Emotionally Speaking : Ben Gernon transcript

Peter Leonard 00:00
So coming in today, I suddenly realised I got a bit of my in-ear earbud style headphones stuck in my ear, big drama, went to the hospital, couldn't hear anything, couldn't see it couldn't get out myself. Wonderful nurse who managed to extract it very quickly because I'm thinking I'm gonna be there for like five hours and not get here to record the podcast.

Narrator (Heather) 00:19
This is Peter Leonard. He's the Chief Executive of The Centre for Emotional Health.

Peter Leonard 00:24
So there was a lot of drama going on. But I think I managed to remain calm. And that was partly due to having the wonderful Sally with me. So relationships and calm people around you are a big help in situations like that. Still can't hear out of the ear, but here I am.

Narrator (Heather) 00:41
And this is Emotionally Speaking, a new podcast, all about emotions, your emotions, and how they affect every aspect of your life.

Peter Leonard 00:51
So hello, how are you today? Thanks for joining me for the last episode in this season of emotionally speaking. We're already working on plans for season two. I really hope you've enjoyed the show so far. And I hope it's given you some insight into your own emotional life. If this is your first time, I hope you'll catch up on our other episodes. I've spoken with four incredible guests, Kate Garraway, Satish Kumar, Virginia Ironside and Alastair Gill about what makes up their emotional toolkits. Working at the Centre for Emotional Health, I talk about emotional health all the time. But I've learned so much from this experience, and I hope that you will as well. It's given me a lot to reflect on about the joys, challenges and growth that comes from learning about emotions, and relationships.

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Ben G 01:38
I know so many people who have had a tricky relationship with anxiety, who have never spoken about it. And I'm guilty of that, too. I wouldn't.... in fact, I haven't told anyone, really, this is the first time I've been really quite open about it. But I would never, I'd never tell my friends what was going on, I didn't tell my parents I was embarrassed.

Peter Leonard 02:01
My guest today ran up against an emotional stumbling block pretty early in their career. But their coping mechanism is one that absolutely works for me too. So to find out more, I'm delighted to welcome conductor and broadcaster Ben Gernon. Ben, hello.

Ben G 02:15
Hello.

Peter Leonard 02:16
It's great to have you with us, Ben. Now you're a conductor and a broadcaster you've conducted everywhere from the Hollywood Bowl to the Czech Philharmonic, live life in that kind of conductor spotlight, quite literally. Is it as glamorous as it looks?

Ben G 02:30
Well conducting can be extremely glamorous. You know, I've been very lucky to work with some of the world's best orchestras, where we perform, you know, some of the greatest music ever written in the best concert halls around the world. But it can also be not so glamorous when you're in the Premier Inn outside Kings Cross or you're having a soggy breakfast on your own. Everybody thinks that conducting you know is incredibly powerful people jet setting around the world. And there are elements where it's amazing like that. But alsothe reality sometimes can be a little grim.

Peter Leonard 02:59
Yeah, hard work as well.

Ben G 03:00
Very hard work, I think because your job is always about giving out loads of energy, and also receiving lots of energy you do... Yeah, you'd have to be quite careful how you manage that. But it can be exhilarating, and it can be exhausting at the same time.

Peter Leonard 03:14
So Ben, let me dive straight in and just ask you, what does emotional health mean to you?

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Ben G 03:21
Well, I think emotional health has definitely changed for me. When I was younger, I used to think it used to be about being happy all the time. And that strikes me as something that seems a little bit silly now I'm a bit older. But for me, it's trying to find comfort, when things around you possibly aren't very comfortable. And having that kind of inner confidence to say I don't want to do that, I'd want to do this, I feel really happy with that. I don't feel happy with that. But generally being on a kind of straight and narrow is probably what would define emotional health for me.

Peter Leonard 03:53
That's fantastic. Ben, you've just in that, that those couple of sentences, you've hit so many buttons for me in terms of what we talk about at the Centre for Emotional Health, about emotional health not being about being happy all the time. For example, you can be grieving, and still be emotionally healthy. And that's, that's important. So I guess you must - given your kind of work and the environment you're in, that must be quite a high pressure environment?

