



Episode #201

**A Conversation with Author Amanda Stern on
Growing Up with a Panic Disorder**

March 24, 2020

Debbie: Hello, Amanda, welcome to the podcast.

Amanda: Hi, thanks for having me.

Debbie: I'm really excited about this conversation ever since, you know, you and I met in Toronto, we both spoke at the Shift Your Thinking Summit, and I think we both heard each other talk. And we were like, oh, my goodness, we need to do a traveling show or something. Because I just was really rapt by your story. And it's such an important perspective for parents raising differently wired kids parents in my community to hear from so I just appreciate the work that you do.

Amanda: Oh, well, thank you and right back at you. And we really do have to stage our 36 city tour together, yes, all right. Let's get working on that.

Debbie: Yes, after this episode. Well, what I would love for you to do, I mean, you've written an incredible book called Little Panic in which you share your personal story of growing up with an undiagnosed panic disorder. That's what your talk was about. I was wondering if, just to start this, you could share some of that personal story with us. Maybe even just starting with when you knew when you first knew that you were experiencing things differently than other kids were?

Amanda: Mm hmm, sure. So when I was little, about, I don't know three or four or five even, I knew that I had these terrible feelings in my body. And obviously, I didn't know that they were different from anyone else's feelings. I thought this was just what it meant to be human. But my siblings and I had to go to my father's house every other weekend and I had to go to school. And when I started to have to go to school, I would have a very severe reaction to leaving my mother. And the same thing happened when I would have to go visit my father. I would have, you know, complete meltdowns. But I would also throw up or my body would vibrate and it felt like I was dying, and being pulled into this, like deep black hole of nothingness. And no one around me behaved this way or acted this way or seemed to feel this way. And so over the course of time, I realized that, how I responded to these things were very different than the way my friends reacted or the way my siblings reacted. I couldn't ever have a sleepover. I couldn't have anyone sleep at my house. So with each sort of different skill that is introduced into your life, I would slowly discover that I couldn't do things that other kids could do, and I became acutely aware of that difference.

Debbie: Well, it's so fascinating to me that you did have this insight or the self awareness from a pretty early age that, you know, wait a minute, I'm experiencing this differently. Something isn't right here. And yet, you really struggled to be understood or seen by the people in your life. Can you talk about that? Because you know, you write about it so beautifully that you wanted some kind of external symptom to show people that what was going on internally wasn't okay.

Amanda: Yeah, I had a whole period of time, probably starting at around age eight, where I really needed someone to understand what was happening to me. And the only

way I knew how to do it was to have something wrong with me. So I would pretend that I had broken my arm and I would wrap my arm up in an ace bandage and wear a makeshift sling or I would limp or squint my eyes to make it seem like I had some sort of eye twitch. Anything for someone to recognize that something felt broken inside me. And the only way I could do it was by externalizing the internal. I think that it was very difficult for me to actually articulate what was happening beyond just saying, I am scared or what if you leave what if you die? I was saying all the things, you know, I was saying all the fears, but they just weren't being they weren't received with the seriousness that I needed. They were sort of brushed off as just, you know, regular childhood separation anxiety, when in fact it was really severe and it crippled my life in a lot of ways daily and I felt it all the time, it was always inside of me. And there was just no real way for me to explain that to anyone without I needed a way to show them. Because they weren't doing anything with the words I was already using. So it was very frustrating and very difficult. And I think that there were a lot of signs and signals that were sent to my parents that just went to the wayside, that just they didn't catch on to. So I think that was also a large part of it.

Debbie: Well, and one of the things that is so striking in your book and I love the way you structure this, you intersperse in-between chapters, these assessments and tests, little experiences that you underwent, so many assessments and evaluations over the course of your childhood. And, you know, I pulled out this quote, I highlighted so many things in your book, but I pulled out this quote you wrote, "I was confused by the tests, I couldn't understand why adults believe that state capitals, equations or analogies could determine why I was always afraid." So tell us a little bit more about that search for an answer, for solutions and what you went through in that testing process.

