

Grit 'n' Grace — The Podcast

Episode #191: How to Handle Anxiety and Depression with Hope

Amy:

So Tim, tell us the backstory of *Running for Judge*. Why did you write it and who did you write it for?

Tim: I wrote it principally as an encouragement. It's not principally a book designed to tell people how I became a judge or what it takes to become a judge in California or what being a judge is like, although that is a large part of the book. There is a whole lot in there that's a kind of a backstage look. Or since we don't have stages, we have courtrooms, we call it the chambers look, back where I sit at my desk with my clerks desk just a few feet away. It's kind of a look at being a judge. And then it's also a look at what happens when a judge has to deal with a mental health diagnosis, and how those two can happen. And so I meant it as an encouragement for people who carry responsibilities, but also deal with anxiety or depression. Because it's not often that you get to hear of somebody who is in that kind of position, who then also says, oh, by the way, this mental health issue came along and I had to find a way to carry out my responsibilities and get all this done. People don't hear that too much. So I want it to be an encouragement. And I also wanted it to be a resource for people who themselves may not be experiencing mental health issues, but they know people who are, family and friends and coworkers. And as I point out in the preface of the book, the numbers are high. It's one in four, who battle anxiety, depression, or both. So anybody who says, "Well, I don't know anybody who's mentally ill." They're just not aware. They know plenty of people who have anxiety or depression. They just haven't recognized it yet. And so the book is designed to maybe help people recognize that as well.

Amy: That's so true. This is a message we need so much in our culture in general, but I think especially in the church.

Cheri: Absolutely.

So in an early chapter of your book, it's titled,

– an early chapter of your book is titled "A young judge with imposter syndrome," and I found it surprising and rather comfortingly normalizing to hear that somebody with the role of superior court judge also has struggled with imposter syndrome. I mean, superior and imposter syndrome just don't seem to go together. So what has imposter syndrome felt like or sounded like or looked like for you?

Tim: I think in large part that stems from feeling like an outsider so much of my childhood. The youngest of four meant that I sometimes had privileges that my older siblings did not. I think my

bedtime was a lot later than theirs when I had been considering where we were maybe when we were going through the same age ranges, but you know, other than things like that. There's a lot of opportunity to feel left out when you're the youngest. And then – and I don't mean to complain about being the youngest, I had a great time, except as being the youngest of four. That also meant that I was sometimes called fifth by the time my dad got to my name, fifth because four kids plus we had a dog, so –

(Amy and Cheri laugh)

– it took a while sometimes. So there was that. I was not one of the popular kids in school, elementary school. High school, I finally found my my niche because I was a band geek. And that covers a lot of things. But you feel left out a lot of the time when you are not part of the in crowd, and I talk about that a bit in the book. So yeah, imposter syndrome, and then it just kept going at college. I always was wondering, “Am I really going to be able to claim that I deserve to be wherever it might be?” And the odd thing is that was despite the fact that I was actually obtaining some things that – or getting into some situations that took some doing. I was still dealing with the idea that maybe I was an imposter. I remember one college class, it was a 10 person seminar where you had to be hand-chosen by the professor and take part in this. And he took one person from one major and one from another. If you had the same major as somebody else who was better situated, you weren't going to make it, because it was this interdisciplinary thing. And yet I got into that. And then I applied to study overseas. And I got into that. And I applied to law school, and I got into that, and I applied for a judge and I got that. And despite this track record of doing all this stuff, I still was always wondering, “Really? Am I supposed to be in this position? Maybe somebody is playing a joke on me. Maybe they're gonna yank it out from under me.” So yeah, imposter syndrome.

Cheri: Hmm. Wow, that is so relatable.

Amy: So, some people are dismissive of mental illness. And what's your response to people who say, “Oh, it's all in your head.”

Tim: Oh, you mean besides smacking them around a little bit?

(Amy and Cheri laugh)

Amy: That's appropriate. Yes.

Tim: I try to, I try to refrain from the verbal smackdowns. I don't like to. It's somewhat dismissive. When they are dismissive of mental illness, it's dismissive back to just come up with something that is

flippant or derides them. So when they say things like that, they dismiss mental illness. And I put this part in the book, you know, people say mental illness, it's all in your head. And I respond with "Yes, and a heart attack is all in your chest, but go see a doctor either way." You know, there is as much evidence for the chemical imbalances that lead to mental illness issues, the chemical imbalances show up in symptoms, we call those symptoms mental illness. Well, chemical imbalances show up in your bloodstream, too, and we call that high cholesterol and it leads to a heart attack. All of these things can be addressed medically. The good thing about things like heart conditions is you can also exercise and the good things about mental health issues is you can see a therapist and you can go through the intellectual and emotional exercise you need in order to address those issues too, along with the medical care, and along with taking care of your body, just like you would with a heart condition.

