



Dr. David Hanscom

The Effects of Aging and Anxiety on Pain

An interview with Donald Cohen
on Back in Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom

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- Tom Masters: Hello everybody, and welcome to another episode of **Back in Control Radio** with Dr. David Hanscom. David has invited psychologist Donald Cohen to visit the show. David?
- David Hanscom: Well, Donald, thank you for taking the time to be on the show. I know you've had a long day. Donald is a good friend of mine. He's a clinical psychologist in Manhattan, right? Did I get that right?
- Donald Cohen: No, actually in Connecticut.
- David Hanscom: Oh, Connecticut. Okay, close. I got New England right. But anyway, now Donald's-
- Donald Cohen: Every now and then I'm in New York.
- David Hanscom: Donald's a good friend of mine. He's been in private practice for many years. He and I have spent many hours talking about chronic pain and anxiety. I just want to get his perspective on a couple things. He does a lot of family work, anxiety, depression. Donald, could you introduce yourself a little bit as far as your background and specialty and your experience and interests, et cetera?
- Donald Cohen: I've been working as a family therapist for 41 years. I've been private practice 41 years and doing group and family therapy, individual couples, dealing with all types of issues, midlife, anxiety, depression, things like that, identity crisis. And teaching, writing books.
- David Hanscom: How many books have you written, by the way?
- Donald Cohen: I'm on my eighth book. It will be coming out in May 2020.
- David Hanscom: Wow. What's the most recent book?
- Donald Cohen: The most recent book was a poetry book that just came out called **Writings from the Ferris Wheel**.
- David Hanscom: Okay. Are you doing a book on a father son relationship?
- Donald Cohen: Yes, that's coming out right before Father's Day 2020 in May. A book I wrote originally with my father in 1996 was called, **My Father, My Son**. This is the new and updated version of it, which will be called **The Inside Ride, A Journey to Manhood**.
- David Hanscom: Great. Well, I'm excited to have Donald on this show. Donald and I are good friends and we'll try and keep this fairly professional here even though in real life we give each other a pretty hard time. But here's the perspective I'm really looking for. I found out in spine surgery you actually learn a few things over 30 some years. What I'm curious about from our chronic pain work is that anxiety is

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a big deal. You've had lots of things that haven't worked and lots of things that have worked. I'm curious about your approach to anxiety, but I also want to talk about anxiety in regards to aging. From my perspective as an orthopedic surgeon, it appears that as people get older, the anxiety tends to get a little bit worse or sometimes a lot worse and some people seem to avoid it. Now I'm curious about your thoughts on anxiety in general, but also anxiety in relationship to aging.

Donald Cohen: Yeah, it's an interesting question to ask me because I've had back problems lately and been very, very tired. I notice it on a day like today, a stressful day because of trying to just get everything in and not having the same endurance that I used to have. Last night I got 11 hours of sleep which really is nice because it *also* speaks to how tired I am.

David Hanscom: Wow.

Donald Cohen: I think that when I'm not dealing with *issues of mortality*, I'm dealing with *issues of change* around me. Sometimes I feel like Rip Van Winkle who awakened after 20 years of sleep and I'm looking around me and everything seems so different. That's probably disrupted my sleep lately. But last night, for some reason, I pushed myself to a point that I was *so* tired. I've noticed today that actually I'm clear in my mind, more positive, and my back is not bothering me as much.

David Hanscom: Oh, interesting.

Donald Cohen: I'm using that piece of self-disclosure as a reference point to your question for your show. I find it very interesting.

David Hanscom: There's an interesting study out of Israel—very well done study on almost 1200 patients over four years. What they found out is that ***lack of sleep actually caused back pain. It actually induced back pain.***

Donald Cohen: Interesting.

David Hanscom: They did not find the reverse causation. In other words, we know people in chronic pain don't sleep as well because of the pain. But in this study, they didn't find that. They found out that lack of sleep was actually the driving force behind the back pain.

