



WellnessCast™ Conversation with Jeena Cho, JD, Co-Author of The Anxious Lawyer: An 8-Week Guide to a Joyful and Satisfying Law Practice Through Mindfulness and Meditation

Musical Opening: So ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. [Leonard Cohen, *Anthem*]

Joe Bankman: Welcome to the Wellness Cast™ – I'm Joe Bankman, professor at Stanford Law School and also a psychologist. My partner in this podcast is Sarah Weinstein, lawyer-turned-therapist and external director of the Wellness Project here. Our guest today is Jeena Cho, co-author of The Anxious Lawyer, an 8-Week Guide to a Joyful and Satisfying Law Practice Through Mindfulness and Meditation. Jeena is also a partner at The JC Law Group in San Francisco, and a regular contributor to *Forbes* and *Above The Law*.

Sarah, law is an anxiety-provoking profession. There are high expectations, some of which come from ourselves, and a lack of control over outcomes.

Sarah Weinstein: I was just reflecting on that this morning, after a session with a Biglaw associate, how at every turn there are opportunities for anxiety. I remember them myself, so it's not really IF something is going to make you anxious, but HOW are you going to deal with it? And you know, for reasons beyond the scope of this podcast, we all deal with anxiety differently, but I think just understanding how you deal with it and getting some ideas or tools in place really is quite helpful.

Joe Bankman: Our guest today is a lawyer and she's really written a how-to book to help us deal with anxiety.

Jeena, welcome to the podcast.

Jeena Cho: Thank you so much, Joe and Sarah, for having me.

Sarah Weinstein: Yes, hi Jeena, thank you so much for being with us today. One of our goals for the podcast is to normalize the difficult emotions we all experience, and to make that real, we usually begin by asking our guests to share a hard moment. But what I think would be useful this time, is for you to give us your story about how you came to embrace mindfulness and meditation and to write The Anxious Lawyer.

Jeena Cho: Sure. I've been practicing law since 2003, and anxiety has always been a big part of my life. But I kind of knew that I hit a wall where I would get up in the morning and do probably what most of us do, just look at my calendar. And I would just feel this sense of anxiety rising, and it would just be debilitating.

Joe Bankman: What did the anxiety feel like, physically?

Jeena Cho: I could feel my heart starting to race, my stomach would get tied into knots, sometimes I would almost feel like I was going to throw up. My palms would get sweaty. It's that sense of dread, of not wanting to face the day, not wanting to do the things that were being asked of me.

Sarah Weinstein: Was there an acute event or some other occurrence that made you want to change or seek help?

Jeena Cho: There were probably several moments, but one that definitely comes to mind is I was doing a presentation at a local Bar Association here, and I was responsible for inviting all of the bankruptcy judges and trustees, and my only job for the day was actually to just get up and introduce all the speakers. But the morning had just gone terribly. I arrived at the Bar Association, there was no coffee, there was no breakfast, judges are coming up to me asking if there's coffee, and again, I could just sense that anxiety rising as though it was sort of a personal failure that I didn't have coffee available. I got up to introduce the speakers and I said, "Judge So-and-so, Judge So-and-so," and then I got to the third speaker and I could not remember her name. She's someone I had been in front of probably a hundred times and I just could not remember her name. I remember I started to sweat, and then of course that just makes the anxiety worse because you think, "Oh my gosh, now everyone can tell I'm sweating," and I can feel myself sweating through my undershirt and also my jacket, my suit jacket that I had on. And I remember just feeling like I wish there was a hole that would open up so I could just jump into it.

Finally I looked at my notes and luckily I had written down the person's name, and then I just read everything as quickly as possible and got off the stage. It took me just days or weeks and I couldn't let that experience go. I remember just feeling like such a failure, and I thought, "You know, this might be a good reason to maybe think about getting help so that I don't have panic attacks." That was such a terrifying experience.

Sarah Weinstein: Oh Jeena, that does sound like a very difficult moment and I so appreciate the openness with which you shared it. It made me think of a very important paragraph in your book, actually, on page 1 in the Introduction, where you say that when you went around and spoke with lawyers who were suffering from anxiety and depression, what they all said was the worst part was the isolation they felt, thinking that they were the only ones facing these challenging emotions. I was very happy to read that in your book, because it's consistent with what I find in my private practice, and it's what led me actually to want to include a 'hard moment' at the beginning of our podcast.

So, what did you do to get help? What was your first step?

Jeena Cho: I started to notice that anxiety was becoming a bigger and bigger part of my life, and then my boyfriend at the time decided this would be a great time for us to get married. So, I was planning the wedding, and as we were getting closer to the wedding, I started to notice that I was losing hair, like clumps of hair. Then I went to the doctor. He ran a bunch of tests, and he goes, "Oh Jeena, there's nothing physically wrong with you. This is all in your head." And he went to prescribe me a bunch of medication. Around the same time, I was having lunch with a friend of mine who's a psychotherapist and she's like, "You know, I think you might have an anxiety disorder. Why don't you go and check out this clinic at Stanford?"

