

# How Anxiety Can Lead to Growth

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*Kirk Schneider, Ph.D. and David Puder, M.D. do not have any conflicts of interest.*

In this week's episode of the podcast, we interview Dr. Kirk Schneider, a psychologist, psychotherapist, and author of, *Life-enhancing Anxiety: Key to a Sane World*. Dr. Schneider is a practicing psychotherapist and director of the Existential-Humanistic Institute, a psychotherapy training institute. As a former mentee of the great existential psychologist Rollo May and a self-described existential-integrative psychotherapist, he has made significant contributions to the fields of humanistic psychology and existential psychology throughout his career.

## Dr. Schneider Biography

Dr. Schneider's journey into the understanding of existence and the human condition began at the young age of two with the unfortunate passing of his older brother. This shattering event led Dr. Schneider to subsequently face internal turmoil and challenges in the form of night terrors and hypochondriasis, which ultimately prompted his family to begin taking him to a psychoanalyst at the age of six. An intuitive child, Dr. Schneider was able to sense that this analyst was a seasoned veteran of the vicissitudes of life, and yet, had managed to transcend such difficulties. In this way, Dr. Schneider's analyst served as more than just a psychotherapist, but also served as a role model and mentor.

While Dr. Schneider was able to regain semblance of a normal life and childhood, he was once again confronted with significant challenges at the age of twenty-two, when a culmination of stressors and negative life events led him to a tumultuous time of extreme anxiety and panic. During this harrowing experience, Dr. Schneider turned to a friend and classmate. This classmate gave Dr. Schneider two important gifts in this moment, the comforting quote of "this too shall pass," and the number of an existential psychoanalyst. Dr. Schneider embarked once again on the deep work of his own psychoanalysis. It was during this time that Dr. Schneider was encouraged to lean into, as opposed to resist, his deep anxieties and fears.

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## The Trauma and Drama of Birth and the Guides that Emerge

Perhaps the first and most fundamental confrontation with the existential reality of human existence begins with birth. Otto Rank, a mentee of Sigmund Freud, described in his book, *The Trauma of Birth*, the theory that one's birth marks the shift from union and nonbeing to being and chaos. Dr. Schneider elaborates on this experience further by recasting the experience as "the drama of birth," in which initial elements of shock and terror are also met with wonder and discovery.

Dr. Schneider describes birth as a wild plunge into a vast unknown sea; no equipment is in place for one to negotiate such a plunge alone, and one must learn to swim at this moment. He goes on to detail how pivotal figures in one's life may act as guides through such turbulence. During these turbulent experiences, there is a great importance of being met by one's guide with a proper holding environment, a space within a relationship which provides safety and support for one's psychological and emotional needs.

Such needs for attunement (for having emotional needs met) begin at birth and extend throughout infancy, as demonstrated by the results of a series of studies which employ a Still-Face Paradigm, originally invented by Edward Tronick, Ph.D. in 1978 (Mesman et al., 2009). These experiments examined the subsequent effects on infant mood and behavior in situations where a mother is asked to shift from being playful and responsive to unreactive and emotionless ([Watch Here](#)). What follows consists of attempts at reconnection by the infant that progress from playful, to angry, and ultimately to a state of dissociation. Remarkably, these experiments have been successfully repeated in neonates as young as 0-4 days old, thus highlighting Dr. Schneider's emphasis on the importance of a proper holding environment after birth (Nagy et al., 2017).

The findings of the Still-Face Paradigm experiments help demonstrate the effects that such a lack of feelings of support, engagement, and presence can have on the psyche and behavior of neonates and infants, a time when the tools and abilities of self-soothing have not yet developed. The implications of Still-Face Paradigm experiment findings are further demonstrated via a study by Beebe et al. (2010), in

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which the communication patterns of 4-month-old infants were found to be predictive of attachment patterns at age 12 months. Specifically, it was demonstrated that 12-month-old infants characterized by disorganized attachment styles (described as “fear without resolution”) experienced maternal interactions at age 4 months old that were more generally negative and distant ([Read More Here](#))(Beebe et al., 2010).

Such importance of attunement continues into adolescence and adulthood, as well. Throughout one’s life, pivotal relationships with one’s parents, mentors, or even psychotherapists may allow such individuals to serve as guides along one’s journey through life and existence. When one embarks on an adventure to the unknown with the comfort of a guide who serves as a source of stability and calm during such an endeavor, a positive foundation for growth is laid. Dr. Schneider notes how in the therapeutic journey specifically, the guiding hand of a therapist who is a supportive and comparatively free human being may play an essential role in helping the patient to develop such foundations within themselves, thus promoting a foundational healing.

In serving as the [hero's](#) guide, the most important factor of this role comes in the form of presence. Offering one’s presence and attention in and of itself is a statement of support and comfort, and is essential in creating a proper holding space for growth. Specifically, Dr. Schneider states that “the presence of a therapist acts as a guiding force for the patient to dive into the patient's unconscious and to do the inner work.”

