

Daniel: Hello, I'm Daniel Zomparelli and I am afraid of everything. And I want to know what scares you. So I've invited people to tell me what they're afraid of. Then I'll talk with experts to dig a little deeper and get tips on how to deal. This is, I Am Afraid That.

Daniel: Movie theaters stress me out. There is something about the enclosed space that makes me feel trapped. Limited exits strategies become my main focus when I'm in them. I think about earthquakes, shootings, anything. Everyone looks suspicious to me. I remember watching the new Beauty And The Beast with my husband, and an older man came in by himself with a backpack. And I thought, there's no way this man is coming to see this Disney film. He's a gunman. Then his husband rolled in, and I looked around to see only other gay couples, which mostly made me question what we were all doing watching this movie.

Daniel: Our next guest is also afraid of going to the movie theaters, but it's not for the reason you'd expect. We chat with the star of Netflix's Special, Ryan O'Connell about his anxiety around theaters, and then speak with our resident expert Stacey Slate to figure out what's behind this fear.

Daniel: Please welcome Ryan O'Connell, an author and performer, and now an Emmy nominee for his series Special on Netflix. Thanks for joining I Am Afraid That.

Ryan: thank you. I'm afraid of getting an Emmy, is that weird?

Daniel: Are you actually?

Ryan: No, I'm kidding.

Daniel: Oh, I was like-

Ryan: Can you imagine?

Daniel: No. That's-

Ryan: I'm here to talk to you about my fear of awards. No.

Daniel: No. I feel like I have such a deep fear of success. That I can see somebody being afraid of awards or things along the lines of success.

Ryan: Success to me doesn't mind fuck me that much because I feel there's still so much more to do. So, I feel like people's perception of success is so bizarre. And I think like "it may seem like I've achieved success this year," but like "trust me hunny she's still living in an apartment with no AC."

Daniel: Oh no.

Ryan: Yeah,

Daniel: That's the other fear.

Ryan: So it's like, it's [inaudible 00:02:35]. Do you know what I mean? It's like [inaudible 00:02:34]. I feel like once I can afford a house and start feeling alienated from my friends and family, then they'll should be successful. But until then I'm just very solid with them. Here I am.

Daniel: On that note, what is your fear?

Ryan: My fear is going to the movie.

Daniel: I'm just assuming specifically the movie theater.

Ryan: Yeah, the movie theater. I just don't fuck with... I mean I went to [Pise 00:03:03] this week, which was huge for me. And then last summer during a murderous heatwave, I went once a day, three days in a row, which was huge for me. But I used to love going to the movie theaters growing up. It was my... When I lived in New York, I went three times a week because it was the only place that reminded me of California. Because movie theaters are the same everywhere.

Daniel: Yeah.

Ryan: So I loved it and I took a lot of solace in it. And then something just shifted when I was 27 and then I just became afraid of it. It was really strange.

Daniel: Did you notice any inciting moment?

Ryan: Yeah.

Daniel: Okay.

Ryan: So when I was 26 I was leaving New York to move to Los Angeles, which no one's ever done in the history of life. So just bear with me here.

Daniel: Congrats on being in the first line.

Ryan: First reasoning made. And I have really debilitating anxiety attack. My first one. And it was a really bad, and I've had two anxiety attacks my entire life. Attack actually doesn't feel accurate. Episodes is more accurate because I have an anxiety attack and then it throws me off kilter so much that I live in a permanent state of anxiety for months afterwards. That is so severe and so psychotic. So that's sort of what happened. And so all of a sudden, the movie theater, which was a place where I felt the most safe in New York and all that stuff became a scary no go. And I just like stopped going all together. Which is really sucks cause I love movies and I feel embarrassed. I feel embarrassed talking about it because I'm one big, "let's go see this movie." And I'm like, "No, it looks terrible." And they're like, "it's been nominated for like five Oscar's." I'm like, "it looks like garbage."

