



Essential Alchemy

The Ancient Art of Healing Naturally

Season 3, Episode 9: Why The Kids Are Not Alright with Max Dubrow

Jodi: Hi, I'm Jodi Cohen, your host, and I am so excited to delve into what I think is one of the most important topics as a mother and just a human on this planet, like our children, how to support them through anxiety, friendship, challenges, and social media. And I'm joined today by a brilliant young voice, Max Dubrow, who is the author of this fabulous book and the host of a podcast, I'll Give It To You Straightish, and also dear friend of my daughter.

And so I know how brilliant she is and what good advice she gives. But this book is kind of amazing. I know we can talk about how the podcast got started and how parents started listening, but as an adult who, you know, doesn't really understand why kids are always on their devices and what is driving this anxiety. You gave so much insight. I feel like I understand this so much better and I can support my daughter and her friends so much better. So thank you.

Max: Oh, I'm so glad. Thank you so much. I've always been told I'm kind of a quote-unquote, "older soul", so I understand like not wanting to use social media and the being able to live life outside of social media, but also growing up in this generation, it's very difficult to have a social life without social media. And so that's what's kind of tricky is that this is so new and so different than any other communication in the past because this is all-encompassing and like everyone's on it.

So it's difficult when you're a parent and you never had social media growing up, it's difficult to think, you know, okay, you're on your phone. Like, I have social media too, as a parent. I'm not on my phone 24/7, but we make plans, we call people, we email.

Jodi: Group chats are not our only social connection.

Max: For example, one of my least favorite social media is Snapchat. 90% of the time all you're doing is sending face pictures back and forth. It's quite ridiculous in my opinion. But if you're not doing that, cuz I've tried to stop doing that multiple times cuz I don't feel the need to send pictures of my face every five seconds.

But if you're not doing that, people don't think of you when they make plans or like they don't, you know, they, they'll see your name Snapchat you and think, oh, what is she up to? And they'll text you. It's such a weird, you know, like if you're not constantly on your phone, you're not in a loop. It's so strange.

Jodi: I know. It's interesting. I went to a training on communication yesterday and they were talking about connection and when we're communicating, what we're really craving is connection. And to put it in context, they showed the brain kind of lit up. Like if survival's at stake, if you're in physical danger, if you're lacking food or you're lacking water and a certain part of your brain lights up and then they showed the same thing.

If you're lacking connection and they're like basically the lack of connection is the same kind of like lack of safety that lacking food or water. And so that's why we have anxiety, you know, and that's why Covid, the total lack of connection, everyone I know is anxious now.

Max: Oh, completely. Me too. I don't know a single person that doesn't have some kind of anxiety since Covid for sure. Time with social media, everyone's anxious, you know? It's stressful and it's confusing and no one knows what they're doing. But you think everyone knows what they're doing? It's very confusing.

Jodi: Would it be okay if I kind of read your description of anxiety?

All I wanna do is cry. But I'm so sick of crying. I'm so sick of being out of control of my own emotions, of not being able to have harmony between my thoughts and my mind. I don't even know I need to cry until I do. I don't wanna be weak. I don't wanna have to ask for help. How is it fair that I have to live in fear while others laugh? I put myself in situations that I can't handle because I should be able to, and I can. I just don't want to. I wanna give up, turn around, go home, not have to worry anymore. Silence my mind, but that's unreasonable.

Max: That's part of a collection of poetry that I've written, and so I kind of put that in there as a hover picture, but it ended up being very relevant to, you know, the whole chapter of anxiety. And it was, it's partially a literal meaning of, I physically wanna turn around and go home cuz I'm so anxious. I do not wanna be in my car. I wanna drive home and like not go to wherever I'm going to because I'm worried about this, I'm worried about this, you know, my car's gonna crash, everyone there is gonna hate me. So physically I was like, I wanna go home. But then, you know, not only is it also a metaphor for not only anxiety, but also just life, but also like, even when you do go home, sometimes you still have that feeling of, I wanna go home.

It's not always a place. And while it definitely is with your people, your home and with your family and your friends, but sometimes that feeling of home is very hard to pinpoint. A big thing is, you know, you wanna feel safe and if you're not home you don't feel safe and so it's hard to feel safe when you don't know what home is.

Jodi: Well and you mentioned control. When I get anxious, I try to control things because then there are less variables.