Then, in one of my insomnia-filled nights at like 3:00 a.m., I went and looked at the website and there was an intake form that you can fill out, so I did, and a few days later the clinic called me back and I went in and they said, "Oh, you have social anxiety disorder." I was like, "What? What is this thing? Social anxiety disorder?" I felt like such a freak because it was never something I had heard of. I had never known a lawyer who had social anxiety disorder. I ended up going through the cognitive behavioral treatment program.

Sarah Weinstein: You had never heard of social anxiety disorder. Did it feel in some way inconsistent with your notions of being a lawyer?

Jeena Cho: Yeah, and also I think there was this feeling of shame, because as lawyers, our job is to socially interact with others, mainly our clients, and that was really the thing that was giving me so much anxiety. I would look at my calendar and knew I had three calls with my clients that day, and I physically felt ill just thinking about getting on a call. And it didn't matter that the content of the call would be nothing unpleasant. That really didn't have much to do with it, but of course if there was a call that I was dreading, like an opposing counsel who I was going to have a very contentious call with, a lot of times I would just say, "I'm not feeling well, we need to reschedule this call." But, inevitably, at some point, you have to get on the phone with these people. So, it was this really awful, challenging period in my life.

Sarah Weinstein: It certainly sounds like it. And those feelings of shame are familiar for many of us. What was the cognitive behavioral therapy experience like for you?

Jeena Cho: It was a group session, and I think that was really, really helpful for seeing that other people suffer from the exact same thing that I did. So, for example, standing at a grocery line, if the person in front of you just turned around and said, "Oh, what are you making for dinner?" I would start to sweat. Just recognizing oh, that thing that I thought made me a complete freak for experiencing isn't unique to me. I think it really helped to normalize all of my experiences, which then created a space where I could bring acceptance to it.

There's just so much about learning how the body reacts to different stimuli and also recognizing that the physical experience of anxiety can only last for a couple of minutes. But what happens is we keep feeding that loop. We keep feeding that physical sensation of anxiety by adding additional negative, unhelpful thoughts to it. So, really learning all of the different thinking errors and recognizing, like "Oh my gosh, everyone in the room is laughing at me because they can tell that I'm sweating," well, that has a lot of assumptions and thinking errors built into that statement. So being able to actually break down that statement and recognizing, "Oh, I'm doing mind-reading, or I'm catastrophizing," and I feel like for the lawyer brain, that way of actually analyzing our thoughts was so incredibly helpful.

Joe Bankman: Jeena, having gone through treatment and figuring out what works for you, you've written a book. The book has mindfulness and meditation as partial solutions. Can you define those terms?

Jeena Cho: I like to think about mindfulness as being in the present moment and bringing awareness and compassion to each moment. So it's not only about bringing your full attention, but also recognizing the quality of the attention that you're bringing, because I think we all know sometimes you can show up super irritated, and then that's what the world reflects back at you. So, coming at this from a place of calm and compassion and kindness, which I think is very contrary to how lawyers typically operate in the world.

For meditation, I just think about it as mental training. If you were an athlete, you would train your body for optimal performance, and meditation essentially does the same thing for the mind. Also, it's the formal practice of mindfulness.

Sarah Weinstein: Can you say a little bit about how meditating and practicing mindfulness will help lawyers?

Jeena Cho: Yeah, I think for me the most profound moment was just recognizing that this constant feeling like I was failing, when I brought mindfulness to it I started to see that that thought wasn't true. But also I was able to have a friendlier stance toward that thought, my inner critic. Before, when I would notice the inner critic come up, I would go, "Oh my gosh, I hate this thing. I want to sever it from myself and I don't want to have this thing anymore, all of these negative thoughts and self-doubt." But what I learned was I can sort of embrace it and take a friendlier stance towards the person I felt that I don't necessarily like, which then created a more easeful relationship with myself. When I was able to

do that, I was able to bring that sense of curiosity and kindness towards others, and I noticed my relationship with others also shifted over time, so people that I had really contentions, difficult relationships with, sort of started to soften around the edges.

Sarah Weinstein: Yes, you know, it seems impossible to argue with what you just said, yet a lot of lawyers are skeptical. I have lawyers say they're afraid mindfulness and meditation are going to make them weak, or ruin their ability to advocate effectively for their clients, or make them mentally foggy or soft. What do you say to these lawyers?