When such presence is not offered, no amount of competency of the guide may overcome such lack of presence. For example, take the case of Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius and his son. [Marcus Aurelius](#) is a historical figure of monumental importance due to his ability to walk a life of both great success and great humility (a rare combination indeed). Despite such worldly success, Marcus Aurelius failed to inculcate the same characteristics in his own son, who turned out to be a monstrous human being in a variety of ways. Marcus Aurelius was absent from his son’s life until his teen years, as he focused all his energy on the Republic. In addition to the daily demands of running the Republic, Marcus Aurelius spent more than a decade of his life leading campaigns against the Germanic tribes to the north (Mark 2022). While the true origins of his son’s constitution may not be entirely understood, it is within the realm of possibility that such a monstrous constitution was a direct result of a mere lack of presence and availability on the part of the father. Negative outcomes related to paternal absence have been clearly demonstrated in research. Specifically, children raised without a paternal presence have increased rates of academic issues,

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attachment issues, mental health issues, criminal and gang involvement, poverty, and substance abuse (Brown, 2019).

## A Culture of Distractions and Quick Fixes

As an existential-integrative psychotherapist, Dr. Schneider often returns to the two following questions: “What matters about your life? And, how are you wanting and willing to live it?” Such questions are pivotal in the quest for a life of meaning and purpose; yet, we seem to be evermore in the presence of a culture and climate where quick fixes and distractions serve as roadblocks to the discovery of answers to such existential questions.

A negative feedback loop has emerged where individuals are becoming less inclined to work hard to uncover true meaning and marketing companies are more inclined to offer the illusion of meaning via the consumption of various products. Since their inception, marketing companies have been deeply attuned to the core drivers of human behaviors and motivations and have intentionally tapped into related, deep archetypal seduction processes (i.e., the search for the holy grail). Surprising as it may be, the concept and practice of marketing was actually invented by the nephew of Sigmund Freud, a man named Edward Bernays, who intentionally co-opted his uncle’s work in order to manipulate consumers into purchasing products (for more information on this topic, see the BBC documentary “Century of the Self” [[Watch Here](#)]).

In more present times, such hijacking of our innate drives continues in the form of technology companies, which operate with the incentive of attracting as much of our time as they can. Through the use of artificial intelligence and user data, such companies have become masters of psychology through their expertly crafted algorithms that show users exactly what appeals most to them. As Dr. Puder describes, it is indeed a truth that one can learn a great deal about an individual simply by viewing their “for you” page on Instagram or other social media platforms.

The effects of technology companies on our individual psyches may be more profound than one would initially suspect. In particular, from the years 2005-2017 the rates of depression in adolescents increased 52% and from the years 2009-2017 the rates of depression in young adults increased 63% (Twenge et al., 2019). Interestingly, the first iPhone was released in the summer of 2007 and, according to Maryville Online (2021),

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many of the most prominent social media websites and applications first made their debut between 2006-2011. The ability of technology companies to masterfully craft interfaces that perpetually engage us has resulted in a dwindling of the precious time we once used for introspection and self-reflection. Spare moments, such as waiting for a bus or walking to work, where spontaneous self-reflection once had the opportunity to occur, have now been replaced with an endless stream of content ripe for consumption. A lack of time for such reflection may be one of the mechanisms that has contributed to the alarming rises in mental illness.

## A Deep-Work Solution

In the face of such corrupting societal and corporate forces, Dr. Schneider offers a powerful solution: instead of meaningless quick fixes, deep existential problems indeed require deep introspective work. He believes deep work is required for true healing and will allow for the building of a foundation upon which one can feel more free to pursue lasting fulfillment in relationships and creativity, and can learn to discover things about other people, cultures, and places. In Dr. Schneider's view, an imperative lies on the shoulders of depth-oriented psychologists and psychiatrists to help inspire a cultural shift towards fewer distractions, slowing down, and time alone, thus allowing the individual to ask and answer those questions that are most important: "What really matters about my life, about the lives of those around me, and how do I live in the face of what matters?" A failure to engage with such questions has possibly contributed to greater extremes and increases in mental illness.

Dr. Schneider argues that rather than running from the inner turmoil that one may feel in the face of such deep existential questions, a learning to embrace such life-enhancing anxiety may ultimately lead to a greater sense of freedom and an ability to experience a life that is full, rich, and graced with a sense of awe. By foregoing the necessary deep work, many of us today fail to achieve such heights of the psyche and soul. Dr. Schneider suggests that "one must ask whether a lifestyle of speed, packaging, instant gratification, and quick fixes is the kind of lifestyle that is really what you are wanting out of such a finite life."

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## Closing Remarks: The Most Important Questions of Life

Dr. Schneider closes this podcast with a revisiting of the most important questions in one's life. He implores that one must take the time to ask, "What matters about your life, and how you are wanting and willing to live it? How will you put it into action? Are you willing to put it into action?" Elaborating further, Dr. Schneider states that "depth-experiential therapy will foster the answer to such questions, along with reading, friends, mentors, slowing down in one's life, taking stock, recognizing the preciousness of this fleeting time and space that we have, attempting to be open to wonder and surprise, to be open to what can happen, what is evolving, and exploring what you are bringing to what is evolving." Furthermore, he encourages each of us to remain open to a relationship with things greater than ourselves. He argues that "this is essentially what spiritually and religion is about; one may be small and fragile, but one is also capable of great transcendence." Dr. Schneider leaves us with the notion that by bringing such qualities into one's own life, one has the potential to not only better their own life, but to bring about a better world, as well.

Read the book:

Life Enhancing Anxiety: **Key to a Sane World (for more information visit <https://kirkjschneider.com>)**

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