Ryan: I feel trapped. First of all, I always need to have an aisle seat matter what. I will always be on aisle seat. Then if I need to leave, I can leave immediately. But there's something about... I don't know, if I feel restricted, I feel in the darkness of the room, weirdly, I don't fear getting shot in theater, which I think is probably everyone's fear. In this fucking garbage dumpster of a world we live in. It just feels extremely terrifying to be watching something. Oh, also the content of the movie that I watch. So I used to be a horror movie queen, a honey. I took multiple horrifying classes and I remember I went opening night by myself to House The Devil, which is such a good movie. But all of a sudden life became a horror movie. So I couldn't watch horror movies anymore.

Ryan: Anything that was beyond Nancy Meyer's Marshmallow Cloud Escapism I couldn't handle, I don't watch scary movies to this day. I just cannot do it. And even like dramas that are upsetting, I don't watch, there's a lot I don't watch anymore. It sucks. It's not shocking, scary movies make you feel scared or anything. People like to feel scared for whatever reason. And I used to love feeling scared. I remember watching I Spit On Your Grave casually at school for my night class. And watching that movie, which is brutal and terrifying and then be like, "anyways It's a thing to do after class" being like "I need to go to Murray's bagels." Nothing stuck to me. That's the crazy thing about being young. The elasticity. Nothing leaves a mark until it does. Do you know what I mean?

Daniel: Even if the movie is in your home? You-

Ryan: I worry about... So, the thing about these anxiety episodes, the two that I've had. It's like am almost more severe than the first lasted three months and I think I'm worried about watching something unsettling that could trigger another attack.

Daniel: Right. You [inaudible 00:07:00].

Ryan: Yeah. So I really don't want to do that. So I really curate my existence in a way. Where I'm only watching comedies or that's it. It sucks because I truly loved films so much and I loved every kind of movie and the darker the better. I didn't care. And now I truly, clearly cannot watch anything. People that saw A Mother. I was like, "good luck with your project." [Suspiria 00:07:23] "good luck with your projects." I haven't seen any of those movies and I would never see those movies, but I would go, if I was 22 I would've been there opening day by myself with only get popcorn and been like, "yo!" You know what I mean?

Ryan: I don't know what happened. It was like is it's compounded with my fear of going to the movies for sure. But then it's also, the content that I'm seeing. I can't do anything that's slightly unsettling.

Daniel: No. That sucks very hard.

Ryan: Yeah.

Daniel: Was the anxiety attack... As you called it, were you at the theater when that happened? Or at just-

Ryan: No. I wasn't. Seriously, it was so strange. I was writing. I was at a cafe writing for my job and then all of a sudden I felt like the [inaudible 00:08:07]. But I also was on Roxie. So I was on Roxie, but that was normal. I was on Roxie all the time.

Daniel: Okay.

Ryan: And then I thought I was overdosing. Because I was feeling really panicky. And then I called my friend, my friend was like, "well you're on a downer so you're not overdosing." If anything you would go to sleep. You know what I mean?

Daniel: Okay.

Ryan: This doesn't quite work. And I was like, "what's going on?" So then the second time I had an anxiety attack. I was going to bed and then all of a sudden it was like the walls were closing. And again, I don't know, it's really weird. Like they kind of come out of nowhere, which is why I think I live in fear of them coming again. And I think that the second time it came it was sort of, "Oh, this is part of my life now. This is part of like my mental health journey. I'll have these anxiety episodes." And then what's weird is that they just go away. They lift, it's almost like getting a flu and then the flu lifts and then you're better. And then you don't remember ever being sick.

Daniel: It's a weird fog.

Ryan: Yeah.

Daniel: And then it's gone and you're looking back and you're like "Did I not-

Ryan: "How do I do that?"

Daniel: "did I not leave my bed for a week?"

Ryan: Well I had to go... The second one came at a really inconvenient time cause I was working on Will And Grace. And I had to go to work every single day. Imagine that. Going to work God. But I was getting no sleep. I never slept and I never ate. And I basically had to go to a job where I was required to be funny all day long. And then I had to go pitch jokes on tape nights. Well Don't Stop Believing by Johnny with blasting and it just was absolute hell. I felt like I was disassociating the entire job. I was just like, "I'm not even here. I really don't understand what's going on."