Amy: That is so helpful. So along with dismissiveness, another negative reaction sometimes people have to mental illness is they feel like it's shameful or it's a sign of weakness. What would you say to someone who's struggling with mental illness whose friends and family acts like it's something shameful?

Tim: That's really hard. And I think it's the same type of thing that friends and family throw at people, whether it's mental illness, or someone has been abused, and their family is telling them that's all their fault, or other types of things that people deal with. Job loss. "Oh, how – why'd you lose your job? You must have done something wrong." You know, these things come along and family can be cruel in their lack of understanding of that and lack of support.

But what I would tell someone who's dealing with mental illness and the stigma that goes with it is, first off, just realize you are not alone. There are tons of people out there that you know who are dealing with this as well, you just may not know that they are, again, we get back to that one in four for anxiety and depression, let alone all the other mental illnesses out there. So that's part of what I would say. And that's another reason for writing the book is – and I get into that in the preface as well, is that the stigma attached to mental illness needs to go away. And so I wrote the book. And in order to say in part, look at me. I am a superior court judge. I am still in office. I'm talking about anxiety. I'm talking about depression. I'm talking about the medications I was on. I'm talking about the medical care I received from my doctor, I'm talking about relying on my wife to be strong for me. In, and – Cheri, you read the book. My wife read the book and she said, "I think you gave me too much credit." And I said, "Not even by half."

Amy: Well, it's so helpful and so needed to have voices like yours and places of influence who are saying, "Yes, this is this is my story too," so that we don't feel alone.

Cheri: Well, and one of the things that I picked up as I was reading the book, in fact, I had – you gave it to me at the last writing conference, we were out together and I didn't – when I told my family I had read half the book while you were sitting behind me, they were like, "Well, that's awkward." I'm like, "Why would that be awkward? He gave it to me and I wanted to read it. So I started reading." But anyways, one of the things I love –

Tim: The awkward part, Cheri, was that as I was sitting behind you while you were reading it, the whole time I was thinking, "Oh, please don't let her throw it down in disgust. Oh, please don't let her throw it down in disgust."

(Cheri laughs)

Amy: High pressure.

Cheri: No, I hope you saw that I wasn't paying attention to what was going on up front because I was so engrossed in the story. And I only stopped it because I had some responsibility that I had to, I had to pick up.

One of the things that became clear is that you – and you feel free to correct me if I'm not using the right terms here because I'm kind of new to some of the terminology here. I'm not new to anxiety or depression being a fact in my family's life. But I'm new to the words we use to talk about it because in my family, there are some things that ought not be spoken. And the, this falls into that category. But it seems to me that during some of this, you needed some forms of accommodation at work. And now – and I know your your wife actually kind of brought this up with you, you bring this up at the end of the book; you have an added layer and level of understanding for people who need accommodations. So, what does accommodation mean in your line of work?

Tim: Right. We are required by the canons of judicial ethics in California to accommodate people we need to. And it's not just accommodation, like you see in the Fair Employment and Housing Act or the Disability Rights Act or something like that. We need to provide a way for everyone to have a fair opportunity to be heard in court. And so it doesn't take a, some sort of disability or health issue or something like that. It's just if a person needs some accommodation, we have to give it to them. And that's one of the reasons why I think it was important that I went into judging in detail at times in the book, I talk a lot about judging, I talk a lot, a lot about what it means to be a judge and what we deal with all the time. And so now, if you talk about the anxiety and depression issues in particular, I think I'm better able to recognize when somebody in front of me is not being difficult, but they're, they're actually dealing with an anxiety episode. And so I need to, perhaps take a break from that particular hearing and give them a chance to gather themselves. I can take other types of hearings, usually, since

we've got a lot of work going on in the courtroom, and I have several that are waiting to go at the same time.

