them back to their menu depending on what their age is. So ultimately they're getting the strengthening and building the skills. Then that gives them that belief in themselves and that brings their confidence. And then that's a beautiful cycle.

Kara Williams:
For sure.

Jodi Richardson:
Absolutely. Yeah. There are a few things you can do.

Kara Williams:
And I liked how you touched on celebrating the use of strategies as well, because remembering that learning those strategies when and how to use them is just as important as completing the work tasks and things that are set as well. So I suppose, yeah, just not taking away from what the students also doing in that space of using their strategies.

Jodi Richardson:
It is just, and it feels like a slow start, but you build momentum.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
You build momentum because they might not get all the work done or they might get a whole lot less done than you would expect. But the idea is they start to build the skills of independence. You're teaching them understanding what skills go down when anxiety, which is the executive function, the accurate thinking, flexible thinking, that perspective taking and self-regulation. They go down. So they might have skills they can't draw on or they might have be lacking in skills that they can be taught and then they can build their little repertoire. And it's like us, we do this all the time. We don't even realise.

Kara Williams:
Yes.

Jodi Richardson:
We do this all the time. So yeah, it's really powerful. But it does take time.

Kara Williams:
Yeah, it does take time. Jodi, I could happily chat to you about this for the rest of the day, but it is time for us to wrap up. I'd just like to revisit some of the strategies that you've given us today and just recap on these so that teachers who are listening can implement these in their classrooms tomorrow. So you talked about things like looking for patterns in behavior. The ABCs one I really like is the building, the individualized menu of strategies that students can have that agency and voice in developing, and then working on those to build their independence. The other thing that you spoke about as well, the positive classroom management strategies, expectation, predictability, routine, and importantly, understanding anxiety as well.

Jodi Richardson:
Yeah, it is. Look, thankfully, not everybody lives with an anxiety disorder. We don't want everyone to have the personal experience of understanding it, but just to know the fact that we both have that as a challenge in our life, it doesn't have to be a stop sign. It can be, that's the thing about anxiety, isn't it? That it'll say, stop. It'll say, just stay where you're safe. Stay where you're comfortable, and it can make a person's world very, very small.

Kara Williams:
It can.

Jodi Richardson:
And so when we have a good understanding about it, and an example for a teacher listening might be when you're lying in bed at night, it might be two o'clock in the morning, it's often two o'clock, the 2:00 AM the 2:00 AM, and you wake up and you're like, oh my gosh, I promised I would send that whatever to so-and-so, and I haven't done it. And heart racing, that's your stress response. Anxiety activates the stress response. And so imagine if that's constantly being activated and you're constantly feeling like that and you're in that panic, that's what it can feel like fatiguing. It's absolutely exhausting. So we want to have lots of compassion for these anxious kids and really skill them up so that they can go through school, do the best they can with everything that they attempt, and then obviously take those skills with them into life as well.

Kara Williams:
On behalf of the Academy and our listeners, I'd like to thank you for joining us today, Dr. Jodi. As always, it's been great chatting with you and hearing your insights.

Jodi Richardson:
Well, thank you for having me, Kara. I really appreciate it.

Kara Williams:
Thank you. And take care.

Jodi Richardson:
Thanks.

Outro
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