UCL Remarkable Stories

Episode 1 – Alex and anxiety

Transcript

**Mitesh Vagadia**

We are UCL. And these are our remarkable stories.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

Hi, I’m Mitesh Vagadia, I work in the UCL Student Support and Wellbeing team. In each episode I'll be in conversation with UCL guests as they share with us their remarkable stories, experiences, and life lessons. In our first episode today, we meet UCL staff member Alex Page, who works within the Office of Vice Provost Advancement to ensure donors to the university are properly looked after.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

Alex will be sharing how anxiety has affected his life in unexpected ways, and how he manages this on a daily basis.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

How long have you been suffering with anxiety and what does it mean to you? Because for someone like me, doesn't have a real insight, having never suffered from anxiety, I believe. So to you, what would you say, anxiety is to you, and how does it impact on your daily life?

**Alex Page**

I think anxiety is and I mean, I'm speaking just for myself not on behalf of all anxiety sufferers, I think it can manifest itself in a lot of different ways in a lot of different people. To me, it's something I think I've always struggled with. It's, I think it's a very easily sort of underrated kind of thing because I think anxiety in a lot of senses people think ah anxiety, that's sort of what you get before fear, it's quite mild. It's, you know, people are just worrying about things that they shouldn't worry about. It's the same as being a bit nervous, you're going to miss a train, or something like that. It's not, it's definitely is an emotional and physical manifestation that can really be quite overwhelming at times. And I think it's been really good. In the last sort of few years, there's been lots more conversation about anxiety, about just how serious it can be or how debilitating it can be and less sort of feeling where you just think, oh, you need to shrug it off. Oh, don't worry about that everything will be fine. I'd also say it's often not rational, especially with some of the things that I get anxious about, they are very much things that are very unlikely to happen, or things where the worst case scenario isn't actually, objectively, particularly a bad thing. But that doesn't mean the feelings don't manifest themselves anyway. So, to some people, I think, who don't struggle with anxiety, you can think oh, that's a really silly thing to be worried about. It shouldn't matter. But it does matter, I think a lot of the time. I can't put a finger on when I started, when anxiety became a thing that I was aware of that I had. I think probably it's always been with me in some respects, but over the last over the last few years, there's much better understanding around it and even you know, you could have anxiety and not know it yourself, or you could just be telling yourself all the time, oh, this is a really stupid thing for me to be worried about, you know, I'm being I'm being over the top or something. But I think it's important to recognise that that is, you know, it's not just a case of being worried about something you shouldn't be it is actually a physical thing. And in some way influenced by chemistry in the brain and stuff like that.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

In terms of, you said the impact it had on you, what did it exactly do?

**Alex Page**

So, I think there's a couple of ways of having anxiety. It's not just a one sort of one symptom. If I get really nervous about something, conflicts a lot of the time are something that sets me off. I really, really don't like the idea of getting into conflict with people, and if I think something is approaching that might be a confrontation, there is definitely a really sort of physical manifestation there. My hands will start to tingle. You feel that sort of constricting of the throat. I find it quite hard to, I think, not to breathe. My throat is very dry. And there's also sort of that feeling that sort of queasy feeling in the stomach that comes on quite suddenly, sometimes. I'm not sure what the best way to describe this is like overheat in a way like you feel really sort of sweaty and sometimes quite faint. And all of that can happen from sort of, you can be absolutely fine, and then an email can show up in your inbox that says, oh, you've completely messed this up or something or you know, there's been a complaint about you or whatever, you know, something that looks like it could be a confrontational situation, and you go from zero to 10 in about 15 seconds. And you know, that's how quick all those things can come on.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

And you said that you can't pinpoint exactly where or when it came from, when it happened, you feel like it has always been with you.