Ryan: So that was really hard because I had to just beyond. But I was truly feeling like I was dying inside every second of every day. And then what cured it... Which is really bizarre, is that I got sick with a cold and I had to go take to the bed and I had to be in bed for three days to get better or something. It was like a flu and then staying still and being forced to slow down cured me. I'm not kidding. Because what happens is, the anxiety check happens and it's so scary that it puts me on a hamster wheel. Where I'm just constantly checking in and my anxiety. I'm like, "How am I feeling? I feeling weird? And that constantly checking in, creates more anxiety and it's just a vicious cycle. And then

by getting sick I couldn't focus on my anxiety cause I was just sick. All my defenses were down.

Daniel: Alright.

Ryan: So it kind of just forced me to clear my head and get better. It's really weird.

Daniel: I mean and makes sense to like if you're overworked.

Ryan: Yeah,

Daniel: And not able to process anything.

Ryan: Yeah. I just think I get really panicky, and my brain goes 44,000 miles per hour and I am not able to stop and I can't get off the ride.

Ryan: Also another weird thing happens in theater, which is really weird. I have never even talked about this, because I don't even know how to articulate it. So I was hit by a car when I was 20 years old and I lost one nerve function in my left hand and I should have ended up with permanent nerve pain. But I didn't. Thank God. But occasionally I'll get little... How do I describe it? neuron misfires. It feels like little tingles, you know what I mean? It feels like "tingling" all over my hand. And for some reason, I never really get them unless I'm watching a movie in the movie theater. It's really weird. I can't be. I never talked about it because it's so weird and I'm like, "Is there something about being in a theater that triggers my hand to freak out? What does that even mean?" But then it's like I'm being psycho. Like maybe it's just like coincidence. I don't really know. But I don't really experiencing it outside of the movie theater. So I know for sure that if I go to a movie, there will also be a big chance of my hand just getting like very Ting ley and kind of my neurons misfiring or something. And it will be kind of painful and awkward and then it will go away. So that's another layer of fun to this whole fear.

Daniel: I mean, theaters are so overwhelming sensory wise. It kind of makes sense. Right?

Ryan: Yeah.

Daniel: You're there. The music is so loud, the sound is so loud.

Ryan: Yeah.

Daniel: That's usually what makes me really get into an anxious mode is that it feels overwhelming how loud it is.

Ryan: Yeah. And I never used to drink before movies, but then when my anxiety stuff started happening, I would have to get one or two cocktails at Stellabarra. Stellabarra, a place where I've truly just been so drunk for no reason. But yeah, so I just started to have to kind of like numb out a little bit before the movie, which also felt weird. And now I go sober. I stopped doing that because it was just, I didn't like it. Because then you're drunk

and then you'd get weirdly hung over during the movie and then you're like "Okay, that was stupid it made no sense." But yeah, I don't know what... It's really embarrassing because I genuinely loved going to the movies. It's so weird how something that used to be the safest space imaginable for me. Living in New York became something to completely and absolutely avoid living in Los Angeles.

Ryan: There's nothing worse than being stuck in the middle of the road. That's a nightmare. Especially when you're disabled like me. And getting out of the row is like you just stomping on everyone's feet and making a scene. That was my worst nightmare growing up. If I was late to class. I just wouldn't go, because they didn't want to have to move through the crowd.

Daniel: Right. I mean obviously that doesn't help that movie theaters or not at that accessible.

Ryan: Yeah, they're not. And I think partially, I sit on the aisle because I want to be able to leave, but also because I don't want to have to step over people's feet to get to the middle.

Daniel: Yeah,

Ryan: Yeah, for sure. That definitely plays a part. There's so many layers. But for example, I didn't see *MidSommar*. What are the... How do you say *Midsommar*?