Ben G 04:17
It is a high-pressure environment. I think sometimes when you look at conductors, from the outside in, it looks like it's just somebody waving a stick around having a lovely time and everything happens without them. But I think when you're in that environment, and you're responsible for making everything sound great, you know, there's a real strong pulse going through the orchestra that everybody's positively engaged with the music and that together, you're building this great thing, that can feel very challenging sometimes. Because you're extremely passionate about the music. You're passionate about the people around you. But you're also passionate about getting it right and not screwing it up.

Peter Leonard 04:52
Yeah.

Ben G 04:53
So there's a lot of kind of things going on in your mind when you're conducting. Yeah, but more and more I'm thinking about stepping back as a conductor. And that's something maybe that we'll talk about a little bit later on. But this idea that you can let people around you be responsible for things, rather than trying to be like some sort of control freak and make everything wonderful.

Peter Leonard 05:13
Yeah, fascinating. Okay, I kind of want to dive into that a bit already. But we'll come to that later. I guess I've always looked at conductors and thought, that does look like a really responsible position, but also potentially quite a powerful one.

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Ben G 05:28
Yeah, and it can be, well, power can be exercised in many different ways. It is powerful in the sense that you have the ability to influence a moment at any given time. But it's not powerful in terms of discipline. I'm not there to tell people off, I'm there to encourage the best music making possible.

Peter Leonard 05:48
That sounds amazing.

Ben G 05:50
It's honestly, it's a blessing, the job is really fun. And it changes, you know, rehearsals can be very intense. And then performances sometimes can feel so exhilarating and free, like you're riding a wild horse. And then sometimes it can be a little bit disappointing. You know, it's, it's a whole host of different emotions being a conductor.

Peter Leonard 06:06
Yeah, I want to drill down a bit into some of those moments now that you've mentioned, if I can, can you give us an example perhaps of a, an experience and moment or a series of them, where you've had to navigate them in a in a way that you've kind of used your emotional health? Or had to think about emotional health in a way that that has been challenging, perhaps?

Ben G 06:29
Well, I never thought about my emotional health until I was 21. And when I remember being a teenager thinking, what is stress? You know, you can always fix something, no problem whatsoever. Little did I realise that once you become an adult, you know, bills arrive. But I was 21 and I was watching a concert in the Barbican. And I was a third-year student at the Guildhall School of Music. And I had one year left halfway through my degree. And I suddenly found I couldn't breathe in the audience when I was watching the London Symphony Orchestra, and my teacher was playing in the orchestra. They're an orchestra I had admired since I started at the Guildhall. And I remember having this very strange experience where I couldn't quite catch my breath. And it just escalated from that where I started feeling very panicky. And I'd never had that feeling before, I didn't quite understand what was going on. So I managed to like ride it out for like 20 minutes, and it just got worse. And so I ran out of the auditorium in a very dramatic fashion. And just like, lay on one of those, they have soft areas in the Barbican. In a very dramatic way, you know. And then someone called an ambulance, of course, because they have to. And then I ended up in accident and emergency -- though I did have a chest infection but that's beside the point. This was my first experience of knowing what it's like to panic and wanting to run away and wanting to get out of a situation. And I think that then made me so incredibly nervous about a going back into the Barbican again, which is ridiculous because I was training to work

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in that very space. I became very superstitious about what I ate because I went to a very well-known restaurant beforehand and was like I can never go to that restaurant ever again. And even simple things like going to the supermarket. Walking around being around people I didn't know I felt so... well just so rotten, really, and the typical anxiety symptoms of blurred vision, you feel a bit weird, you feel a bit tingly, you can't quite breathe. And it was also at the point where my career was starting to take off. And it was quite discombobulating in a way because on the one hand, when you're young conductor and you're starting to work with some of the world's best orchestras. And the gigs are really good at the beginning because everyone's like, oh I wonder what they're like, you know, let's kind of grab these young hot things while they're there. I was flying around for the first time on my own travelling on my own staying in hotels on my own, conducting orchestras in different languages. And I would be conducting these amazing orchestras, and inside there'd be the most magnificent firework display going off where mid concert my heart would be racing I'd feel like I wanted to throw up and sit on the loo at the same time. It all just felt really horrible.