Donald Cohen: If you take today's experience that I'm sharing with you, we'll have to see. I'm playing tennis tonight actually after this interview. That was part of my stress of getting everything in today. I'm going to try it out. There's no doubt that when I sleep, there been some moments where the pain has kept me up. But it really is a dramatic difference in the way I feel today after getting a good night's sleep, both mentally and physically.

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David Hanscom: Many years ago, the way the whole Direct your Own Care (DOC) project started was from my decision to start addressing people's sleep. I was inspired by a book by William Dement who started the sleep lab in the 1960s. Dement's point, around which he developed the idea of the sleep lab, was that only 5% of physicians actually addressed sleep as part of the treatment plan.

So I said, "Well, I can do this." So I started getting people to sleep, and I was surprised at the number of people who would get better. Assessing sleep is still number one in the entire process. Let me ask you a question. In my experience watching other people and colleagues, anxiety tends to get worse as you get older. Is that a fair observation, or am I just wrong or that one?

Donald Cohen: I find myself more overwhelmed by unexpected interruption in the mechanics of everyday life—like the kind of thing I had to handle today that stressed me out involving my car.

That's why the name of my book, the new book, is called the **Inside Ride** because we're all on an *inside ride*. In the second half of life, we tend to want to focus, at least someone like me, on my inner life and from within. When the mechanics of life get in my way at this stage of life, I feel like I'm being robbed of that experience, and that makes me anxious.

David Hanscom: Right.

Donald Cohen: That's an interesting thing because I didn't expect that. I find myself more anxious about needing more time to reflect and not deal with the everyday annoyances of car leases and flat tires.

David Hanscom: Some of my thinking about why anxiety might get worse as we age relates to cognitive function decreasing a bit as we get older. Not as much as we might think.

Donald Cohen: Yeah, there are more issues with processing. You don't process things quite the same way is what you're saying--right?

David Hanscom: Right. Things we know are anxiety-producing as we age include understanding now that at age 45, the quality of sleep takes a dramatic decline in most of us. So when we're not sleeping as well, of course anxiety is an issue.

Let's say I came into your office. I'm 67 years old and I've not been sleeping well. My anxiety is about an eight on a scale of 10. I have some life stresses in the family, not horrible but just something I don't see an end point to yet. What is your general approach to helping me cope with anxiety? I guess what I'm asking is your opinion on what the most helpful general approach to treating anxiety is versus approaches that aren't very helpful?

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- Donald Cohen: Well, now you know that certainly *the sleep factor* is a big deal. On the news the other night there was a story covering corporations in the city where people are actually encouraged to take naps during the day. They have like these nap machines where you can put this thing over you. Have you heard about that?
- David Hanscom: I have not.
- Donald Cohen: Yeah. They're like 20 minute naps. They're almost required now in workplaces. I think meditation is good. I think certainly time to reflect; just taking time in your day to do something that you feel relaxes you, whether it's reading a book, taking a walk. I'm also big on creativity. Creativity is a broad thing, but finding time to express your creativity, exercise, relaxation, meditation. Perhaps a nap and really finding a place and somebody to talk to about what you're really experiencing inside yourself, I think is important. I think *dream life* and being in touch with your *dream life* is also important.
- David Hanscom: Okay. So in general, somebody comes in with anxiety, you obviously get to know them as a person, their family life, etc. So obviously you're not taking a one approach fits all type attitude. So I agree. Sleep, exercise, creativity, all those things are. Do you prescribe those? Like you said, go meet with your friends or actually take an art class. I mean, do you actually prescribe those as treatments or just sort of help people figure this out themselves.
- Donald Cohen: No. I'm very active and verbal in my therapy. I want to just include what you said, making sure to include exercise is very, very important. No, I actually make those recommendations to people when I see them. I'm proactive.
- David Hanscom: What about as far as talk therapy? I mean obviously you do talk therapy. Do you tend to focus on the response or anxiety, anger issues, family issues or does it just depend?
- Donald Cohen: It depends. Look, not everybody has access to their dream life, but everybody has a whole other life in their inner world. So I always look for what's going on unconsciously with somebody, but I also encourage people to express their feelings, stay in the moment with me. I think the more you get out of what's inside of you, whether it's a dream, whether it's a feeling, even anger issues—it's just a place to vent and express. I just encourage people so much to ***not internalize their feelings.***
- David Hanscom: I'm going to ask you a funny question here. What are some of the blocks to people actually solving their anxiety? I'm assuming a high percentage of patients you work with have less anxiety after you work with them. Right?
- Donald Cohen: Right, right—hopefully.
- David Hanscom: Is it like over three months, six months, a year? I mean, how long does it sort of take to actually decrease anxiety?

