The Wellbeing Conversation

With Dylan Alcott, Brad McEwan and special guests

Overcoming fear and embracing the new world with Mark Hand and Dr Pippa Grange

Brad McEwan: Welcome. It's great to have you here. And we hope you can join us throughout the wellbeing conversation. And for those of you watching this chapter, you will notice this is a different location from the first few chapters but we are in COVID and we are in lockdown, we're not able to head across town to that location anymore, hence here I am in the living room and it's fine!

As with every chapter it's my pleasure to welcome our Paralympic gold medalist and ANZ ambassador Dylan Alcott - Dylan, great to have you here.

Dylan Alcott: G'day Brad, great to be here, mate. I've absolutely loved being part of this series, and can't wait for today's ep.

Brad McEwan: Well, this EP is all about overcoming fear and embracing the new world. And joining us today, we have Mark Hand, ANZ Group Executive Australia Retail and Commercial Banking. Mark, thank you for joining us.

Mark Hand: Brad, great to be here. Looking forward to today's conversation.

Brad McEwan: And our expert for today's conversation, joining us all the way from Copenhagen. It's a pleasure to welcome Dr Pippa Grange, psychologist, culture coach and author. Hello, Pip. Great to have you here.

Dr Pippa Grange: Thanks so much, Brad. It's great to be here with you.

Brad McEwan: Well, we are talking about overcoming fear and embracing the new world. A lot to discuss. A lot to talk about. A few stories, I imagine. So we'll get into it.

So why don't we start then with our psychologist, Pippa. When we talk about fear, what is fear and where does it come from?

Dr Pippa Grange: Great question, Brad. Fear is an energy, it's an emotional energy and it's basically an early warning system. So without fear, we'd be in all sorts of trouble. We absolutely need it to prepare us to respond when there's a threat, when there's danger, when there's something that's, you know, likely to get in our way in a big way.

And so it's designed as an early warning system that we then can turn the hazard lights off with. But unfortunately, with fear, it's not very discerning and there's way too much of it. And it comes from our instinctive amygdala, our old circuitry in our brain, basically.

And it will pop up extremely quickly, extremely readily, and tell you that everything's going to go pear shaped any minute.

So we need to be able to intervene with our thinking brain, our newer circuitry, our frontal cortex, as we call it. And tell the fear what to do. So really, if we think of it as an early warning system that we need to turn off. I think that's a good start place.

Mark Hand: I think Pippa touched on something there about how fear kind of drives your performance. Fear is it evokes a response within you so you've got to realise that it's actually quite a good thing. But that fear will drive success. It drives application to things that are important. And you can see that every day. I'm a competitive person by nature so part of that fear of failure for me or that fear of disappointing someone, all those sort of feelings help drive you in a workplace. And people need to understand that that's not a bad thing to feel uncomfortable and feel concerned about what the outcome might be.

Brad McEwan: Dylan, what do you fear?

Dylan Alcott: Look, I used to fear a lot when I was growing up with my disability. I think that was one of the main reasons why it kind of ruined my life. To be honest, a fear of not being worthy. To be honest, the fear of not being included. That was probably my biggest fears.

And one thing that I was very lucky that happened to me was, I was able to overcome that. I guess you learn to handle your fears a lot better. Mostly through lived experience.

So once you have that lived experience, you know you become comfortable with handling fear. But in saying that, when I roll out to play an Australian Open final on Rod Laver Arena, I'd be kidding myself if I didn't say that I wasn't fearful or nervous of the situation. But I couldn't agree more. I harness that feeling to help me perform better.

Like, why else would I want to get out of bed and train everyday if I didn't want to get myself into situations where I felt that in my stomach that, you know, that feeling you get in your stomach, that empty feeling of fear or nerves or whatever it is. That's why I do what I do. And it took me a while to embrace that. But once I did, I definitely become a better athlete. And I think a better person because of it.

Dr Pippa Grange: Dyl, can I just jump in on that? It's a really nice description. That feeling in your gut is a readiness feeling, right? And it's the thought we attach to it that causes the problem.

If the thought is, "here we go. I'm getting out that, you know, this is it" kind of thing. I remember Glenn Archer saying that, you know, he was sick every time he played, you know, but he started to attach the thought that was readiness rather than attach the thought that that was something going to go wrong.