Peter Leonard 07:34
Yeah. You have an incredible way of painting a picture in all sorts of ways. I have an image of you laying in the Barbican. It's quite incredible. That feels like a lot going on, but kind of came on very quickly. And then and then kind of stayed with you for a bit, is that right?

Ben G 09:20
It did it did come on very quickly. And then it stayed with me probably for about two and a half years. And I tried all sorts of you know, little different things and you know, try and sit and do meditation once every month, you know -- which is clearly useless. Or I'd try and have a hot bath or try and ignore it. But I found it quite difficult at that point to really understand why it had happened. And why for the first time in my life my emotional health wasn't stable.

Peter Leonard 09:48
Yeah. And at that point, you say you didn't kind of know what was going on or what was happening. Was there anywhere you could go? Was there... how did you kind of what did you... Where did you look to for any help or support?

Ben G 10:01
Well, first of all, I went through the whole medical profession and had, you know, gazillions of tests. And I was passed from pillar to post going what is wrong with me? I just don't understand. Then I tried, there was a student counsellor, who I spoke to, and I tried getting a massage every week.

Peter Leonard 10:19
Sounds very nice, but...

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Ben G 10:20
It was very nice, but I don't think it really deals with the actual problem. But I, I did try and exercise a bit more. And I think that might be the key for me. Okay. And I found that the more I moved, the better I felt.

Peter Leonard 10:36
Yeah.

Ben G 10:37
And also, just stop thinking about it. Because the problem with anxiety is that it's so ever present in your mind. And the principal problem is that you're, you're worrying too much. And then if someone tells you to think about something, you can then get yourself slightly tied up in that obsessive thinking. And in a way that was just constantly keeping that fire burning.

Peter Leonard 10:58
Yeah.

Ben G 10:58
In that I was looking for it to be okay. But at the, but kind of at the same time, I was making it worse.

Peter Leonard 11:05
Yeah. And there's something about I mean, listening to the kinds of things that you were you were doing, and you were going through, you know, we talked at the beginning about the kind of high pressure of the role and the sense of responsibility, in a sense, because they will, yeah, absolutely, you're going to be anxious about that, that, you know, even if you're training for it, even if it's the thing you want to do, it's still a lot, isn't it? So, so there's something about the anxiety that comes with that, which is, is in a sense, normal in that, you know, you would feel anxious about it. But then also that sense of if I haven't felt this before that, that and people listening may well have a similar experience, of what do I do about this? You know, this is a new feeling. And I don't know how to process this and what to do. And, and I think in my experience, people don't talk about it enough. Which is why then when you, when someone does experience it as you did, it's like, oh, what do I do about this? Where do I go?

Ben G 11:57
I know so many people who have had a tricky relationship with anxiety, who have never spoken about it. And I'm guilty of that, too. I wouldn't.... In fact, I haven't told anyone actually, really, this is the first time I've been really quite open about it. But I would never, I'd never tell my friends what was going

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on. Didn't tell my parents, I was embarrassed. But I do think you're absolutely right, that it's a normal human emotion.

Peter Leonard 12:21
Yeah.

Ben G 12:22
And it's just when it gets out of whack, it can be a very kind of scary experience.

Peter Leonard 12:26
And I think it's quite easy to get out of whack. I think that especially because it can be quite an intense kind of intense feeling.

Ben G 12:32
It's hard to sit with, isn't it sometimes. And I also think you can feel as well that you're stuck in this endless loop of 'it's never gonna get better. Why do I feel so crappy? Why do I feel so...?' Well, that you just can't trust your body. And I think that's a scary thought for lots of people.

Peter Leonard 12:50
Yeah.

Ben G 12:50
And that was scary for me. But it does get better.

Peter Leonard 12:53
And what's really interesting, you're just talking about not being able to trust your body, is that for you, from what I'm hearing, the key to beginning to change it was your body in the physical exercise.

Ben G 13:04
Exactly.

Peter Leonard 13:05
Which is fascinating.