Amanda: So when my parents started to take things seriously, was when I started to get grades. So when my anxiety manifested itself academically, that's what they paid attention to, instead of the actual anxiety itself. So, when my grades were so terrible, they assumed I had some sort of a learning disability and so they arranged for me to get an IQ test. I wasn't told what the IQ test meant or what it was for, but I assumed it was to help me with my fears and to identify what was wrong with me, so someone would fix it. And when I went to my first appointment, I remember being just so alarmed when the doctor started asking me these questions that had absolutely nothing to do with my worries or my fears. They were school questions, you know, and I just I didn't understand what was happening. And I also wasn't a test taker. Like that was not my forte. And so as soon as I started to get tested, I would have a panic attack, and I couldn't function and I couldn't answer the questions. And so obviously, I didn't do well on the IQ test. So then I would get sent to a different IQ tester, because my parents didn't like the results of the first IQ test, or you know, or the evaluator said, we don't know. So I would go to another IQ tester and get another IQ test. And so it was very confusing for me. And after a couple of evaluations and tests, I felt like, Oh, I understand what's wrong with me is that I'm stupid. And so that is what I learned about myself from these tests when no one was communicating with me about why I was taking them. And the fact that they weren't identifying

or talking about my feelings made me feel like, Oh, I should be ashamed of this other thing that's inside of me that no one can see. It's probably so embarrassing that no one wants to talk about it, or it's so rare that no one can even see it. So it just sort of, you know, created this dichotomy in me where I felt like I was dumb, and I had to hide that and I also had these weird worries that were embarrassing and shameful. So I had to hide that.

Debbie: Yeah, I mean, I think that the way that you talk and write about that experience of, you know, what you made that mean, you know, as a young child is so powerful and I think it's something that parents in my community, we can't really hear enough of. Because I'm sure you're well aware of this, there's a lot of stigma surrounding labels. And I do notice a lot of reluctance among parents sometimes to get a diagnosis to get a label or to share with their child what's going on. Can you talk about that a little bit more?

Amanda: Yeah, I mean, for me, what I would have given for someone to tell me what was wrong with me, my life would be so different. Everything about my life would have changed if my parents had sat me down and said, this is what's going on with you. And I think that a lot of parents worry that if they say, you know, this is what's going on with you, it's going to make things worse or the child is going to have developed some sort of issue around that diagnosis. But really, we already know something's wrong, you know, it's not like it's a secret to us. So having that label is actually helpful so that we can have context for what's going on with us. So, I really do believe that parents should communicate with their kids about the kids themselves. Otherwise it feels like as a child, it feels like a part of you is being withheld from you. And when you feel that a part of you is being withheld from you, you begin to feel alien and it's a very strange type of existence. To know that maybe there's a secret about you that your parents know and your teachers now and testers now but you don't know it, and that makes that makes a kid feel so strange and not even human. It's a terrible, terrible feeling.

Debbie: And one of the things that you know, and you and I talked about this separately, the way that you are able to kind of capture what it felt like to be you as a child, which I think is such a powerful perspective. You know, I used to have Asher on the show when he was younger, where he would share what it feels like to be inside his brain when he's really distracted or when he's deep diving into his interest and things like that. And I think your ability to convey, you know, very viscerally what you experienced as a child, as a reader is incredibly powerful. And as you know, as a parent, it's so upsetting to know that a child could be experiencing that. Could you talk a little bit about, I guess, tell us a little bit more about what this crippling anxiety and panic that you were experiencing, what that looked like. And then I'd love if you just share a little bit about how you were able to capture that through your writing.

Amanda: Sure. So it felt like I was trapped under like a layer of vibrating heat. And, like I was separate from the world somehow that there was some danger between me and the world. And any sort of motion, I took any sort of step by I took that I would, I would start feeling like I was going to die. You know, it just felt sort of like I felt like I was being dragged by my ankles toward like a big black pond of

quicksand. And I was going to be pulled down into it and like just dropped into nothing. Yes, I felt very, like my brain felt like someone was constantly scribbling in it couldn't really have I couldn't find words so much. It just felt like heat. There was a lot of heat and and, and pins and needles all over my body. And just a terror. It was just I felt terror. And I felt terror all the time. And sometimes the terror would just show up in a flash and other times it would hang around for a few minutes. And otherwise it would, you know, the closer it got to my separating from my mom, the worse it the worse I would get. And it would become so debilitating that I would have to stand still and then be sort of paralyzed because if I moved, I thought I would start dying. So it was a very existential fear. It was very confusing to have that type of existential fear when you're little and you can't really make sense of, you can make sense of it all, you know. And I didn't know how to calm myself down. The only way I knew how to calm myself down was to avoid the situation that I was afraid of. And I think that's what my mom got really good at doing for me was helping me to avoid everything I was afraid of. And wasn't until much later when I realized that was that exact opposite thing I should be doing. So what was the second? Oh, how did I write it?