But it can also be just somebody who is, let's say, a witness is on the stand. And they are having a hard time focusing on the questions. They're always reaching for the tissue box and crying. And it's because this is a just a horrible experience for them to be there. I can take a break for that person. Now they're not experiencing a mental health problem. They're just having a hard time expressing themselves in a situation that most people would rather they never have to experience. So you take a break or you ask them if they would like some water or sometimes I will just have a word with them. And I just do it right there in open court and I'll say something along the lines of I understand that it's difficult to answer questions that are being put to you on these things, you've thought about it a lot. But it's important that you make sure you're listening carefully. Go ahead and take a moment. And we will listen carefully to your answers. And we're just going to keep going like this. And we will all get through this. And we're going to be taking a break in a little bit. And so I'll say something like that. And you know, people usually can redirect their attention to where it needs to be at that point.

Cheri: Mmm. Mmm. Wow, that's so helpful.

Tim: Another – I will tell you another one. This has to do with accommodation. I don't, I didn't mention this in the book. But early on, I've been a judge now 25 years. So this is going back probably a little more than 20 years. I had a bailiff in the early days, and he was huge. He's like six foot four and 300 pounds and, and he wasn't fat. I mean, it was just – he's a big guy. And he had a big voice, and you could hear him when he went out in the hallway to call a witness. You could hear him in the next County, just, just a big voice. So in the morning, he'd call court into session, all rise come to order, that sort of thing. And if somebody did not stand when he said "All rise," he would then take a deep breath, step over right behind them and say, "I said, all rise," and then the person would pop out of their seat.

So, one morning, he did the all rise come to order, and there was a man who did not stand and man was in a wheelchair, and could not stand and I saw that happen. And I thought, this man is in a public place a public forum. There is a formal event taking place court is being called into session. The bailiff is an officer of the court, this is in order, and he is unable to participate in a civic function. And I thought I will never put someone in that position again. So I talked to my bailiff and I said, let's try this. I said, try, remain seated and come to order and go through the rest of the opening. But don't do the all rise, and we'll see how that works. And that's how it's been for the last 20 plus years now. And I've never wanted to put someone in that situation. So that's an accommodation not in order to give that man an opportunity to be heard in court. But the opportunity to participate in a civic function.

Cheri: You know, what I love is your awareness, your your sensitivity to the fact that this was something you could make a minor change that that would be more inclusive. So continuing on the topic of accommodation, in, in my experience as a classroom teacher, the students who could most benefit from accommodations are the least likely to ask me for them. There's just such a reluctance. What advice would you have, would you give someone who's holding back from communicating their, their particular needs to their boss or a teacher or whoever it might be?

Tim: I would first tell them that there's nothing wrong with asking for accommodation. And then I would ask them, if someone else needed an accommodation and came to you, because you were the person who had the ability to provide that, would you resent the person for asking? And you know, they all say no, I would, of course not. I do what I could and they say, yeah, that's how everybody else feels. That's how they feel when you ask for accommodation, too. And I talked about that a bit in the book, how, when you're dealing with just the huge stress that comes sometimes, I mean, COVID-19 right now in this whole pandemic, I see people around me who are exhibiting stress in ways that I had never seen them exhibiting before. When stress comes along like this, it robs you of the ability to think objectively on these things when it comes to yourself. I mean, it's hard enough for us to think objectively of ourselves anyway. But, boy, when when you're under that much stress, the idea that you are going to ask for help. Your mind just doesn't go there because it can't. And I talk about that in the book a lot about how if people aren't coming to you, offering the help, it's really hard to reach out for it.

Amy: So good. And the thing, the thing that I keep hearing from you, Tim, is compassion. And just like in so many of the rest of us, our struggles often lead to more compassion for people and I love hearing that in your story, too. You said that you find hope in Matthew 11:28-30, even when you're feeling wearied with burdens that lead you to feel anxious and worried, afraid and confused? What brings you hope in that passage?

Tim: That's the one about the yoke, right? Ok. Alright. 'Cause you have your notes written down and I didn't bother. (Laughs)

Alright, so the thing about that – so Jesus says, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” And I, in part, we think of yokes now and we're thinking, “But you're putting a burden on me, it's a yoke.” But in the time that He was speaking those words, it was a matter of you align yourself with the right people, and that's what He was offering. He says, My yoke, you will align yourself with Me. And essentially, the hope that I find in that is not just it's an easy burden. It's a light burden to align yourself with Christ, but that He's not going to make anything any heavier to bear. I mean, that's one of the things when you're dealing with stress and anxiety. The hardships, you always are wondering "How heavy is this going to

get?” And Jesus says “If you turn to Me, it's not going to get any heavier. In fact, it's lighter. It's a light burden. It is a load that is easily born.” And the other thing about the yoking the oxen together in that metaphor that He used, it was understood back then that you were talking about an extremely experienced and strong ox, being the leader, and a young and weaker and inexperienced ox is put in the same yoke. And the big one did the bulk of the work, while the smaller or younger one was learning the ropes, or learning the yoke. And the – so the metaphor is a good one, that it is Jesus who carries the burden.