Ben G 13:06
Exactly, that when I started moving, and I started running especially, this cardiovascular exercise, there was something that kind of burned off the adrenaline, you can get rid of that angst. And like you said, you can't avoid stress. I mean, stress is an inevitable part of life. And I used to try and avoid stress, and

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then be more stressed than I hadn't avoided it. But I think if you can run off a little bit, then you stand a much better chance of feeling good.

Peter Leonard 13:36
Yeah. Yeah. There's something about the fact that you know, you're building muscle, you're building strength as part of that, that workout, but alongside that, there's also kind of emotional health muscle, for want of a better expression, that you're building.

Ben G 13:47
Yeah, I feel very resilient when I exercise.

Peter Leonard 13:50
Yeah.

Ben G 13:50
I don't wake up every morning feeling like I've been run over by bus. I feel oh, yeah, I could go for a run today.

Peter Leonard 13:56
Going forward, looking to the future if you kind of think about that. Where's the anxiety now? How does it... is it completely vanished? You're not stressed and nervous at all? Does it show itself in in smaller ways? What does it What's it look like now?

Ben G 14:17
Yeah, it's definitely completely different. Now. I remember someone saying to me that you will get better when I was at my worst. And that was the best thing I'd ever heard. Because I didn't believe at the time it could get better. But now, I mean, anxiety doesn't go away, because we are programmed to feel it. But I feel now that it's, it's kind of like the warm embers of a fire. It's just there. And I know that sometimes it heats up and gets a little too hot. But I know that, that it's A) nothing to worry about, B) that it's normal, and C) that I know what to do now, if it starts getting slightly out of control. That I know that I need to exercise I know that I need to stay hydrated. I know that I need to just take a step back and think Okay, what am I missing in my life right now that could make this better? You know, what is it trying to tell me? And how can I respond to that in a positive and calm way, and not panic? And I think as well, when you're prone to anxiety, and you're prone to anxious thoughts, you just have to remind yourself now and again, that what I'm thinking right now might not be really what I actually think it might be influenced, by the way I feel. And, physically, and don't always trust sometimes how you feel.

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Peter Leonard 15:30
Yeah. Now that that I mean, you just talked about self awareness and a really kind of clear way there. And we have a model of emotional health and made up of seven assets, and one of the assets, I would probably argue, perhaps the foundational one is self awareness, that sense of what's going on for me, how am I feeling? And being able to then kind of take that forward. It sounds like your self awareness is really, would you say it's developed significantly since that laying prone in the Barbican?

Ben G 15:30
yeah since that day of dizziness... I think so. I mean, as a conductor, you do you have to be very self aware anyway. But I think I've definitely become more aware of how I feel. Also people around me, I used to be very affected by, you know, if someone was really angry with me, or if someone was feeling uncomfortable with something I'd done, I feel terrible. But I've developed this kind of, A) a shield against things that aren't very positive, but B) a kind of all embracing, feeling towards other people now. So it's not just solely about how I feel, and that I've managed to turn what was an incredibly kind of insular experience, and something that was going on inside into a kind of more collaborative approach with everything. In terms of emotional health.

Peter Leonard 16:41
Yeah, I'm reading a fantastic book at the moment, it's called The Joy of Being Selfish. And that that talks very clearly about the benefit of setting up that boundary between yourself and others. And there's an element of healthy relationships which does involve that boundary setting. That, you know, I'm not going to take on that person's issue.

Ben G 17:01
That's so tricky, though, isn't it?

Peter Leonard 17:02
It's very hard.

Ben G 17:03
Because then you think as humans, we just we kind of want to help, but we're also really nosy at the same time.

Peter Leonard 17:08
Yeah!

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Ben G 17:08
And you want all the gossip, but you want to know all the dirt. That is a really tricky thing. But I think boundaries are really hard for everyone to establish. Because sometimes you don't want to be seen as being horrible.

Peter Leonard 17:19
No.

Ben G 17:20
Or kind of pushing someone away. But actually, sometimes, like you say, putting those boundaries in really helps.