Debbie: Yeah, I mean, if you want to share how you were able to write in that space, because it's really it's some of the most compelling writing in terms of really just putting you there and giving the reader a sense of what it must have felt like to experience that.

Amanda: Well, thank you. So I feel like I this is true for me. I don't know if it's true for everyone who struggled with some sort of an emotional disorder as a child. But for me, I feel like having suffered from panic disorder from such a young age, the fear is so extreme and it was so chronic, that there's no possible way that I could ever separate myself from those feelings that those feelings are in me. They're a part of me. I grew up, but so did the feelings grew with me. So they're still in me, and I am able to call them up and feel them all over again. And I still you know, I had a panic attack this weekend, actually, for the first time in years and it was awful and I thought, how did I, honestly, like I don't know how I survived it just as a child going through it. You know, I can barely handle it as an adult. But so basically, when I was writing, what I would do, is I would lie down on my couch, and I would close my eyes and I would put myself back in my childhood bed, where I can I can call the smells up, I can just able, like, my senses are very attuned. And I would put myself back in my childhood bed, and I would, I would, I would imagine and feel that it was a night before I had to go to my dad's house. And I would just call up those childhood feelings of panic. And then as soon as I felt a feeling, I would race to my computer and just describe it. And so that's sort of how I did it. It was like I was translating what I felt in my body onto the page, and just exactly what it was exactly what it felt like, you know, I wasn't trying to make it fancy. I wasn't trying to make it pretty. I was just literally transcribing. And that was one that was the most difficult part about writing the book was that in order to adequately convey the experiences and sensations that I lived with, I had to actually re-traumatize myself over and over and over just to get it right. So that was, that was rough.

Debbie: Yeah, I mean, it feels very generous, as a reader, to know that you did that for us, you know, so that we could understand that. Was it cathartic at all? Or was it just really traumatizing?

Amanda: It was really traumatizing. It wasn't cathartic until the book came out, and I started hearing responses. And it was only when I knew that, that my effort had actually reached some people in the ways that I had hoped that I felt like completely, you know, I felt like it was so worth it. And like, it did feel a great catharsis. And I also felt so much less alone. You know, when I finished the book, I felt alone. But when the book came out, and people started emailing me and they said, this book makes me feel less alone, I realized everyone writing to me makes me feel less alone. So it was sort of a type of experience I didn't hadn't even considered what happened.

Debbie: I want to go back to touch upon, you know, you said, I don't honestly don't know how I survived that. And I agree, you know, in just the way that you describe how you felt all the time and then terror that you experienced, and, and I just think of you as this little human, and it's heartbreaking to know that that was what you were experiencing, and that it wasn't being seen. And, you know, you wrote, I think it was your mom who would write you notes that would say like, "You're A-okay." And at one point you said "She's writing things that are the opposite to how I feel." So can you talk a little bit more just about that disconnect between what others did or said to you and what was really going on?

Amanda: Yeah, I mean, that goes on to this day. But there really was a real disconnect to how I was feeling and how people perceived me. A lot of what happens when you are suffering from something that you consider to be shameful or and you consider it to be shameful because no one in no adult in your life is attending to it properly, is you start to create a persona and you start to hide the tenderness behind a facade so that you can protect yourself. And I started to very early on develop this sort of persona of this like little funny kid I was funny I made jokes I you know was a little comedian but that was outside of the house and inside of the house I did it some but inside of the house I was really my full entire self, but it just, I didn't understand how I could feel the way I felt and and, and my mom couldn't feel it, too. You know, how could she not? How could I feel this horrible and this close to death and she just has no idea? And it really just I felt so alone and so trapped, and in a world that I felt incompatible to. And I felt like I just have to act like everyone else, I have to just...there's a way to be human and I'm not doing it right. So I just have to sort of pretend. And so a lot of my life has been pretending that I'm okay. That I'm funny that I'm fine that I'm, you know, tough, you know, and it's all a protection against being seen for who I really am, which is anxious. And having that be misunderstood because it was misunderstood my entire life. And there's nothing more painful than being misunderstood for your core self.

Debbie: Yeah. Yeah, I'm wondering if you've thought, I'm sure you have, but if you've even articulated what exactly you needed as a child. I mean, I know there are parents listening to this who, who are going to be hearing your story and, and feeling like well, this is what my child's experiencing and I didn't realize or

maybe I'm downplaying it or minimizing it or trying to, you know, fix it. So what did you need? What do you want parents to know?