I think that we've got this in the moment fear that you're talking about. That's completely natural. Very usable. Very valuable if we attach the right thinking to it, but then there is 'not good enough fear', which is what you what you said about not feeling worthy. And 'not good enough fear' is where all of that sort of emotional energy that we can harness well to perform becomes laced with this idea that we're going to fail. And that failing means being a loser, not just losing, but being a loser. And it's got shame and it's got all of those other things rolled into it. And when that happens, that's where the strain and the stress and the loneliness and the sense of sort of real anxiety kicks in.

So the fear itself is one thing. And the emotional label that goes with that, great. But when we allow that to be just a currency that we operate with and allow it to be laced with this idea of not being good enough as a human being, that's where it goes wrong.

Dylan Alcott: Yeah. I love hearing that and I couldn't agree more. And it took me a while to realise that as well. Like what I was so worried about and sometimes it still affects me. You know, having to win a tennis tournament to feel worthy. You know what I mean? And it's taken me a lot of practice to get over that. But what I found was, which is what you just said, and I love hearing it because you're the expert and I'm just a tennis player. So I'm going to write that down. But it... what I can bring to it is my mindset to that feeling and how I view that feeling. And it actually can be a competitive advantage because I look at the people I'm playing or whatever it is.

In my case, it's tennis, but everybody's watching case I'll be in a business sense or a personal sense or whatever. You know, other people don't see it as that. They see it as you said it, as a negative aspect, which is a problem. And I think converting the way that we do it can actually really be a positive thing that we actually use into our lives. So I'm on the right track I feel like. I love hearing that from you Pip. It's good.

Dr Pippa Grange: You are. You most definitely are.

Brad McEwan: So Mark when we talk about fear are you open to sharing your fears and vulnerabilities with the people around you knowing that out of that you develop a really strong connection?

Mark Hand: Yeah, absolutely. I've probably been accused of being too open more than anything else in the past. I sent a note to my staff last week to let them know exactly that, what I was thinking and feeling.

That's to out to about fifteen, fifteen thousand or more people across Australia. My youngest daughter was born with an immune deficiency, and so she's in a very high risk category. So I've been at home for 22 weeks since the 10th of March. I came home and before we'd even gone into lockdown, my daughter's doctors had said, you know, try and stay off planes because at that stage they didn't know whether that was a high risk of infection.

And so we decided that I'd work from home from that point. And so been home for a long time and my poor little nine year old who's got serious cabin fever, has been out of the house twice in 22 weeks you know once to go get a flu injection. So that wasn't a highlight for her. And once she sat in the car, while I dropped some food at her grandmother's place who wasn't allowed out cause she'd had surgery as well.

And then at the same time, I've got like a lot of us and people my age, we've got ageing parents in their 80s in Queensland, health issues emerging, high risk categories and sort of bunkering down at home and not being able to get up there and do anything for them makes it a bit hard. There's no other family up there.

So I've been very open with my team. And I was staggered with the response that I got from staff, a lot who I've never met, many that I had met just responding, saying it made it easier for them to feel better about their own situation, realising that this impacts everybody. And I think they were really appreciative of a senior person opening up about

the fact that they're a bit fearful for their own family, and that's preoccupying some of their time. And we have good days and bad days and it's okay to have a bad day.

Dr Pippa Grange: I love that answer Mark it's.. and, you know, it's exactly where we would guide leaders to go. There's such an upside to being willing to share yourself intimately, you know, in terms of fear, in terms of your emotional life with other people.

But in leadership, traditional sort of leadership training has showed us never to lose control, never to put your guard down. And it's such a restriction.

It creates such a degree of conformity and sort of performance that gets in the way of true results and absolutely gets in the way of the protection that's found with within connection between people. So that's such an important piece.

I did some work last week for a client talking about return to work. And one of the things that we were saying was that a great option is where the leader can do emotional hangover work. You know, we do this in Olympic sports where basically you talk about what's just happened in an event and process it. You know, it's look at the short, sharp processing of how everybody felt. But you're allowed to have the emotional content in there, you know. How did you feel when you got home? What's been stressing you about your mum and dad that you can't get to and go help that, you know, those kind of conversations and unpack that emotional work.

And I think that that does two things: it allows a person to really help the processing and it allows people to allow fear and emotion into the conversation in a way that can be processed and become useful.

And you don't have to hide. The amount of emotional energy - exhausting - that we that we put into performing who we are and looking flawless and looking like, you know, there's no chinks in our armor and there's no need to be anything other than, you know, this, this bottom line results driver, is it's just too much mental rent to pay. So I love that you did that because that kind of openness is extremely protective around mental health and around managing dialing down fear when we're in ambiguous circumstances.