**Alex Page**

I think there's definitely elements that have reinforced it. So I went to an all boys school for the benefit of anyone listening I am ginger, and quite small, and I have glasses, and I wouldn't recommend having any of those things if you go to the school that I went to. And I think you sort of know straight away that if you’re marked out as different in any sense, then people will be after you not for personal reasons, sometimes just because you know the schoolyard bullies. It's almost a career in its own way, your job is to go out and pick on people because that reinforces your own image. So even if you've led a completely blameless existence and never done anything to rub them up the wrong way, they're still coming for you. And I think there's a lot of that atmosphere in schools. I think it's, I sometimes think that going to school is one of the hardest things you go through in life. And when you come out and you find yourself in a working environment, you'll actually realise people are a lot nicer. You've almost, you've been through the worst and that, you know, it's never going to be like that again. There aren't going to be people coming after you because you've used a silly word that is then the basis of a nickname you have for the next five years. Or people just chasing you to beat you up, because that's just what they do. I'm making it sound like my school time was horrific. It wasn't, it was mainly nice but there's a constant awareness in that kind of environment that you don't want to do anything that marks you out as different. You don't want to do anything that paints a target onto your back. And there's a possibility that that target is always there anyway, just for how you sound or how you look. And I think probably a lot of people had it much harder than me as well. So you're constantly aware, and you're constantly anxious that something is going to happen. And that probably has helped to reinforce that definitely the wanting to avoid confrontation probably comes from there. Family wise, I'm an only child and my parents are still married. So I didn't have a great deal of that conflict at home that a lot of my friends struggled with. There's some sort of I think mental health things that happened in my family that have been quite hard to deal with over the years. They also I think, played a part in my childhood that could sometimes lead to completely unexpected conflict coming up as something you could do could lead to an argument that is just completely unpredictable. So there was that element as well, and I think a combination of those two things sort of reinforced that always treading on eggshells sort of feeling that I've that I've grown up with.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

Was there some practical things that you did to make things easier?

**Alex Page**

I think I'd probably dealt with it quite badly. Looking back now, I would very easily get overwhelmed if something started making me feel anxious, then I'd immediately assume worst case scenario. I decided that it was absolutely going to happen whatever it was that I decided and then I would almost not not quite hyperventilate, but certainly approaching that sort of level of, of fear or panic. I think school and home were a bit different. When you have kind of that sort of environment at home, it's a very, it's a different sort of thing to deal with. I have wonderful parents, and I was very lucky for my upbringing. So I don't want to make it sound like I've just had this awful time when I was younger. But to speak frankly, my mother has depression, and it leads to mood swings, and they are unpredictable and uncontrollable, and you always get the sense that there is something deeply wrong, but you're never going to be told what it is, so you've got the fear, especially when you're a little boy, that it might be you. Dealing with that at home was very much a case of either just going and shutting myself away in my room, if something like that was happening, because you learn quite early on that there was nothing you could do to help. Whereas at school, I surrounded myself with friends, which I think and still is today a key way that I deal with anxiety. I've got a really good group of friends. And just sort of over the years learning that I'm not a burden on them, because I think a lot of the time you look at everyone else and think they've all got it all worked out. And here's me with all my fears, and I'm always voicing my fears and my anxieties and I shouldn't do it, they must be sick of it. They're not going to be my friend anymore. I was very lucky with my friends at school, I think they're fantastic. And just having those people you can go to and say, this is happening or I'm worried about this and not being told you're being an idiot. Or, even understanding when people do say, I don't think that's anything to worry about, sort of seeing it from other people's perspective can be quite helpful as well. Sorry, that was quite a jumbled answer.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

No it wasn't actually it was quite insightful. Are you still in touch with these friends?

**Alex Page**

Yeah, I was best man at one of their weddings a couple of months ago. We've been a core group of 10 people for about 15 years. So, it's really lucky, and they're great, a great set.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

In terms of your last sort of anxiety episode, how frequently does it happen now then?

**Alex Page**

It's really, I've been thinking about this quite a lot recently about whether they're attacks or not because you hear about panic attacks a lot and I've never thought that what I struggled with is in that realm. That I thought it would be kind of insulting to people who have genuine panic attacks to lump anxiety in the same sort of quarter as that. But thinking about sort of the way it does affect you it is kind of, it can be very debilitating. Sometimes if something has made me really anxious, I will have to go and like shut myself probably in one of the toilet cubicles here, just to sit for 10 minutes. Because having all those symptoms I talked about earlier, like feeling that you're overheating, feeling lightheaded, and that sort of sick feeling shaking sometimes happens as well. That's not something you want to be happening at your desk surrounded by colleagues really. So you've just got to get up and walk quickly away. I'm not saying that that is the same thing that people who have panic attacks suffer. But I would probably use the word attack, because it is something that has that sort of physical manifestation that means you actually have to get up and walk away from something. It's hard to predict the sort of regularity that they might come on with. So they are normally provoked by some kind of trigger, they don't happen randomly to me. Whether or not the trigger is rational or not, might be a different conversation. But it could be if something has happened in my life. You know, if I've just got a text from someone saying, I'm really angry at you, if there's an email being oh, you need to do all these things before the end of the day and you know it's impossible, any of those things can set off a quite disproportionate reaction that would requires me to get up and walk off and deal with it somewhere. So I would say they may become regularly as long as there's a situation going on. But then, once it's resolved, things are okay until the next trigger comes up. I can't think of any time where I've just been sort of everything's been, you know, I've been walking down the street, everything's fine and then suddenly the symptoms come on without reason. There's always been a cause, something happening, even if it is something really minor that has triggered it.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

Have you ever sought, like professional help to get you to understand it a bit better, and to maybe help you with it when you have it.