Amanda: Well, I think what I needed, I think I needed to be put first. And I think my parents didn't put me before them in some ways. For instance, when I would get so traumatized about going to my dad's house every other weekend, I wish that instead of just sending me, and watching me suffer, and come home, I'd call my mom hysterically crying halfway through the weekend and make her come up and get me in and she would get me bring me home. So I didn't understand like, if you're going to come get me, why are you sending me there? And I wish that what they had done was to really pay attention and see "Oh, she's really struggling with this. Maybe this isn't the best idea for her. Maybe instead of sending her uptown, maybe there's another way that we can have her spend time with her dad, and maybe it could be on her terms." Nothing was ever on my terms. So, you know, if they had sat down with me and said, "Talk me through what it feels like to let's draw it. You know, where does it feel in your tummy point in your body where it hurts? What does it feel like in that part of your body?" If someone just sat with me and just listened? Honestly, I think it would have been enough, but no one did. And I just needed someone to hear me. I really need them to hear me and to see me and to not become frustrated with me when I was panicking and not to like dismiss me when I was panicking and not to call me names when I was panicking, but to really value my experience as torturous, even though I'm a child, or especially because I'm a child. So I just think that parents, one of the things that I wonder about, I just don't understand is why so many parents don't take their kids seriously. There are a lot of parents who don't seem to like, look at their kids as an entire human person. And there's a lot of, you know, dismissiveness, and it might just be the people that I see around, but I know a lot of parents are amazing, and they love their kids, and they pay attention to them. They see them, they hear them, but you know, there's a subset of parents who are maybe afraid or they just don't, they don't know how to handle it. And so they don't do anything. And I think that that's, that's not the way to go.

Debbie: Yeah, I would agree 100% with that, I think, you know, as you're talking I'm thinking of that word fluency, which I use a lot that our job as parents is to become fluent in who our kids are, and how they're experiencing the world and how they're feeling and experiencing their emotions and conveying what's happening inside of them so that we can translate and help them. But it requires time and it does require a real willingness to put the brakes on and say, "Okay, wait a minute, I can't just keep forging ahead with my, you know, vision or path for what this is gonna look like, I need to slow down and recalibrate."

Amanda: Yeah, and also, one of the other things I wish my mom had done, which wouldn't have happened, and didn't, but I wish someone had said, "You know, anxiety begins at home. So who here has anxiety?" You know, which of the parents has anxiety and sort of compelled my parents and my mom or my dad to look at themselves, and to see that they too suffered from what I was suffering from, but just in a different form, or you know, it manifested differently than mine. But if they had understood that they were my models, and that continuing to model

things with the way that they were modeling things was reinforcing my anxiety, because they were showing me how to live in the world as anxious people. And they were never aware enough or conscious enough of their own behaviors that, you know, it just never would have occurred to them to think of that. So when I talk to parents, at schools, I always say that it's important for parents to, before they even try and address the anxiety with their kids, to sit down themselves and see if they suffer? Are they suffering from anxiety? And where do they feel it in their body? What does it feel like? How does it manifest? And what are the ways that they might be modeling this anxiety for their kids? And that's a good place to start.

Debbie: Yeah, I love that. I would love to, I actually would love to just touch upon your launch for a minute because that is something you know, what our kids' launch and movement out into the world looks like is a top concern for so many families. And you know, you talk about that, and how your mother, because she had already always kind of swooped in to fix things or solve things or protect you from problems, that when you got to that point, there were a lot of things you just didn't know how to do. So how did you get through that? How did you navigate that launch and realizing, I need some skills that I don't have?

Amanda: I did a lot of pretending. You know, it was really embarrassing. I didn't know how to do really basic things. So I did a lot of pretending. And I would watch other people, you know, I'd study them and do what they did and, but, but usually, quite honestly, my mom would do it. And, you know, if I had to sign a lease or get an apartment, or she would like, put all the stuff together and help me, you know, not help me, but just sometimes just do it for me, which again, would keep me from learning how to do it. But, you know, I think I also had a boyfriend at that time, and he knew everything. So I learned a lot from him. And that was really helpful. But I think, you know, thank God for Google, right? We didn't have that. But I think now I, you should see my history now. The things I look up are ridiculous, but you know, I still am sort of consumed with how to do like, regular basic things because I was never taught anything. But so I think, you know, Google is the amazing resource for people who don't know how to open a bank account or don't know how to start a business or don't know how to, you know, rent a home. But yeah, it was really overwhelming. It was really hard. But I was lucky to have an older sister who also would answer a lot of questions and also helped me do a lot of things. And so that was, that was great. I also didn't move far from home. I moved like four blocks. Yeah.