Max: Yeah, like for example, literally today I go to my, I went to go get my ears pierced today. Very excited, but I've literally had to reschedule it like three times this week. So I was like, okay, this is it. Like I'm very excited. I get in the car and I was like, I'm gonna leave at 12 o'clock. My appointment's at 1240, so I'm not gonna be late, you know? And I leave at 1220 cuz the time gets ahead of me, whatever. And I get there and I'm so stressed out because I had the exact plan of how I wanted this day to go. And of course, things don't always go the way you want them to go. And so I get there and I'm literally like seven minutes late and they won't let me in. And I was so just upset because I didn't even care about the fact that I couldn't get my piercing or that like I was late. I don't care. It's just that I had a very strict schedule of how I wanted today to go and that it didn't go like that and it stressed me out even more. And it's like even the things you think you can control, you can't always.

Jodi: I grew up with a mother who had apologized for the weather.

You kind of detailed some strategies in here, like the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 crime. Talk to me a little bit about what helps.

Max: I've learned a lot of strategies. When like being in therapy and just talking to mental health professionals, and I do have to say in the past, even now, I sometimes when I'm having anxiety, think this is so stupid, this is never gonna work. Counting colors in this room is not gonna help. Like sometimes I just feel stupid doing it. But I have to say that if you really trust it, it works. For example, I get really anxious in class and if I'm sitting there and I look for five things that I can see, four things that I can touch. I think it's three things you can hear, two things you can smell, one thing you can taste, whatever variation of that. I'm actually distracting myself from this anxiety. And even though it seems like so simple, like, oh, if I could just do these five things, like I wouldn't be anxious anymore. It seems too good to be true. But it really does distract your mind and help you kind of take some breaths.

Another really big thing is breathing, and I absolutely used to hate when people tell me like, oh, just breathe. Just breathe. I was like, shut up. I am breathing. Like, what are you talking about? But it really does, taking deep breaths calms so many parts of your nervous system. And brings your heart rate down, which is really important. I think a really crucial part of that is taking these deep breaths and not focusing on the anxiety, and not trying to figure out how to get rid of it rather than you should just kind of live with it. But try and make it manageable. Do you know what I mean? If you try and say like, I need to get rid of this anxiety right now, you're gonna stress out more.

Max: Like that's what I do. Taking deep breaths and being like, this is anxiety. You know, this is not going anywhere right this second, and that's okay, but I need to not freak out right now because I need to be good in this class or wherever you are. I think it's really important not to put stress on yourself to want to fix this anxiety immediately. Cause that's just not how it works. And it's gonna stress you out more.

Jodi: Have you ever heard Viktor Frankl? You know, man search, meaning between the stimulus and the response, there's a space. It's this idea that you can't control what's happening in the world, but you can control how you respond to it. So the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, the breathing, all of that is helping you feel safe and calming your nervous system. And when you're not feeling safe, that is anxiety cuz you're looking for how are you gonna respond to the danger. That's really good that you're doing that. And even things like I know you have an adorable cat, Vincent.

Max: My perfect son Vincent. He's sitting right over there. You know, like when I came to college I was very stressed out. And my dad pretty much sent me a cat. He was like, here you go. And the purring helps a lot.

Jodi: And then I know you also like do yoga and do movement. Does that seem to help?

Max: Yes. Another thing that used to piss me off is when my parents would tell me, you know, working out helps so much. And I'm like, yes, but I'm anxious. Like I don't want to go somewhere and work out.

But annoyingly, they're right. And yes, yoga is one of my favorite anxiety relief strategies of all time. I think it's very good for you, like mind and body. And it's also just really fun. And it's not, you know, high intensity most of the time. And it's not like running on a treadmill. So it's nice to just kind of think about your breath in a way that's not focusing on anxiety.

And I also just like yoga because it's very connecting. Even though you're all doing it alone. If you're in a space like with other people or even just like if you're watching a YouTube video, you know you're both doing it together. And I think that's really important is not even just the connection, but the connection on top of you're all trying to heal, which I think is really pretty. I love yoga. I've been trying, keyword, to go to the gym. Just because after I run on the treadmill, I feel so much better and I would never admit that to my parents because they've been pushing for me to go to the gym forever. But it actually really does help. And it's something about like, in my opinion, I mean, it's scientific as well, but getting your heart rate up this much for something that's not anxiety. When you do anxiety later, you're almost like, oh my God, my heart rate. It was so much lower.

Jodi: When Carly's brother Max died, I decided I needed to have rituals. And so every day I would get up and I would exercise no matter how rotten I felt.

No matter if I cried through the entire yoga class. I'm like, I just have to do it because I always feel better. And I think it has to do with blood flow. I think it like makes your body feel better so that your mind can feel better.