Cheri: Alright. Well, speaking of carrying, carrying the burden – while you were running for judge... well, actually, it was you were already a judge, and for the first time you had a contender, and so you actually had to do some campaigning. So during that time, you needed help. So how did other people help you, as you dealt with the depression and anxiety that – if I'm understanding correctly, this was the depression anxiety really became intense during this time that you were having to actively campaign to maintain your seat. So how did other people help during that time?

Tim: Right. So I'd been a judge for 13 years already. I was appointed back in 1995. This is the 2008 election year, and we have six year terms. So here I am running again and hoping that no one's going to run against me and that I will not even appear on the ballot. I just get declared the winner. And then somebody runs against me. And the anxiety came on. The stress came on, it led to anxiety, it led to depression. It led to pneumonia, which exacerbates your mental health issues, which exacerbates your physical health issues, and yeah, pretty bad. The, the way that people came alongside me, it was some who had a lot of experience in running elections, reached out to me, one person who was on my own court, some others that I knew from around town, a couple of judges from other parts of the state who had done judicial elections, one who is in pretty much exactly the same situation I was in. He had, a couple of years earlier, had somebody come out, and like I had somebody come by me, again, somebody who we would not have expected to ever be able to get an appointment through the governor's office. They just didn't have the qualifications to make it through that. So they run for judges. Same thing happened to him. And so he talked me through it. You know, that kind of coming alongside occurred.

There were people at church who were really helpful, course there was family. There was a good medical care, got a great doctor, still have him. He's good. So a lot of that. My son and my daughter, my daughter was in high school still, my son had just graduated high school in January because he started his senior year and realized he did not want to spend any more time in high school than he needed to. So he graduated in January, which meant that February, March, April, May, and the first couple of days of June before election day, I relied upon him a lot to get some things done that I normally would have been doing, and it's just things like errand running and like that, but he just took it on and took care of it for us.

Cheri: Very cool. Sounds like you had quite the team. So what was it like as a – we are obsessed with personalities on this podcast. So you in the book say that you are an INTJ, but nowadays you're testing more like an INFJ.

Tim: That election I think was the turning point.

Cheri: Oh, really?

Tim: From thinking to feeling. Yeah.

Cheri: Okay, but that's still a very private, very independent personality type. So, what was it like for you to accept all of this help?

Tim: No, that's the hard part. I mean, I don't mind if people do things for me. Go ahead. pamper me. Yeah, coffee and chocolate. Wanna invite me over for a pizza parlor, I'll probably be there. Although, make sure it's not too large a crowd of people.

(Amy and Cheri laugh)

But yeah, when you are private and solitary, you have to have pre-existing relationships. So you don't just create new connections with people when you're in a situation like that. Good friends, your family. That sort of connection is what helped me accept the help. These were already people that I was close to, and I helped them, and they helped me, and that sort of thing. But the only person through this process that I would say, came in, just for the election, was the campaign manager that I had hired. And even he was recommendation from a friend at church and was a fellow Christian.

Amy: All right, full disclosure here, Cheri and I might have talked about you a few times before we did this interview and we get a little gushy when we do because we are both huge fans of your Facebook page.

Tim: Oh, yay.

Amy: We love it because you're such an advocate for women. Thank you so much, like, it really touches me. Cheri pointed me in your direction because of that. And also, you have such a strong voice for racial justice. And I just appreciate both so much. So you have very lively discussions there, you put – you put your thoughts right out there, and yet it stays civil for the most part, at least from what I've seen. How do you do that?

Tim: Yeah, that's, that takes a lot of diligence and effort to get that done. Same thing for my blog. I can't do it quite as much on Twitter because I can't regulate comments or replies on Twitter. And all I can do if somebody starts going too far off base there is to reach out to them and ask them not to, and if they absolutely refuse and get huffy about it and then become insulting about it and then start attacking other people in the conversation about it is – the only thing left to do on Twitter is block them. But how do I do it? I monitor the comments and conversations, I jump in when I need to, I delete when I need to. Yeah, I, I stay on top of it. But for the most part, the people who are there have already seen how things run on my Facebook page. So they don't get out of line. They are there because they want to have these types of conversations and they don't want to have the ones where it's filled with rancor. You know, rancor is not listed as a fruit of the Spirit.