Debbie: Can you tell us, just so listeners can kind of come full circle, tell us about that moment when you finally got the name that you have for your whole life for what was happening with you?

Amanda: So, I had a, like a major meltdown one night when I was 25. And I had sort of just, like reached my limit of living with this. It had become just intolerable. I, you know, had gone untreated, undiagnosed for 25 years and had blossomed and grown into all these other anxiety disorders. And so by the time I was 25, I had agoraphobia, social anxiety, you know, depression, I had all these other issues, and I felt suicidal and so I called my mom and I needed her help. And so she

arranged for me to see a therapist, her therapist, the next morning, and so I went to the therapist the next morning and I explained what was happening to me, and he asked me how long it had been going on and he meant days and weeks, which I didn't realize. And I said, You know, I don't know probably since I was two and, and he was just floored. And he said, Oh, my God, you like you have a very extreme panic disorder. And as soon as he said the word panic, it was, it was the word I had been looking for my entire life. It was like an epiphany that someone else was having for me. And it was so right. It just answered the question of my life. And I felt, for a really long moment, like I, I did belong here that I did have a purpose, because I had a name. And without that name, I just felt unmoored. And like there was a part of me that was this lingering question that had no answer. And I just didn't want to, like couldn't, it was too hard to live like that. So yeah, it was revelatory. And, you know, he told me there was medication, I could take and go to therapy and all this stuff. And it was like, sign me up. But you know, little did I know that it would take a very long time for my anxiety to get controlled by me. You know, and not just medication, but because it had gone untreated for so long. So there was just like, 25 years of work. So I feel like I really started life at 25. Like, I feel like that's when I was really born as a, like a conscious person. You know, my fair chance started at 25.

Debbie: Wow.

Amanda: Yeah.

Debbie: So Powerful. So if there are parents who are listening to this who have a child that they recognize has severe anxiety, possibly a panic disorder, what would you want them to do? Like where should they start? And how can they best support their kids?

Amanda: Let's say a good place to start is to read my book. And also, there's a book called *The Worry Cure*, which I really love by Robert Levy, which explains a lot about what worry is and what anxiety is. And, you know, the internet has a wealth of resources on it, but I think that I would, I would just start I would start asking the question to yourself, you know, am, am I guess, what am I anxious about and if it's a problem that you haven't solved or you haven't dealt with or you don't have under control, then I think you have to start with yourself. And you know, either start going to therapy or if you can't afford that there are amazing, well in New York City at least, amazing clinics that you can go to. But I definitely think it has to start with the parent. And then once they understand how their anxiety feels and how it manifests, they'll be able to understand what's going on with their kid. And if the parent doesn't have anxiety, then I think that starting with the books is a good place to start.

Debbie: Yeah. And so, listeners, I will include links to Amanda's book. It's called *Little Panic: Dispatches From An Anxious Life*. I believe it's newly out on paperback, is that right?

Amanda: It's been out in paperback for seven months.

Debbie: Okay. Again, it's just a really powerful read, and I highly recommend it; I've been telling everybody about it. So definitely check that out. And Amanda's written many other books series for kids and working on a novel. So a very prolific writer, but I'll include a link to Amanda's website as well. Is there anywhere else where listeners can connect with you?

Amanda: Yeah. So my website, amandastern.com, they can email me through there. I also do have an anxiety resources page. And I have an anxiety blog that I've been very bad about keeping up to date, but it does have a lot of essays that address a lot of questions that parents have had about their kids and anxiety. And, yeah, I'm so happy to answer any emails from anyone. People write to me through Twitter, through Instagram, through Facebook. So really, anywhere you find me, feel free to email.

Debbie: Fantastic. Well, Amanda, thank you so much for sharing with us today. I'm really just happy to share your powerful story with this community. And, again, you know, I think we both had that moment when we heard each other speak that we were sharing these two perspectives that need to be part of the same conversation. And I just really appreciate your insights today.

Amanda: Well, thank you. Thank you for having me on. I'm so happy to finally be on the show. It's very exciting and I'm honored and flattered.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- Amanda Stern's website
- *Little Panic: Dispatches from an Anxious Life* by Amanda Stern
- Amanda's Facebook author page
- Amanda on Twitter
- Amanda on Instagram
- Happy Ending Music and Reading Series
- *Frankly, Fannie* book series by Amanda Stern
- *The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You* by Robert Leahy
- Shift Your Thinking Summit