Max: I think also having a routine is really helpful.

Every morning and every night I have the same routines and going through the motions of all of that helps me not only feel like I have control, but also there's something about routine that's very calming. And like especially about yoga, if you have like a schedule of when you go or whenever you go to the gym and stuff, it's the same kind of thing, you know?

And as again, yoga, I love for many reasons. But I think another part of yoga that you love too is a lot of the time they incorporate smell and aromas and I love that. And you gave me some essential oils when I saw you recently and I have been using them religiously. I love them. Like easily the best ones I've ever used. I'm obsessed with them. I was telling Carly like, I need more of these.

Jodi: We'll send you more. It's interesting because like the one I use for anxiety is this one, the parasympathetic. I love that one. And because what it really is, like when you're doing yoga, you're twisting, you're turning, your vagus nerve goes from the back of your head all through your body. So you're activating it and that calms you down. That's why breathing calms you down.

I think that's why one of the reasons the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 thing works. And the other thing that, I don't know if I taught you this, but when you're having an anxiety attack, it's the right frontal lobe that's overactive. So there's a whole branch of chiropractic called functional neurology that is basically trying to balance the two hemispheres. So if you just smell something through the left nostril, it kind of activates the right, the left side of the brain balances the two hemispheres, and then suddenly you feel less, you know, anxiety provoked.

Max: That's so cool. I love that.

Jodi: But I mean, I think there's so many ways to help people. And I really want people to know, you know, like if you're on the six month waiting list for the therapist, there are other things you can do.

Max: I know the six month waiting list is brutal. I mean it makes sense because of how many people are struggling with this now, but also you need help. You need help. And I think having a really good support system is extremely important. My best friends, literally your daughter Carly, are very important to me. And like my girl friend and my cat. Not really a support system, but close enough. I mean the cat, you know, whatever.

But if I'm anxious, I go to Carly's room who lives two doors down and I'm like, Carly, help me, and she'll distract me or we'll talk about it. Like even especially talking about it, this is why therapy is so important. Again, there's a lot of positives to therapy. They teach you really crucial skills, but a really big part is talking about it, which helps you kind of process all your thoughts and release all this energy verbally. I think doing all of these things, not in a stressful way of like, oh, I need to have this whole routine of having like workout every day and do this and they do this. It's more just about choosing at least one thing a day that can release some sort of energy that has been giving you anxiety.

You know, so even just talking about it.

Jodi: Or even journaling.

Max: I journal every morning and every night, and I think it's the most genius thing ever because you don't have to tell anyone anything if you don't want to, but you're still getting it out of your system. And there's no judgment. You don't even have to erase anything. Just scribble, you know? I think that's really important.

Jodi: One of the other things that I really liked about the way you organized this book is you kind of talk about what is it that's contributing to anxiety.

So it's obviously academics and getting good grades, being a people pleaser. It's social media and kind of keeping up with the Joneses, like someone else looks beautiful, even though they're like super edited...

Max: It's really difficult time to live in right now as a teenager. Like your brains are barely developed. And you're looking at these things and these people you don't know, but you think you should be. Like, it's just, it's really difficult to grow up like that. I think a really important thing to kind of think about when living in this generation is to not compare yourself to other people. There's a lot of stressors in this world and that just doesn't have to be one of them. And that's much, much, much easier said than done. And I'm very aware of that.

Max: But you know, it's kind of like when people ask me if they should dye their hair, this is kind of a stupid example, but I tell them, well, you can if you want to, but just so you know, your hair comes out of your head because it's perfectly matched for you. And it's like, yes, you can change all these things if they make you more confident. I'm fully for that. But if you're doing it because you feel like you need to be in some part of a trend, or you need to look a certain way, it's just untrue.

And these beauty standards change every five minutes. So if they're changing, then there's not one, then it doesn't matter anyway. So I completely understand comparing yourself to other people, but if you can release that as one of your stressors, life gets a lot simpler in some ways.

Jodi: I totally, totally agree with that. The other thing that I love that you said is like the parents that try to limit the social media, they're cutting off the social life, but then the strictest parents make the sneakiest kids.

Max: By the way, the truest thing I've ever said in my life. Literally, the kids I know that are the hardest drug users, alcohol drinkers, people that feel the need to rebel all the time. They had really strict parents growing up and it's because if you don't give your kids self-expression, if you don't allow them to try certain things, like my parents, they were like, Here you can try some of our alcohol. Like whatever, take a sip. And so now I'm so uninterested in it. I don't drink at all. I mean, I don't want to. There's nothing wrong with drinking, it's just that it's not novel to me, you know?