**Alex Page**

I did have cognitive behavioural therapy a couple of years ago, and that was when I was really beginning to recognise that this might actually be a thing rather than Oh, I'm just an anxious person. Because before then I'd always just sort of dealt with it as the wrong word. I think just not recognised it for what it was and just thought, this is something that happens to me. And that I've sort of always dealt with so I'll carry on but someone recommended I give CBT a go, and it was quite helpful. Yeah, it was. There were some interesting routines, but just sort of writing down things that are making you nervous, sort of really laying out what it is about those situations that are making you worried, what the worst case scenario could possibly be, and then just sort of looking at that and reflecting on it. And personally, I found that to be quite therapeutic. I've always liked writing things down as a way of getting my head around things. So it's been quite useful to just sort of note down, what is it that I'm worried about? If you write that down, especially when you're not suffering from an anxiety attack, it can be very helpful when you are to remember the other way that your brain can look at things that it's incapable of doing at the moment and can sort of help. And oh, yeah, okay, so this isn't actually the worst scenario in the world. Other than that, I do find talking to people very helpful. I probably talk too much. But it is talking through worries I think is an important thing to be able to do. There's that the old thing like keeping things bottled up inside you is never a good idea. I would agree with that. I do tend to worry more and more about things if they remain only on my radar and no one else's for a long time. Sort of that almost becomes an anxiety in itself. The fact that only I know about this problem that I'm worried about. So sometimes, even if it's someone, and especially some say if it's a work related worry, chatting to a friend will help if it's a friend related worry, chatting to a colleague might help. I think sometimes just laying out a situation to someone who doesn't know about it, you can then hear when you're talking to them how you are explaining it and you can also see how they're reacting to it. And you sort of think as you're talking, hold on, maybe this isn't the big scenario that I have convinced myself that it is.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

This might sound like a silly question. Is there anything positive from you having anxiety?

**Alex Page**

That's a really interesting question. And I've never thought of it like that, but certainly, I think yes, there probably is. I think your attention to detail is great because you're very worried. So and again, I'm speaking personally for myself, I'm not generalising everyone who has anxiety. But from my own point of view, as I said, I don't like conflict and making silly mistakes will often lead to unnecessary conflict. So I'm very careful with my work and with everything I do. I also think it's made me very attentive to the needs of people, because I don't like annoying people. So and this can be probably construed as negative or positive, but I'm very much a people pleaser. I like it when people are happy. I like doing things that make people happy. It certainly is much better than doing anything that makes them unhappy, that will make me feel anxious until it's resolved, essentially. So I think it does, it has really had a positive impact in my life that I've been sort of almost had a need to seek approval. Which again, doesn't sound positive, but it does mean that you go out there and become friends with people and you want to really sort of cultivate those friendships. And I think maybe that's played a role in the group that I'm in, just having those sort of friendships for a long time. But because I'm so averse to conflict, I very rarely find myself in serious conflict in either the workplace or sort of my friend space, which I guess is a good legacy to come out of this.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

You feel really comfortable talking about it, has that come out of experience and time, or was there a point where you felt really open to share your experiences?

**Alex Page**

Yeah, I think it is. I think it's much more recent, being just happy talking about these sort of things. I think the wider sort of national conversation around mental health has really improved over the last few years. I think people are recognising anxiety, as not just either attention seeking or not being able to handle basic things or just be in a bit worried about something. It is seen as more, actual acknowledged as more of sort of the condition it is, which I think has been really helpful. There's a lot more sort of celebrity endorsement of talking about this sort of thing. It's really interesting celebrities, you know, often a lot of them are painted as people who don't have any of these issues or, you know, really sort of, so when you get sort of, what's the word like stereotypical strong men, like for example, Vinnie Jones, opening up and talking about mental health, I think that's a really positive image because it goes to show that this is something everyone can open up about, and it's not easy. Especially if, with anxiety, I think, you'll have the fear that you're just going to be shrugged off or you've got the fear that you know, other people have real problems like you know, depression or you know, serious mental health issues and yours is very much like having a cold when you're next to someone with the plague. Like it's not really something you feel entitled to moan about. But I think as I said, recently, there's been a lot more conversation and a lot more people have felt comfortable coming forward. And then you recognise how many people do have similar things. And it's sometimes it's quite nice to sit, even if you're reading an interview or listening to a podcast and think, oh, they feel the same as me or they react the same way I do. You know, it's not just me that does that. So yeah, I think they're much bigger conversation has been really, really helpful. And I think I mean, one of the main reasons I'm sitting here talking to you is just on the off chance, this might be helpful to someone who's listening who also has anxiety and might feel that they shouldn't talk about it, because it's not a proper thing to be worried about or that they, they shouldn't be worried about the things that they're worried about. I'd say it's absolutely fine. And it's good to talk about it.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