Daniel: I don't know. *Mid Summer*?

Ryan: *Mid Summer*. Well, Okay, just summer. So where's the O-M-A-R?

Daniel: I don't know how to pronounce. I pronounce everything incorrectly, so.

Ryan: I love that, safe space. Okay, so safe Spa-ce. So I'm spake. So basically I never saw *Midsommar* and I don't see anything. Everyone talking about, they're like "My God this movie." And am literally over here under the covers teeth chattering.

Ryan: I didn't realize how fearless I was in my twenties and I didn't understand that last city of youth. I just thought this is how I will be forever. I took it for granted. I didn't know that there would be another version of me around the bend. You know what I mean?

Daniel: Especially like a more scared version. You always think that you're going to get more tough,

Ryan: But in a weird way I am though, because that's the mind fuck. It's like "I'm here to tell you that I'm scared to go to a movie." But it's also like "I filmed a TV show where I get fucked in the ass by a sex worker and that didn't scare me." Like "what the fuck?" I just think it's really interesting, what we choose to be afraid of and what actually doesn't give us any fear whatsoever. Because I guarantee you a lot of that stuff I did in may show people would be like, "there's no fucking way I could ever do that. That would be so scary." And to me it was no big deal whatsoever.

Ryan: In a weird way. I think my brain's consciously choosing to become afraid of something as silly as going to the movie theaters. I think it allows me to do all the other stuff that is truly scary in a weird way. And it's like it just curls like in Arc Light cinema and it's like "I'll be here waiting for you" and I'm like, "Great, I'll be over here getting fucked in the ass on TV, bye." You know what I mean?

Daniel: Yeah.

Ryan: I don't care. I mean they do care but it's like I feel grateful that my anxiety lives there rather than in other places that would truly impact my life and a sad negative way.

Daniel: Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Ryan: Yeah, thank you for having me. I was a nervous about doing the show. I was like... Because again, it's like one of those things where I'm talking about my anxiety. It's like, Bloody Mary. Like, "summon it again."

Daniel: That's actually a consistent thing is that a few people have said that talking about their fear. They're afraid of putting it out.

Ryan: Yeah.

Daniel: And tell the world that it'll all come true.

Ryan: It'll all come to get you or something like that. It's so weird. Like a boogeyman or something.

Daniel: Yeah.

Ryan: Yeah. But it's stupid and they can know that's not true intellectually. All right. Thank you so much.

Daniel: Thank you.

Ryan: Smooch.

Daniel: That was Ryan O'Connell and his fear of going to the movies. Before we check in with our resident expert Stacey slate, let's listen to one of the voicemails you left on our fear line.

Caller: Hi, my name is Holly on 22 and for as long as I can remember, I have been afraid of ketchup, which is so bizarre and people think I'm insane when I say it. But if it were to get close enough to touch me, my heart starts racing. I panic. It's more than discussed. I'm truly am afraid of it, which is insane. And my friends used to make fun of me and actually on my prom night, my friend was waving a bold ketchup in front of me and like "Aha you look ketchup low" and she fills the entire thing down my dress. I had a full panic attack. I had to go home and shower for the next three hours. It was horrendous. I

cannot explain it. I don't know where it came from. Has nothing to do with the appearance of flood or anything like that. To really just touch up the smell, the sight. I do not touch it and it's extremely somatic. So thanks.

Daniel: We're joined by Stacey slate, our resonate expert and mental health counselor. Thank you for joining us.

Stacey: Thank you for having me.

Daniel: So we had Ryan O'Connell in and he talked about his fear of movie theaters and it seemed to be more of almost a trigger for his anxiety.

Stacey: Okay.

Daniel: And I am deeply familiar with anxiety, but somebody who's not familiar, what would be the symptoms of an anxiety attack?