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- Donald Cohen: Well, that's a very tough question because I don't think you can give a specific answer to that, but I'm a big believer that you need ... First of all, if you come for therapy, you have to establish a trust with the person you're working with, so even that takes time to build. I think at least six months to a year as a way of building a rapport or relationship and a rhythm, but it can be less. Again, it's very individual.
- David Hanscom: The prognosis for successful treatment of anxiety disorders is challenging.
- Donald Cohen: Yeah, definitely challenging. But frankly, I don't focus on that because to me that's going to take me to a negative place. I tend to think more optimistically and positive. In terms of statistics and stuff, I don't like to get bogged down in that because to me when I'm in this room, I'm only feeling hopeful and in a positive frame of mind and not thinking about results from the past.
- David Hanscom: I think that's a great answer because I mean clearly if you're excited about what's going on, it just helps the whole energy of the relationship for sure. There's also a process called mirror neurons where the somebody laughs, somebody else laughs, but it's not psychological as much as you're actually stimulating the laughing center of the other person's brain.
- Donald Cohen: Yeah. That's a great-
- David Hanscom: If you have a great attitude, it's just contagious.
- Donald Cohen: You know, David, that's a great point. You and I have talked about that. As a matter of fact, I've even laughed a couple of times because I was feeling so overwhelmed before we went on the air just trying to stuff some food down me and I actually, because of my own ADD, I think I dialed the wrong ID code three different times, I was feeling a lot of anxiety. So I think that humor is very important. We've talked about that.
- I'm glad you brought the issue of humor up because in my office, even the way I've designed my office, and I think eventually you and your lovely wife are going to be coming here to visit. My office is a kaleidoscope of memories and objects. When you come here, there isn't a place in this room that doesn't represent some aspect of life. There's a lot of humor in the room. I use a lot of humor in my therapy by just being who I am. As a matter of fact, I was telling a patient today, I notice that your girlfriend finds me very funny and one my best audiences. He starts giggling in the waiting room. He says, "Yeah, for some reason she doesn't laugh with anybody like she laughs with you."
- David Hanscom: That's funny.
- Donald Cohen: I felt really good about that. Yeah, I think humor, having fun and also being loose and getting out of the box and doing things that you wouldn't typically do, by the way, is a good way to reduce your anxiety. That's simply what I do. But I

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think the humor piece is very important. The other thing that I forgot to bring up, by the way, particularly when you get to be where I am in my life is one of the things that creates anxiety as you get older is your issues around mortality. That's again where you need humor. Because if I don't have humor, every day a friend of mine is getting Parkinson's disease or having cancer or dying and there are so many things that remind us that we're not where we used to be. I actually would rather hang out with somebody who's funny than somebody that's just intellectually stimulating. If I get both, I'm really happy.

David Hanscom: Does that mean we can't be friends anymore? I mean, my wife tells me I have no sense of humor.

Donald Cohen: But we laugh about that together.

David Hanscom: Right.

Donald Cohen: What's great about that is we laugh about that together and somehow when you're with us, you actually laugh, David.

David Hanscom: I do laugh.

Donald Cohen: You're a little lighter, and I enjoy that about you, but what's nice is I love that we can be deep. But because your wife and I get along really well and she's very funny and I'm very funny and my wife is very funny, you become funny. You're even funny when we talk about you not being funny,

David Hanscom: Right. Is that the mirror neurons thing happening?

Donald Cohen: I don't know, but I call it the highest laugh is that ... Here's what's happening right now between you and I. Some great philosopher, I don't know if it was Schopenhauer or somebody says, "The highest laugh is the laugh that can laugh at itself."