The one word that you said that resonated to me was real, like the actual problem. Maybe people feel like it doesn't feel as real. Do you think that's something that holds people back from coming from talking about it?

**Alex Page**

Yes, I do. And I think just the things that you can get anxiety over often can kind of make you feel like, oh, I don't really want to talk about this because it might be about completing an essay, it might be about an email you've just sent to someone, it might be, you know, really what in the grand scheme of things appear as minor things and even looking back after an anxiety attack, you might think to yourself, why was I ever worried about that? It was just an email. That doesn't take away the reality of the feeling at the time and how serious it can be. I think there needs to be a recognition that things you can be anxious about, versus what an anxiety attack feels like are quite separate. So even if the trigger is minor, the impact is major. And that I think is, is really important because it is then you are having a real kind of mental health issue. Coming back to saying about whether it's a real thing or not. I think I definitely used to think it wasn't. And I was just being silly, and probably the most difficult thing is to talk about it. I also think, over the last few years, I've recognised and in a lot of ways, there's been a whole societal conversation that has recognised that anxiety is more than just feeling nervous about something. I think it's wrongly branded. I don't like the word anxiety. I think it understates what it is. I think when you have a word like anxiety, it almost seems to imply mild, oh, I'm a bit anxious about missing that train not I'm terrified of missing that train. Whereas I'd say probably one of the words that I would use to describe an anxiety attack is terror. You know, a lot of the time you feel genuine, real fear of something. I'm not suggesting it should be called terror or whatever, I just I just don't agree with the word anxiety as a condition because I think it invites itself to be dismissed.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

In terms of similarities. I mean, you said that it's sometimes not as big as some of the other mental health issues.

**Alex Page**

What you've just said, makes me take it back to your last question about has anything positive come out of this? I would say yes, absolutely. And I never dismiss anyone saying that they have any struggles with anything because you know, when, when you do have something like this, you do realise that what might sound minor, to, to anyone listening is actually could be a huge, massive thing for the person saying it. And it's important to always take that seriously. So I would say that's positive that's come out of it. And I do I have friends who suffer from a variety of different things. And I think you're right, the common frustration is the lack of understanding about what an impact something like this can have on, on your life. And, again, I don't want to come on here and moan about what I've been through because in a lot of ways, I think I've had an extraordinary quite lucky experience. And I'm I think there's definitely much worse types of anxiety out there than the type I have, which I'd probably categorise as fairly mild. So yeah, I certainly don't want to don't want to come on here and sound like I'm saying, I've got the worst thing in the world. And I've people have never understood and it's held me back or anything like that. I think it's more just kind of having conversation about that it is a thing. That it does generally affect people and that it's okay to talk about it. And in the same way that talking about any kind of mental health issue is probably a good thing to do.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

I thank you for coming on, actually, because it's quite nice to have someone who's quite open about something that's quite personal.