And for a lot of college kids, they grew up thinking like, oh my God, I'm gonna get to drink in college. I have all this freedom. You know, like, I can do literally whatever I want. So they get here and they do whatever they want, and then they're like, oh God, like what did I just do? Like, I wish my parents had set me up for this. And I think that's like my parents did very well.

Jodi: And the other thing that you said that I loved was, you asked people, do you just want me to validate you, or do you want me to give you solutions? And I think that's a wonderful strategy, especially for parents.

Max: I agree with that. There's a lot of times, for example, my mom, I think I wrote this in the book, when I got my ACT score back, it was not what I wanted. And my mom was like, it's okay. You can do better. Like you can do this and this and this. I'm like, I'm gonna do fine. Eventually I know I'm gonna study. That's not the problem. I'm just annoyed about it. You know, like, just be upset with me. And that's really important in all relationships. Like my girl friend and I, we use that a lot because sometimes you can't read other people's minds. It's very difficult to know if they want you to say, here, let me just give you a hug, or here, let me help you.

Max: Because some people want certain things and even if they want one thing, usually, sometimes they wanna switch it up, or like sometimes they do need help on this one thing. And it's really important because if you're giving them a solution and they want comfort, you're gonna have this break. And not only communication, but in the way they feel supported, you know?

Jodi: Kind of getting back to that safety gauge, when you feel like you're in danger and you're unsafe, you can't even hear the solutions. You need to kind of diffuse the emotion before you can even problem solve.

Max: Oh, 100%. That happens to me all the time. You know, like, get a bad test on a grade or a bad grade on a test. And they're telling you to study more and you're like, I just wanna cry about it for five minutes. I can't even think about having to do that yet.

And you know, college, I have to say is one of the most ridiculously stressful, like getting into college specifically. One of the most ridiculously stressful things, especially right now. Like it's virtually impossible to get into college now, and there's so much pressure put on us. That like if you don't get into Yale, you failed. And like that's so untrue. But that's how it feels. And so when you don't get into Yale, but you get into, like Tufts for example, which is what happened to me, I was so upset. My parents were like, do you realize how good Tufts is? And I'm like, no. Everyone's pushing for IVS or the best of the best, and it's like it doesn't even make sense for everyone to go there.

It doesn't fit everyone. And that's just one example of all of the academic pressure right now. I mean, some of the schools that were really easy, like my dad was telling me the other day how USC used to be half the population. And USC used to be so easy to get into. Now if like you can't get in unless you're an athlete.

Jodi: Honestly, it's very insane and it's also, there's a lot of pressure to like show up and look perfect online.

Max: Oh my God. And there's just a lot of critics. Everyone loves to hate, you know?

Jodi: Let's talk about that and the toxic friendships. You had the best list I'd ever seen. I wish I had this earlier, so I'm gonna run through them. Read them to you. What makes you feel bad about things you can't control?

Max: Like that one specifically, I was mentioning my own anxiety. I had friends in high school with, some of them, no fault to their own. They just didn't understand it. And partial my fault because I didn't express what I was feeling, mostly because I didn't know what anxiety was. And that's what I was feeling. But regardless, some of them on purpose, some of them on accident, but for example, there was this one time where I made plans with someone. This happens a lot, but I made plans with someone and I get there and I feel nauseous because I'm so anxious and I have my mom, this is before I could drive, so I had my mom come pick me up and I'm like, I'm so sorry guys. I leave and I hear them the next day about like how they're mad at me and they're talking about it and they're upset and partially, rightfully so, because, you know, I can't sit on there and blah, blah, blah, blah. But it's not really my fault that I'm having anxiety, and it's difficult, especially when you don't deal with anxiety.

I think people who do not deal with mental illness, it's very, very hard to understand. And that it sounds like it shouldn't be like that because it's like, no, I get it. Like you're anxious, you're stressed out, but the feeling of it is so much more than what you would not only expect, but also think about. So for people to not have mental illness and to try and understand it, it's difficult and that makes sense. But I think a lot of sympathy and empathy and love and compassion should be given to not only everyone of course, but you know, to these people who are struggling with mental health because had they been like, oh my God, are you okay? We can accommodate to you like, or we'll reschedule. That would've made me feel great. But otherwise, I'm hearing them say like, she always flakes on us. She's a bad friend.

Like, I'm not doing this to hurt you. I'm doing it because I'm scared, or whatever it might be.