Stacey: So the anxiety attack let's say is not actually something diagnosable but a panic attack is. So, they are abrupt and they tend to be either triggered as you mentioned by something that is fearful, something that is distressing that is oftentimes have to about as kind of coming out of nowhere or out of the blue. And these symptoms reach a peak within a few minutes. So, some of the symptoms that you might see if it were a panic attack would be somatic. So a lot of physical symptom. Sometimes you might notice your heart is racing or you feel nauseous or you're dizzy or you might be sweating or trembling or feel like you might be choking or out of breath. Sometimes you can even experience numbness or tingling in your body. There are other symptoms that move away from the physical and maybe we could say there's sometimes more psychological. So you might have the experience that you are kind of detached from reality or sometimes even detached from yourself. And a lot of people report feeling like they're dying or they're completely losing control or going crazy. So there's combinations of symptoms that can sometimes make up a panic attack.

Daniel: Okay. And you were talking about how they'll appear kind of out of nowhere. Is this you... You said that was common. Is that true or is there like something that it stems from?

Stacey: In my experience, I think it is common for them to feel as if they appear out of nowhere. And so the work that that we might do is to try to uncover meaning. And we could do that through a psychodynamic approach where we're trying to understand panic as let's say maybe even defending from something that may be more unacceptable or frightening Denise.

Stacey: Or we could also try to understand it from a cognitive behavioral standpoint. So really looking at the connection between thoughts and symptoms and behaviors and working to kind of understand those triggers and then work to replace them with other beliefs, other behaviors so that you're actually practicing responding to your circumstances or experience in a different way.

Daniel: And in Ryan's case, he attached movie theaters, it became a trigger. Is that common?

Stacey: Yeah, if the attacks are occurring because of a specific place or thing, we may think about them more as developing around the specific phobia. And that can be based on objects, it can be based on situations that tend to provoke immediate fear or anxiety. Typically, if it is something that attaches to a specific thing or place, the fear may be out of proportion to what, what danger is actually pose there. But, it's still relevant because it does cause distress and it's sort of queued on by something very specific. And I think a lot of panic is tied to an association or it's a specific phobia. You can even try it to gradually expose yourself to the situations that pose the most threats. And we do that in a graduated way. So we start with the least anxiety provoking sensations, and almost try to induce those but induce those within a safe environment. So you could... somebody got really busy as one of their symptoms, you could try spinning yourself in circles to elicit that experience while also replacing thoughts like "I'm going to die or something terrible is happening here." With "it's the fuzziness and I can handle this." So, we work up to facing more and more anxiety provoking situation. And then starting to reduce the fearful experience, the fearful thoughts, the reaction that may prevent us from really being able to feel more in control.

Daniel: I know personally that all that works. I had my first panic attack, I think... I'm trying to remember what age I was, but It felt out of the blue and I did feel like I was going to die.

Stacey: Yeah.

Daniel: So I took myself to the emergency room and then the lady looked at me and she's like, "your breathing is fine and you seem fine." She's like, "do you have a history of panic attacks and your family?" And I was like, "yes I do. I'll go sit down now."

Stacey: Yeah. And sometimes really just understanding what is going on is absolutely a form of power.

Daniel: Yeah. I feel like afterwards dealing with it and knowing about it. I still get panic attacks often enough, but now I'm always just like, "excuse me, I'm having a panic attack." And I go and do breathing exercises until the heart palpitations go away.

Stacey: Yeah.

Daniel: And it works.

Stacey: Yeah.

Daniel: I mean it scares whoever I'm with, but.

Stacey: Yeah, It's difficult to experience that distress I imagine, but to be able to soothe yourself and control it in some way from an internal place of security is a major step towards being able to handle it if or when it does happen.

Daniel: Thank you so much again for joining us on season two.

Stacey: You are welcome. Thank you for having me.

Daniel: I'm Afraid That is produced by me, Daniel Zomparelli, Gabe Liedman and Little Everywhere. If you have a fear you'd like to hear on the show, please share with us that iamafraidthat.com. Where you can get more info on the guests and experts. That's iamafraidthat.com. If you enjoyed the podcast, please subscribe, review and share. It helps other people find this show, and thank you for listening.