**Alex Page**

And yeah, I think that is sort of the motivation is just a set kind of, to help people out. And also to sort of say, I think probably the biggest conflict within me is what I've what I've mentioned before about not really having the right to feel anxious. I've mentioned that in terms of other mental health issues, but I think it's wider than that. And now that I think about it from our last conversation, I mean, you know, you especially living in London, you walk down the street, and there's a lot of people who are homeless, and they're obviously having huge battles in their lives and you think what right do I have to be nervous about what it is that I'm feeling. Especially when you come from quite a fairly typical, I don't know like upbringing. You know, there was always I lived under one roof, there was always food on the table. There weren't any of those sort of kind of struggles that a lot of people do struggle with. So you think to yourself, I shouldn't be feeling anxious, you know, I should be thankful every single day. But when you're having an anxiety attack, none of that seems to matter anymore. It becomes very central. The only thing in the world is the thing that you're worried about. It's quite a selfish thing, in a way, I think. And that's another thing I've tried to deal with is just sort of saying, you know, is that a helpful way of looking at it by saying, you know, well what am I worried about with the bigger picture? I've always had a kind of, like a pinch of salt attitude to that if you're worried about something and people say to you, oh, well, there's people starving all over the world. I don't think that's a helpful thing to say to someone who is suffering from a mental health issue. It's not understanding, it's not emphatic. I can kind of see where the standpoint of someone saying that it's coming from, but I think there's a real lack of understanding there that it's not brought on in proportion to anything. You know, if you're having an anxiety attack, you can feel really awful and, as I said before, for completely disproportionate reasons. But your brain is wired in a particular way to react like that. And you can't help that and being made to feel guilty about the fact you're having an anxiety attack is not going to do anything to make it better. And there's nothing you can do to resolve that other situation they've put in front of you. People are starving everywhere. Right, okay, I can't sort that out right now. So now I just feel bad about the fact that I'm having an anxiety attack on top of the thing. I'm having an attack about. I don't know that's quite jumbled. But I think my main point is, that's not a helpful thing to say to people who have mental health issues. And that something that might seem very small isn't and they're probably again, I'm only speaking for myself, but they're probably feeling guilty enough already about not being able to help make a big thing out of something without it being reinforced to them. So yeah, don't say that.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

Is there anything else you do that helps you?

**Alex Page**

I think, deep breathing I think anything like that it does actually help to get your breathing under control. I have a tendency to breathe fast and shallow, if I'm having an attack, and that doesn't help, because you're not getting as much oxygen in. It's just, it's not helpful and it amplifies the physical side of things. So I think being able to breathe deeply. The thing I said earlier, if you've got a list or something where you've written down your worries, do if there's anything you find therapeutic. I think that's helpful, just sort of write down what is this, try to almost derail your mind from the track its going down onto something else, something with purpose. So you know, I need to write down what it is I'm feeling about right now. Or, you know, it could be anything, anything that maybe distracts you and has a purpose. Again, I'm only speaking for myself. Also, I find music very helpful. So I mean, that's talking specifically about having an attack now in the more general sense of dealing with the sort of what I mentioned earlier at school, you know, that constant anxiety that something's about to go wrong. That's different to when something is going wrong, but it's a, it's an ever present sort of beast, and it's almost like a shadow looming sort of just out of sight, that sense that something is going to fall on you and happen. It just hasn't happened yet. And I think for dealing with that in everyday life, I do find music really, really, really helpful thing I couldn't operate day to day without music. Leonard Cohen, for me, in particular, is just the best solution. I can listen to any of his music on repeat all day, and that's fine. It really helps. He's not to everyone's tastes, his music is certainly very dark. I don't know if there's something in that, you know, I think cheerful music would never help me. But sort of the melancholy music that he has really does. And people often say, oh, why'd you listen to that? It's really depressing. And I would say it's absolutely the opposite from my point of view, it's therapeutic. And walking, I find walking very therapeutic as well. I find it, I like going for a walk. And if I'm not listening to music or a podcast, I will just think through things that I may be anxious about at the moment or things that might come up in the future. And it helps to sort of keep that at bay, because there's nothing worse than that looming feeling of dread when you can't pinpoint where it's coming from. And it never, as I said earlier, it never formulates into an attack by itself because it needs to trigger but it keeps it at bay. I think if you just have to constantly remind yourself, everything's going fine. Actually.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

The shadow that you mentioned, I've never heard that before.

**Alex Page**

A very melodramatic word. I just feel like there's something you know, when there's something just in the sort of the field of your vision, just out of sight. Or imagine if you were on a safari, and there was a lion, you knew there was a lion somewhere nearby and that its probably watching you and working out the best form of attack, but you've got no idea where or when it's going to strike. That's kind of how it feels. It's just in the, in the periphery most of the time, and you're not always consciously aware of it. You know when there's a noise in a room and you don't hear it until it stops. It often sort of relegates itself to that in the brain. So, you forget.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

How was it at uni, for you?