David Hanscom: Right. Yeah.

Donald Cohen: So I like that about you.

David Hanscom: Well, I think that one thing we should talk about is that we had sort of a remarkable experience that Donald is a childhood friend of the person who introduced my wife and I. Her name is Patrice. Donald and Patrice, what grade did you guys meet in? How old were you?

Donald Cohen: Oh my God. I think she and I go back to like first or second grade. She was my cheerleader on the basketball court. She would make me tuna fish sandwiches before basketball practice.

David Hanscom: Really? I didn't know that.

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- Donald Cohen: Yeah. We laughed a lot together by the way, and we still do.
- David Hanscom: Patrice's daughter, Megan got married into Tulum, Mexico a few months ago. We knew Donald and Dee a little bit, but we spent five days together at this hotel on the beach and going back to high school or college. My wife went down there with pretty severe knee pain, which she'd been having off and on for about four months and honestly it wasn't even the drinking, we weren't even drinking that much, but we just started to laugh and I'm not sure why. Babs's knee pain just flat out disappeared.
- Donald Cohen: Interesting.
- David Hanscom: It's still gone. She has no knee pain. See, one of the things we can ... I don't want to get too much on this, everybody knows my lines a little bit, that the essence of healing chronic pain is feeling safe. Because when you feel safe, your body chemistry goes from stress hormones to play hormones like oxytocin, dopamine and serotonin. What it does, it changes neuro conduction. It actually changes ... When you're full of stress hormones, it doubles your neuro conduction. Your body is supposed to feel the pain more when you're under threat. You become hyper sensitized.
- When you relax and laugh (you've heard laughter's the best medicine) because it changes the body's chemistry so the nerve conduction gets cut in half or more, and the pain will go away. That's why we have hundreds of patients going to being pain free. My website is forgiveness versus play. The play is a big deal because, again, it's not an obsessive play to distract yourself. It's truly relaxing. I would say that ... Because we had a pretty good time in Tulum, didn't we?
- Donald Cohen: Well, I thought it was one of the best times we've ever had together actually. Actually the highlight was having connection. It's connection, and laughter brings connection. But even when you're not laughing and you feel people are getting your humor or things you're saying all contributes to a lighter and more relaxed attitude. We had an amazing experience with each other, the four of us and the rest of the people around us. I think we actually made people happy. People started coming to our hotel because it became the student union. It was the place to be.
- David Hanscom: It's true.
- Donald Cohen: Because we were fun, David. You were fun too. David, you were fun too.
- David Hanscom: Right. I'll take it.
- Donald Cohen: Actually you were fun, David.
- David Hanscom: At least for 10 minutes of my life I was funny. So no, it was good. We also had a little ... What was the language we spoke?

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Donald Cohen: Well Patty, because Patrice, I forget, we don't call her Patty, we call her Patrice now. She was Patty to me. Growing up, this as part of what we're talking about and we all had our own private language. Then we made up a language. What was it? A language from Mexico. What did we call that language that we came up with for the wedding? We came up with these fun words. We don't have to get into words, but it's fun to make up things. Again, being creative, being loose. Right. I had a language with Patrice growing up, but then Babs, your wife and all of us created a new language and actually we recited it and performed it at the wedding.

David Hanscom: Yep.

Donald Cohen: It was fun.

David Hanscom: We had a good time. There's actually a very, very famous book. It's called The Anatomy of an Illness by Cousins. He actually talked about laughter curing of a disease called ankylosing spondylitis. There's actually a paper out of Sweden about six months ago showing a very strong link between chronic stress and autoimmune disorders and people forget. "Well, okay, wait. What is an autoimmune disorder?" Your body's immune system literally attacks itself. With my wife's knee ... People forget when you're full of stress chemicals, the histamine levels are up. It changes the inflammatory response. Again, not psychological, it's neurochemical. We totally relax. I honestly haven't relaxed like that in a while. My wife keeps reminding me that I need to do that again. But that laughter truly is a healing. In fact, it's a big deal.