Peter Leonard 17:27
Yeah, it does. So kind of a whole range of things that are kind of coming into play here around you, and your emotional health and how you are able to present yourself and work in a way which is, you know, not only helpful for you, but also for those you're kind of working with and responsible for.

Ben G 17:44
Yeah, it's not just about me, it's about everybody around me. And kind of, I think as conductor there's that awful thing of, the more relaxed you are, the more relaxed everyone else is. Which is a blessing in disguise, because sometimes you think, oh, no, I'm not feeling very relaxed today. But I do think especially in a group of 70 musicians, anxiety can spread like wildfire. You know, sometimes it's 7:30 and you're going onstage, and everyone's feeling slightly nervous. And it's all about how you harness that energy. And what I kind of put through myself to them and what they give back as well.

Peter Leonard 18:20
Listening to all the things that you've said, and so much resonates with my experience, but I suspect the experience of people listening as well. If someone's at home, and that they're constructing their own emotional health toolkits for things that will enable them to navigate those kinds of experiences, what would be the top things that you'd say, okay, you need this in your toolkit?

Ben G 18:44
I would say the most helpful thing in your toolkit would be find an exercise or a movement that really works for you. Something that you come back from and you feel really good about yourself, and the endorphins are flowing, and you feel great. I'd also say address really basic things like nutrition and hydration. They're so important. And I think the third thing in my toolkit probably is knowing that things will be how they will be and just reminding yourself that it might not be what you thought it could be. But it will be something and it will mean something to someone. So don't always strive for

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this kind of perfection in everything you do. Because there will be times when it's disappointing and times when it's amazing. But know that what you're doing is just fine.

Peter Leonard 19:32
Yeah, that's fantastic. Ben you've hit so many of our buttons that we use at the Centre for Emotional Health around self awareness, self agency, personal power, all of those kinds of amazing things that really help with emotional health, which has been fantastic. I could listen to you for hours. And... the pictures you paint are just really brilliant. Where can people go to find out a bit more about you? Have you got a website?

Ben G 19:56
I do have a website. It's www.bengernon.co.uk I'm also quite active on the old Instagram and Twitter.

Peter Leonard 20:02
You are yes, I've been internet stalking you ahead of this.

Ben G 20:05
Gosh, what have you found?

Peter Leonard 20:06
Well I found it was your birthday. Which was a good thing. And people can also listen to you on a podcast, I believe.

Ben G 20:08
Oh well. Yeah, we're making, well, we've made a podcast. It's called Monsters of Music. It's on BBC Sounds.

Peter Leonard 20:17
That sounds intriguing

Ben G 20:18
It's me and the comedian Tom Allen and a different guest each episode. And we unpack the darker side to our well known composers. To people like Anton Bruckner or Percy Grainger, we kind of get into bed with the composers find out their darkest secrets, and their wonderful desires, and unpack all of those.

Peter Leonard 20:38
That's the best trailer for a podcast I think I've heard ever. Ben, it's been an absolute delight talking to you. Thank you for sharing what is clearly a significant and personal story. But I'm sure I found it really

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helpful, and I'm sure people listening will have found it helpful as well in terms of top tips and ways of kind of navigating those events and developing emotional health. Thank you so much for your time and for for sharing your story with us.

Ben G 21:03
You are so welcome.

Peter Leonard 21:06
And thank you for listening to this first series of Emotionally Speaking. Throughout the series, I've asked all my guests to contribute one of their coping mechanisms to the emotionally speaking toolkit. These are the tips they use when their emotional health is tested. Well, our toolkit is pretty full now. And I hope that you might find at least one of them useful when you're feeling emotionally challenged. There'll be more episodes of Emotionally Speaking to come. So if you haven't already, please subscribe to the podcast and watch this feed for more episodes. Emotionally Speaking is presented by me, Peter Leonard, and thanks to my colleague Sally Alden for her support in making these podcasts.

Narrator (Heather) 21:43
Peter's the Chief Executive of The Centre for Emotional Health, and you can find out about their work and training courses by visiting their current website familylinks.org.uk

Peter Leonard 21:53
The series was produced by Freya Hillier and Alexandra Quinn, and it's brought to you by the team at Loftus Media.

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