Amy: Shocking.

Tim: Quite. So once I discovered that I thought, “Oh, hey, we can we can avoid rancor, we don't need it. And so people tend to land on my page because they want to avoid those types of conversations. They want to have the type of conversations that we have on our page. Disagreement is fine. There's a lot of people who disagree with what I write or what some other commenter on one of my posts has come up with. And if they want to talk it out, go right ahead. But if they start getting insulting about it, then I need to get in there. And I might delete things there was one about a week ago, where it started devolving into some personal attacks, not attacks on the ideas. And it was a woman and a man who were going back and forth and back and forth. And she said something about how he was obviously starting to take things too personally. Which if I had seen that first, I would have said, “Please don't call things personal for him.” But I didn't and it was too late because by the time I saw this, he had already responded by calling her the B word. Yeah, so. I said, “Please apologize. And please delete.” And he said, “No.” I said, “Really. You need to.” He says, he says “Why? You didn't tell her she can't make a personal attack on me.” And I said, “Because we don't call people names on my Facebook page.” And so anyway, I finally I deleted all of that myself and ended up having to block him. I mean, you can't, you just can't do that. So yeah, that's that's how I do it. I you know, it's not a free speech place. These Facebook pages. If you want free speech, there's a city park you can go to and stand on a soapbox and talk –

Amy: Or go to your own Facebook page. That's what I thought several times. Yeah. Free speech on your page. Not mine.

Cheri: Yeah, now, there's a very specific thing that they nobody can talk about on your page because of your role.

Tim: Right. Yeah. Politics and court cases are both off limits. I cannot comment publicly on politics or politicians. And I cannot comment on court cases no matter where they are, whether it's my courtroom, another courtroom in California, or a courtroom in another state, I cannot comment on.

Cheri: I just found that so – I find that so refreshing with that, with that whole, that whole part of the conversation just lopped off, it's not allowed. And I'm like, wow, more – more areas of my life need that kind of a firm boundary.

Tim: You know, and I used to if someone would put up some sort of comment on a Facebook post about a politician or mentioned that my name I used to reach out to them and say, you know, "I can't do political discussion." I just stopped doing that. I just delete it. They can contact me if they want to know how things got deleted. But every once in a while, I'll put on my page, a main post that says here's why political comments get deleted and then I explain why. Oh, and when I say that I can't do it? I, you know, sometimes people think that I'm just trying to be really careful as a judge – but when I say I can't do it, what I mean is because state law prohibits me from doing it, and I can lose my job. I like being a judge, so I don't want to lose my job. And no, we're not going to talk politics. And no, we're not going to talk about court cases.

Cheri: Great.

Something else I've noticed is that some people in public positions choose to keep their faith very private. You have not made that choice. Why are you so actively open about your faith?

Tim: You know, I'm who I am. And people who are out there in the community, the people who come to the courthouse, there's no reason why they shouldn't know who the elected officials are. And some people have no faith in – I shouldn't say that. Everybody has a faith of some sort, but they don't have what you would consider a religious faith by whatever that definition is. And if people know that, then they do. And if people know I'm a Christian, then they do. And however you want to follow that through with elected officials on what it is they believe, I think that's all right for people out there to know. I've never had it be an issue when it comes to cases I've heard and decisions that I've made. People ask all the time, "Well, there's got to be a lot of things you can't do because the law tells you to do it, but your faith tells you not to." And I keep thinking, "Okay, but I haven't seen that yet. It's 25 years so far, but yeah, sure, if you say so. There must be those things." And they're not.

Amy: So interesting.

Well, say – give us some closing words for our listeners, Tim, what do you want our friends to know?

Tim:

I want them to know that God is for them. Jesus did not come to the world to condemn the world but to save the world. He said as much when he was talking to Nicodemus, and when you realize that, the way that He looks at you is purely with love and grace and mercy, then life starts to take on a lighter load. And it's just not the heavy, hard burden that sometimes it can be if you feel hopeless, and without anyone on your side, it's nice to know that the one who is eternal is also eternally for you.