Jeena Cho: I think that's so funny, because now they're teaching mindfulness and meditation to military personnel, to Marines, and the Seahawks are also teaching it to all of their players. So, it's counter-intuitive. Really, mindfulness and meditation, like I said, is a way of training your mind so you can be more focused, and that focus will be different for everyone. If you're a football player, obviously it's being in the moment in the game. Similarly for lawyers, it's really about when you're standing in a courtroom, you don't want to have your mind thinking about your grocery list, right? And so it's training your mind to be more focused, but not just focused with the sense of grouchiness, it's really being focused and also feeling calm and more at ease at the same time.

Joe Bankman: I wonder if it would be useful for us to take an example. Say I get a bad email from a client, and the client wants something done with a timeline I can't do. Maybe the client expresses a little dissatisfaction with what I've done so far, a little bit of impatience. Let's go through your techniques maybe one by one. Let's start off with mindfulness. I get this email, what is mindfulness going to do for me?

Jeena Cho: Yeah, so being present always starts in the body. I would pause and just notice the physical reaction of getting that email, and I would imagine I might start to feel tension or heat in my head. I might start to notice some extra energy running in my arms. There's just this feeling and shifts in your body, so I think that's a great place to start, and recognize it, and go "Oh, I got this email and that's the impact that it's having on the body." So then I might just take some deep diaphragmatic breaths, because there's actually a condition called email apnea, where while we're doing email, we hold our breath, which then sends our body into that fight or flight mode. So being mindful is just sort of noticing what is happening in that moment. That would be the first step.

Sarah Weinstein: So, after you have been mindful and considered the initial impact of the email, let's look at this common email scenario with a lens of compassion, which underlies the loving kindness meditation you discuss in the book. And just as an aside, I was interested to read in the book that in the classes you've taught to lawyers, compassion is the most difficult concept for them to grasp. That may be the subject of another podcast but, in any case, help us understand how cultivating compassion for the author of the email, the seemingly unreasonable client or opposing counsel, maybe, how would that help here?

Jeena Cho: I think our natural inclination is to interpret the email from the frame of, "This person is doing this to be mean or unkind or they're angry." When I bring compassion to the picture, it's really bringing curiosity, and also taking the most generous view of what the intent behind what this person is wanting. So, I might naturally think, "This person is always unreasonable. And he's always so demanding." But I can actually look behind the scenes and say, "why is it?" "Is it because this is the first time he's going through a bankruptcy, and he's just uncertain, and this is how he's expressing that fear. Or is it just that he feels frustrated because he feels like I'm not taking care of things in the way that he thinks that I should?" Bringing compassion for what that person is going through, and also just recognizing that just as I have bad days that person might also just be having an off day. And that might be the reason why he sent this sort of nastygram, it might not have much to do with me at all.

Joe Bankman: What about self-compassion?

Jeena Cho: When we talk about compassion, we can't talk about compassion towards others without talking about compassion for ourselves, because it's only by cultivating compassion for ourselves that we develop the capacity to have compassion towards others. Before I even get to the person sending the email and bringing compassion towards that person, I might need to actually step back and secure my own oxygen mask before helping others. I might just say, "Wow, this really hurts that she would send this type of email after I really went out of my way to help her, or I really felt like I was giving her a lot of attention. It kind of stings when I get an email like this." So actually saying, "Oh, this hurts. Oh, this is a difficult moment and can I be kind to myself? Can I experience more ease in this moment?" And just stepping back a little bit and actually pausing to tend to our own needs first.

Joe Bankman: So we attend to our own needs, we're mindful, we give self-compassion, now we give compassion to the person that wrote the email.

Jeena Cho: So, actually, the acronym that I use all the time is STOP, and I think that might be a good way to frame the steps for the listeners out there that want to practice this. STOP stands for Stop, T stands for Take a breath, which is sort of the mindfulness piece of it. And then Observing, so observing what's going on in your body, observing what's going on in your mind, observing what's going on in the person sitting across from you. And then finally Proceeding. So, proceeding is taking the action. An action might be that I just sit down. The action might be walk away from my desk and get a drink of water or make myself a cup of tea, because we never want to react from that place where we're feeling angry or triggered. We want to always respond from a place of calm and ease.

Sarah Weinstein: I really liked the part of your book where you said, when you were talking about compassion, to think in your mind, "just like me," and then to fill in the blank. "Just like me, this person is trying to do the best they can." Or, "just like me, they're trying to represent their client."