**Alex Page**

It was, I mean, it was really good. I loved my university experience. I didn't go to UCL sadly. I went to the University of Kent, which is great. People should visit, they do a lot of fantastic stuff. And I think it was I mean, probably just a very typical university experience with a lot of the woes that people deal with. From you know, course pressures and I did a lot of extracurricular stuff. I think that really helped for me. And the least time possible that I can have sitting around by myself worrying about something is good. So I kept active. That might sound contradictory to what I said about going for a walk. But there's a difference. And I've never thought about how contradictory it sounds, but going for like a two hour walk, you have a purpose, you know, you're going somewhere. And it's really good to talk things through. Being at home alone for a couple of hours, is the opposite of that. And it's where all that sort of looming feeling of dread can creep up on you, at least from my experience. So yeah, university was very much, you know, it's your first time moving out of home for me. So there's all this stuff about living in halls with people I'd never met. You know, the extra responsibility. I worked from first year to the end of my master's, sometimes I do like 80 hour weeks. I find that really helpful actually. Having the job in the supermarket was a sense of purpose. It came with its own anxieties, it came with all of its own circumstances. I was one of the front end sort of supervisors. So I dealt with a lot of customer complaints. I think that really helped. I don't think I'd be where I am now, if I hadn't had that job. And probably for my university experience, my experience in the retail sector was more valuable to forming me as a person than my degree was. Which I've never said out loud before. I did a degree in history. It was great. I'm interested in history. I learnt a lot about the war and Renaissance architecture. And I learned a lot about how to write critically and think critically, which is really helpful. I think, nowadays, when you see all this sort of fake news circulating around and stuff, having that schooling in critical thinking, of who did this, who is the source, why are they sharing it, is useful. But in terms of me actual personal development, definitely working in a supermarket was a hugely great thing to do. I've worked since I was 16. That was fun, but that was very much like a weekend job. Working at Asda was, I think for me, it became more than just a way of earning a bit of money to spend on nights out or whatever. For me, it was actually something I really enjoyed doing. We were a very strong team there. And there were six of us front end supervisors who did all the shifts all week, and I really filled a lot of bonds with people and because you were going through the same thing, I got to meet people outside of the sort of normal circles I'd have met if I just done history at university. So I think there's a lot said about you know, you're in the university bubble. A lot of the time you don't meet people who aren't studying at university who aren't you know, part of that, you know, that sort of bubble. But working in a supermarket you know, the people that everyone there, fascinating backstories, people from all over, lots of like, lots of mums who would come in and work 10 to three while the kids were at school, really nice people to get to know and work with. Obviously, everyone comes in to do their shopping there, it was the only big supermarket for probably about 10 to 15 minutes’ walk around. So lots of people would come there and just dealing with customers, dealing with complaints, I was on the customer service desk a lot as well. And you saw all kinds of things. People getting really angry and shouting at you for something that isn't your fault that you know, because it's been on the shelf and they've been overcharged a pound. And you know, they're really shaking their finger in your face and having a go. And for someone who doesn't like confrontation, that was really difficult. I'd get all those symptoms then, you can't just walk off in the middle of serving a customer and go and shoot yourself in a cubicle. So I had to learn a lot of the how to deal with conflicts that you can't avoid that it's actually your job to help resolve. I think that job I think really formed me as a person because it it made me think a lot about you know, asking yourself, what's the worst that can happen? Dealing with very angry people, a lot of the time dealing with really good situations as well. Unexpected situations. We had someone give birth once in the home and leisure department and just had to get some cushions and first aider along as soon as possible. And you're not ready for those things. They just happen.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

It felt like, you were okay with that?

**Alex Page**

Yeah. So I think that's kind of twofold. I think in the first instance, that people pleaser element of me that I spoke about earlier overrides the anxiety element. So imagine being in a situation where you can help people with their inquiries every day. I mean, for me, that's perfect. I mean, why do I love working here so much? Our office brings in philanthropic donations that have a massive impact on research on people's lives that improve them for the better. And I love that. I love working here, it's fantastic. And just seeing that impact that you're a part of is very nice for someone like me. So I think I went in there because I wanted to help, with kind of the knowledge that there might be the odd complaint. But I also think it was quite nice to say to myself, there will be conflicts here that you can't avoid. So, you know, if you're shoehorned into it, maybe it's a way of dealing with something you'd have always put off otherwise. There was really a bit of me that did say to myself, I need to be more assertive, I need to be better at dealing with stuff like this, you know, I'm not very good at it. And back then I was thinking, I'm, I'm weak. I wouldn't agree with that anymore. But I think it's very easy to think I am a weak person because I get nervous about everything. And that's what I was feeling then. And I just thought, this might be a good thing to do take on this, this bit of responsibility. And at the end of the day, you know, you're not the Prime Minister, you're standing behind the customer service desk. None of your decisions are going to start a war or have lives hanging on them, you would hope. So there was definitely that sort of that element. And then when I was getting nervous about things, then obviously, as I said earlier, all those things go out the window, because it doesn't matter if it's rational or not, all that exists is you and the problem and your reaction to it. And you're trapped because you're representing the company and you can't just walk away and that that really helped, I think, And I didn't recognise what I had then for what it is. So I think that was probably an element too, but I would certainly I'd do it every time, yeah.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

What's interesting is you said that it formed you more as a person working in Asda than going to university.