Donald Cohen: No doubt about it. You know what's nice about your wife, one of the things I like about your wife, when you're with somebody who is willing to get out of the box and stretch and be silly, and I mean silly. There's no reason why people when they get older can't still be silly and immature and have the inner child play going. It's contagious.

David Hanscom: It is.

Donald Cohen: Then you stop thinking about who you're angry about and all the things that overwhelm you in your everyday life. That brings up the other subject of anger and forgiveness, which you started to hint at, is that anger and forgiveness ... Anger does not do good things for anybody. Certainly not your body. I'll tell you how I use forgiveness, is I try to understand the otherness of the other, which is what I mean by that is that when people are doing stuff to us, it's not necessarily personal. It's because of where they're coming from. Then when you get out of feeling like a victim, that takes away the stress and the anger and then you can laugh.

David Hanscom: Right, right.

Donald Cohen: That's got to help you physically.

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- David Hanscom: Right.
- Donald Cohen: As well as sleep. As I said, and don't forget where we started there with sleep because I'm going to test my back out on the tennis court tonight and see if that theory is correct, which I think it might be.
- David Hanscom: No, it really does make a big difference. Again, it changes the body chemistry and it changes the speed of the nerve conduction.
- Donald Cohen: David, that's why meditation is good also and relaxation exercises.
- David Hanscom: Right. Absolutely. It sounds like, if I'm hearing you correctly, that when your patients are with you, you first of all get to know them so they feel safe, and then you have real conversations about real things and people get to relax.
- Donald Cohen: Well, that certainly feels good. It feels good when you can talk about things. I feel good when somebody listens to my getting down to deep meaningful things and you don't have to explain it to them. They get it. You connect with them on a spiritual psychic level. That too is extremely to feel connected to another person because you don't have to explain yourself to them. That kind of human connection definitely reduces anxiety.
- David Hanscom: That's an interesting point because there's a huge study done by Cigna in 2018. This was 20,000 Americans. They found out that 53% of Americans feel socially isolated. Another one, Chicago showed that when you were socially isolated, you developed the exact same symptoms that you deal with physical pain. In other words emotional pain and physical pain go to the same part of the brain, give out the same physical symptoms. A big part of the process that we have seen is connecting with other friends and family, and you just do it. There are no short cuts. But reconnecting with life is a huge factor and actually calms down the nervous system in healing pain.
- Donald Cohen: Well, that's another good point you're making because I've done a lot of group therapy. What we had when we were in Tulum together, we were doing group work all the time together because we were always talking as a group and we were very communal and we were not isolated. There's no doubt that I'm big on a group experiences, communal connection. You can even make a case for it. As the sixties generation gets older, we were talking about we should all get a place together. Patrice, Kevin, me, all of us together because there's no doubt that if you're not isolated, you're more connected. That can even be whether you're in a group situation or a one on one situation.
- David Hanscom: I absolutely agree. Well, Donald, thank you very, very much for your time. We're going to talk in a little bit about the family issues around pain and your experience with that. Any final thoughts to the listeners on life in general, anxiety and aging?

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Donald Cohen: Well, the thought I'm having right now is that actually doing this with you has been fun, and it was helped by the fact that I got some sleep last night. My tennis should be outrageous tonight.

David Hanscom: Okay.

Donald Cohen: In terms of just deeper thought, talking to you, it's nice to do this together. It's something we haven't done before, which makes me think of another thing. When we do something that we've never done before that's novel and new, that becomes empowering and invigorating. I guess from this, one could say that we've never done this together before, and ironically one could make the case for the fact that that has reduce my anxiety today because it's not something I've ever done before. Being innovative, different, and creative and original stretches the soul. It doesn't shrink the soul. It stretches the soul.

David Hanscom: Absolutely. Well, thank you very, very much. This was fun.

Donald Cohen: It was fun.

Tom Masters: Donald, I want to thank you for being on the podcast and sharing your insights and experiences around aging and anxiety. To our listeners, I'd like to remind you to be back next week for another episode of Back In Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom. For more information, remember to go to the website at <https://www.backincontrol.com>.

Note: The original transcript of this episode of Back in Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom has been edited for readability.