Jeena Cho: Yeah, yeah and if nothing else, you could say, "Just as I wish to be happy, just as I wish to not be involved in this crazy difficult case, so does this opposing counsel, right?" I went through this amazing program through CCARE, which is hosted where you are at Stanford University, and they teach an eight-week course on cultivating compassion. I really can't recommend this course highly enough. I think in some ways it broke open something really deep inside of me. I remember sitting in traffic and feeling so incredibly frustrated that I'm in traffic and I'm running late, and then just pausing and looking around and going, "Wow. Look at all the other people who are probably desperately wanting to get to where they want to go. Just as I wish to get to my final destination as quickly as possible or just as I wish not to be stuck in traffic, I also wish for these people to not be stuck in traffic with me." That phrase, "just like me," is something that was often repeated in that course, and I think that's such a helpful tool to carry around with you and say, "just like me, what's the common denominator that we're both experiencing in this moment?"

Sarah Weinstein: It seems that the consequences of understanding that type of interdependence really could only lead to enhanced feelings of compassion and self-compassion, so that makes a lot of sense. Certainly with opposing counsel but also in our personal relationships, I think sometimes we can slip into a type of dualistic thinking where we think that it's one side against the other. But the reality is often very different, where there's more of a connection and a shared similarity, even in situations where there's great difficulty, there often is an overlap of vulnerability or similar challenges.

Jeena Cho: Yeah.

Joe Bankman: The genius of that "just like me" phrase is what it does for the person who says it. It takes away our anger.

Jeena Cho: Yeah. Definitely. I think the compassion practice was really also helpful for me in those situations where I felt like there was nothing I can do. I was thinking of, for example, a client would come in and they would tell me that they have to file for bankruptcy because their daughter died and they literally went into debt and liquidated all of their assets to try to keep their daughter alive. And obviously I can help them out of the debt, but the thing that I can never help them with is the trauma, the pain. I can never bring their daughter back, and I remember just feeling so helpless, because what they were deeply desiring, obviously, is to have their daughter back and getting them out of debt almost seemed so insignificant in the face of this incredible pain that they were going through. And I would just sit there as they were crying and do that practice of just saying, "Wow, I wish for these people to heal and find happiness, and to get through this experience."

Joe Bankman: What I'm taking out of this is the mindfulness, the self-compassion, and the compassion. I think that's a terrific set of techniques to deal with difficult events on a day-to-day basis.

Sarah Weinstein: And Jeena, I think the way that you've done it, by sharing your own vulnerability and some of the events that did not go so well for you, that even makes it more effective. I think it's often we connect with people through what has gone wrong for us in our life, not always where we've succeeded. So I really appreciated the way that you've written the book.

Typically, we like to sign-off on our podcasts by asking our guests to share a wellness practice they use in their own life. But because we've spent this time hearing from Jeena about how she uses mindfulness and meditation, she has kindly offered to guide us in a loving-kindness meditation on the podcast. We're going to publish that as a separate episode, so please tune in after this interview and you will find a 10-minute meditation led by Jeena.

But before we end, I just want to check in, Joe, about our technique from last time by Professor Ron Tyler at Stanford. He said that at the end of every day, his favorite wellness technique is to write down three things that went well, why they went well, how he felt at the time and how he feels now when he's reflecting on them. I know you said you use a variant of this 'three good things' with your clients. Did you also try it out for yourself, Joe?

Joe Bankman: I did use it, and I found it really effective. I work with some terrific people in a lab on digital mental health, but I'm so busy when I work with them, and I can't really appreciate them. I used Ron's technique at night to focus on just how impressive and public-spirited my co-workers are. I felt inspired.

Sarah Weinstein: For me, the three good things and the gratitude journal, these are not techniques that have resonated with me particularly in the past, but I know there's a lot of research behind it, so I was actually quite interested to see how it would feel. And I agree, I found it very moving. I didn't write about anything extraordinary. What was helpful for me was just to really see the beauty actually in the ordinary of my life. I've been processing some very deep feelings of loss the last couple of months and it's been a pretty challenging time. So, just to reflect on things, what I wrote about were things like, I had a wonderful afternoon with my son after school. I had lunch with my mom on a Wednesday, which we do every week. I had some client sessions that went particularly well and felt connected. I had coffee at my favorite coffee shop. This is definitely a highlight for me. So, just to see how having these ordinary things every day adds this beautiful structure to my life. Reflecting on that actually was much more valuable than I anticipated.

Joe Bankman: So thumbs up to Ron's reflections. Jeena, thank you so much for being on the show.

Jeena Cho: Thank you so much, Joe and Sarah, for having me.

Sarah Weinstein: It was such a pleasure, Jeena. Several people have asked me, "When are you going to interview Jeena Cho?" And we actually had you slated I think for late

July to be our August podcast, but we had some technical difficulties. So, I'm very glad we finally made it happen. Thank you so much. Please listen to Jeena's guided meditation published today as a separate episode, and for those interested in accessing the other resources from the podcast, including how to find Jeena's book, [The Anxious Lawyer](#), please see our website at www.law.stanford.edu/wellnessproject. Thanks so much for listening and please tune in again next time for another episode of The Wellness Cast.™