Jodi: Well, they also, they have their own motives. Like honestly, after Max died, oh, Carly, we had just gotten back from a two week trip to Peru and she needed to go back to school shopping. So we went back to school shopping when she ran into her friends, and I think I put a picture on Facebook and someone said, people are are upset with you that your kid died and you're putting a happy photo on Facebook. Everything should be miserable. And it was like, oh my God. I'm serious. I'm like, you know what? If you need me to set myself on fire to keep you warm, we're not a good fit.

Max: Like people just wanna put you down. And also everyone is a critic on social media. You cannot do anything. Just do what you wanna do. Like, listen, you are happy all the time. They hate you if you're sad all the time. They hate you. They just hate you. They just hate everyone. So do not take it personally. People are just taking out their own shit on social media.

Max: Specifically, I was referring to relationships, like dating. But also best friends. I've had a few best friends who would get very mad if I hung out with other people. And unless it's like a mutual, we just wanna hang out all the time and we're very happy. If it feels like you can't go anywhere else that is toxic. Like you should be able to hang out with other people. It doesn't take away from your relationship. And I think that's really important in high school, because everyone likes to have a best friend. It's ridiculous, but everyone likes to have a best friend, so when you're not hanging out with them, it's like, you're friend cheating on me. Like, no, I'm not just hanging out with other people.

Jodi: Possessiveness. Is rude to your face.

Max: Oh, I hate that. People who are blatantly, like, even backhanded, like, oh, your hair looks cute. Did you just cut it? Like, no. Like, don't do that.

Jodi: Talks bad about your family to you.

Max: I hate that. If someone says to you like, your mom is crazy, you're like, your brother is rude, not rude. I guess it depends, but like if your brother is, he's kind of a douche, like, excuse me. Like family is off limits always. That's the most important thing in my life. You don't come at my family without coming at me.

Jodi: I completely agree with you. And then weaponizes things that you tell them. Gaslighting.

Max: I hate this. This has been a problem in my immediate family because it's hard when you're telling people things in your family cuz it's like, I tell my mom something, then she tells my brother and it's like, no mom, you can't do that. And we kind of had to establish boundaries, and we're all very much better at that now. But in high school and in middle school, if you tell someone something and then you get into a fight and they use that against you, that is an awful friend.

Jodi: That is a toxic relationship. I'm now 54 and these are things that I wish I had known when I was your age or even like 10 years ago. Because it wouldn't take a lot of time and anxiety.

Max: It's really helpful to kind of look for these signs. Don't be pessimistic and just assume everyone's like this cuz people mess up. Sometimes that's different. But if these patterns are continuing over and over again and you just feel terrible every time you talk to someone, it's a toxic relationship and you need to get out of that. I think this is something that's very important that not a lot of people will do, is getting space and removing yourself from that friendship does not make you a bad person. I cannot stress that enough.

Max: I know so many people who refuse to stop talking to people, stop being friends with people, stop doing X, Y, and Z because they feel bad. And like I love that they're compassionate and they just want to make everyone happy. But you need to help yourself first. You put on your oxygen mask before you help others. You need to get away from people who are draining your energy, like vampire suckers or whatever. Energy vampires.

Jodi: If you think of a garden, you have to pull the weeds for the flowers.

Max: And that doesn't mean that they're a terrible person or that you're an awful, awful person. It just means you don't work together. And if they are great with someone else, that's great. You don't need to hate them just cuz you're not friends with them anymore. And it's okay to not be friends with people anymore. You're not supposed to be best friends with everyone. And that's something that's very hard to swallow for some people, which makes sense. But it's very prevalent, especially when you're in a situation, like in college, you do not have to be friends with everyone. And that's it.

Jodi: I think it's also, I've got three best friends and that's a very good number. And everyone else, I'm lovely to, but they're not my best friend.

Max: Exactly. Best friend is a tier.

Jodi: Is there anything that we have not talked about that you'd like to share?

Max: I think just be kind to yourself. No one wants you to be nice to yourself in this generation. Like it's just no one wants you to be nice, but be nice to yourself and of course, be nice to other people, but take care of yourself and be kind and be gentle with yourself. If no one else is doing it, the least you can do is do it yourself.

Jodi: I love that. And if people want to follow you or find out more about you, where can they find you?

Max: Every social media and everything is just Max Dubrow.

Jodi: Well thank you. Thank you for your insight and your brilliance.

Max: Thank you so much. I love talking to you. You teach me so much. Thank you so much.

Jodi: So sweet. Thank you.