**Alex Page**

I think so. I think going to, if I hadn't had the job at Asda, going to university would have, it would have been great, but it wouldn't, it would have made me reinforce those few qualities that I came there with. What's the best way of describing this? Like, I think I can be quite an introverted person. I think that studying history as I did very few contact hours, a lot of it is oh you just need to go to the library and do 30 hours a week reading. Which for me probably translated into 30 hours, every three years, But there's not, you're not thrown into a great deal of social situations, you really have to seek them out. So, you know, I'm not, I would, and obviously, I had a lot of friends then we would go to the club together and stuff but I'd never do that sort of thing by myself. I wouldn't go to a club by myself, I wouldn't go to the pub, with the aim of meeting a stranger. I don't think I've ever done that. It's a terrifying prospect for me, you know. And whereas going to work with the public every day, and you know, when I started doing the checkouts, and so you've got someone who's doing their weekly shop, you might be serving them for 20 minutes. You have to learn how to make conversation. I'm terrible at small talk. I was even worse back then. And you just kind of learn certain formulas, how to talk to people. And you kind of learn. I think there's a great deal of people watching, there's a great deal of learning from other people around you behaviours and things like that. I think there should be an anthropology course on supermarkets because it is really a melting pot of every single aspect of society. Everyone needs to go shopping. And when it boils down to it, it really does reinforce how we are all the same. You know, everyone's gonna get angry if they overcharged, everyone is on the lookout for when the reduction labels come on, everyone buys you know, bread, milk, staples, all of that sort of thing. It's I think supermarkets are a great example of how society should be united. Yeah, I just think that it put me in a lot more situations. It meant that I spoke to people that I wouldn't have spoken to normally in age ranges different to me. If I'd just been at uni I probably would have hung out with people, mainly my own age. Mainly my own background probably and mainly studying History so that would have been quite a narrow experience probably. And not because I didn't want to hang out with anyone else just because if I'm normally alone I won't seek to have company of people I don't know so i would have just probably sat around in the house if my friends weren't doing anything and not adventurously throw myself into new things, whereas the supermarket did all that you know, and I ended up with regular customers from all walks of life and still in touch some of them now. So, I think that was much more about broadening personality about meeting all different types of people, about tackling some of the things that made me anxious, and the friends I made, they're fantastic. I went around the world with one of them, it was great yeah.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

At a point in your life if you could give one piece of advice to that younger self, to help you manage the anxiety. What would you tell them?

**Alex Page**

Don't feel guilty, I think. I think, certainly for me, and hopefully maybe for anyone listening who has this, I think guilt is a big aspect for all those things I've touched on earlier. You know, you're aware a lot of the time that life has been pretty good to you. And you know, you've got a job, you've got friends, you've got a family, so many people don't have that. So what right do you have to be feeling how you feel? I think I mentioned earlier that my mum struggles with depression. And so I think that, too, has played a big part in my upbringing, and also that whole argument about why should I feel sad, when so many other people have things worse off than me. I've been able to witness that happening to someone who I'm very close to, and witnessed that thinking that isn't helpful because when you feel like that you do just feel like that you can't turn it off. I think that's a very common misconception that if you say to someone, oh, you know you're feeling anxious or you're feeling sad. Don't worry, lots of people have it worse off. What do they expect you to do, just cheer up at the click of a finger? You can't turn it off. It's chemical. It's physical. It's like having a cold. You couldn't say to someone with a common cold, you know, other people have the flu. And you'd be like, oh, no, you're right, I shouldn't have this cold, and then just get rid of it. You can't do that it's there until it goes away. And I think the first thing is to acknowledge that, and think I shouldn't feel bad about this. This is this is a physical thing. It's caused by some kind of chemical in the vein. It's just like having a cold when you've got it, it will come on, and you shouldn't feel guilty about that. And you shouldn't be thinking there's much worse things happening to other people. You should, you should care, obviously, but it's okay to feel affected. And yeah, so don't be guilty. They're the three words that I'd say to my younger self. Because it just makes it worse. It puts you in a vicious cycle, because then your sense of self-worth goes down as well. Not only am I feeling anxious about all of this, but I'm also a bad person, because I'm being selfish. And I'm only caring about myself. And I have no reason to be sad because lots of other people have worse things happening to them. But I am sad. That's because I'm a bad person, because I'm broken. It just goes on and on and on and on. And it's much harder to climb back out of it. If you've got that sort of reinforcing negativity going on in your own mind.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

Does it feel good talking about?

**Alex Page**

Yeah, actually, I've, I've said a few things today that I've never really considered before. I certainly haven't thought about the whole Asda thing and being such an important influence in my life. And I've never been able to, and I don't know if I have or not, but I've never been able to brilliantly articulate that feeling of dread that follows you and everywhere you go. Just out of sight. So yeah, that's certainly helpful. It's quite nice talking to, you're relatively a stranger to me, we've met once before this. That's definitely nice. I think yeah, I think it is. It is nice. And I hope it, I hope it's helpful. I hope I haven't sounded too negative. I think that's another important message as well. That maybe I haven't got across properly. But having anxiety doesn't mean you're constantly an anxious, worried, worst case scenario is going to happen person, you know, you're not stuck in that mindset all the time. It's something that can come on from my experience, and then you do get an overwhelming sense of, or, you know, this is terrible. This is this is going wrong. And like I said earlier, is something that feels out of sight. But while that's out of sight, everything else is inside. And a lot of that can be really positive things. I'd like to think of myself as a fairly happy person really. Like, I know I have this thing, but I don't think it defines me. I think if you ask people in the office for one word to describe me, it would probably be cheerful. I get that quite a lot. And so yeah, I think like, I don't want to come in here and just say, like, I'm moaning, and this is a constant terrible battle, and poor me. It's more a case of, it's fine for this sort of thing to come up. But it doesn't define me. And actually, I'm generally very, very happy person.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

I wouldn't describe you as being anxious when I first saw you, and even now, knowing that you are dealing with anxiety, I still wouldn't think of an anxious person, you don't come across that way. Like you said, you come across like a very cheerful, happy person to me.

**Alex Page**

It's really interesting that because like I said earlier, when you're having an attack, you feel like it's physically recognisable, and that people should be turning around and being like, oh, what's wrong with you? But I also feel like that the lurking sense of dread, all of that is kind of visible in a way. And I'm often I feel out of step with how other people describe me. And even now I've got, like a constant running thread through my vein of do I sound like, like what are people listening to this going to think that I'm an idiot, or I'm belittling other things, or you know that I sound really what's the word privileged? Is that the word that you know that other things I said, well, why am I sitting here complaining about this? And you know, that even now is going through my mind. But at the same time, I guess I can kind of project what you've just described as well, because it's, yeah, it's quite, it's quite below the surface. I think. I think that's probably a difference with how different people suffer from these things. But I would say that to people, just because it's not visible, doesn't mean it isn't there. So if someone says to you, they've got anxiety and you think no you don't have anxiety, you're the happiest person in the world. They probably do. And I mean, you've read a lot about actors quite often, and comedians struggled with depression. Quite often, and there's a there's a whole studies on, why are people who struggled with things like this more likely to be funny? Is it sort of like by observation to the world that they can make and stuff like that? I don't know. I don't have the answer to that. But my point is that, you know, comedians as a whole profession, you think, oh, they're funny. And a lot of comedians struggle with really low feelings of self-esteem. And it's always just under the surface, but it's not necessarily something you can see. So, yeah, that would be a bit of advice to people who don't suffer from that. Like if someone says that they do. Really, really take them of their word. Don't make them prove it. And don't think No, no, you don't, you're fine, you're happy. And you can be happy and anxious at the same time. Very much so.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

It’s been so exciting for me, I've never spoken about anxiety to anyone. I've never known it the way you've taught me. I think you've been really articulate actually. I think it's been great the way you've shared more than you've said the word moaned. I think you shared and I think that's, I think that's powerful.

**Alex Page**

Thank you. I hope I hope that someone can listen and, you know, feel like it's okay to be anxious. I think that's the main objective.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

So yeah, thanks.

**Alex Page**

No problem, absolute pleasure.

**Mitesh Vagadia**

If you have been affected by any of the topics raised in this episode, please do visit the UCL Student Support and Wellbeing website, where you'll find a number of helpful resources. In Episode Two, I'll be talking to UCL alumni Lincoln Lee and Kisum Chan, founders of the amazing social enterprise Rice Inc. Trust me folks you do not want to miss this one.

***Transcript by otter.ai***

***Edited by Emma Hughes***