Brad McEwan: Dylan, have you learnt anything about your fears during COVID?

Dylan Alcott: Oh, look. I've definitely called on the stuff that I've learnt over the years to overcome what's going on at the moment.

I think and I couldn't agree more with what has been said, especially when I had huge fears about me being self-conscious about the person that I was having my disability and that. Guess who I told about it? I told absolutely no one. And that ruined my life for two years and as soon as you release that emotional baggage and start talking about it, my life honestly changed immediately. It really did.

And it was such a, you know, it was a really hard time in my life, but I'm so glad I went through it because it was such an incredible lesson for me, because I learnt to have the tools to be open about how I was feeling and things like that.

But in saying that, you know, when COVID hit and the Paralympic Games got cancelled and so did Wimbledon and all my career got put on hold and I put up a bit of the armor that Pippa talked about and I was saying that I was fine and everything was okay and things

like that. And it took me a few weeks to start opening up with my partner and things like that about how I was actually feeling and how I was feeling was that it sucked and I was sad and things like that.

And as soon as I started accepting that fear that I didn't know what was going to happen with my life and started communicating it, I started feeling so much better, I honestly did.

You know, we are in this together at the moment. And I've learnt that talking about what's going on has been the biggest asset for me to become the person that I am, but also feel comfortable in the situation that I'm in.

Brad McEwan: And Mark, have you found with the people around you at ANZ, there's a fear of working in isolation and of loneliness, particularly those people that live on their own?

Mark Hand: Yeah, there is, there is, and sometimes it's hard to imagine what other what other people are working through. So I've had staff tell me that they've had a couple of kids at home being homeschooled at the kitchen table. They're in a small house or a small apartment. And we've got younger staff who have come into the organisation early this year. A lot of graduates, for instance, they've never actually met their manager. They've certainly never met a more senior management. Yet they're in meetings where they're talking to people who have never, never physically seen them. And this is hard. This is hard for people who aren't established an organisation. I've just finished 32 years in ANZ. So I kind of feel like I know everyone. I know my way around. And I've got to I've got an office big enough at home that I can work out of. But when you start to talk to individuals and I'll make random calls to staff all the time just to see how they're going and how they're coping, if there's anything else we can do for them as a bit of a pulse check and there are so many of them that are in shared accommodation where they just can't get quiet time. There's nowhere to go other than the bedroom that they live in. And it is really hard for some people.

And I crave social interaction. So I miss being in the office and I look forward to the day when we do get to go back to the office. But there are some people in our organisation that that are really struggling with this this environment. And this is lack of interaction or even just the lack of basic facilities that you might take for granted when you go into an office.

Dr Pippa Grange: I think there's a that's a really insightful sort of way of looking at it for the compromise, isn't it? I'm really thinking at the minute about mums who are homeschooling and trying to work full time and manage the whole thing. So it's not always mums, but it's tending to be the burden on women at the moment in regard to that, and one of the things that I think is so useful for leaders to do at the moment is to actually involve those people who are, as you say, Mark, new to the organisation or in really tricky positions, trying to balance multiple things and feeling the strain, a) talking about that strain, as you're obviously doing, but b) involving them in the solutions.

So, you know, Zoom burn out is a thing. And, you know, discussing what's actually on the table for, what can be compromised in terms of how much screen time, how much meeting screen time is realistic, you know, and how are you going to rethink productivity across a period like this so that, you know, you're not expecting eight hours or six hours of constant screen time back to back. And, you know, because that's going to really strain people. And then that sort of sense that, you know, fear's a thief of your wellbeing and your joy and that

sense of sort of creeping up, I'm gonna start getting behind here. I'm going to start looking like I'm not performing, you know, how do I do both and feeling not good enough in either.

So I think involving people in the realistic conversations about what can be compromised is really smart.

You know, I've seen some really great examples from companies doing, you know, either sending equipment or, you know, not just the sort of 'we love you messages', but practical things that help somebody get through the day in a socially isolated and compromised space.

But the other thing I just wanted to say about that, Brad, was, you know, you talked about loneliness and loneliness, as we all know, is a cold abyss that nobody likes but there's a difference between being alone and loneliness. And the difference is in whether you feel connected, it doesn't have to be physical. So those you know, I'm aware of some people who've got like film club and home schooling hacks, WhatsApp groups and all sorts of other things going on that allow a sense of connectivity even if you're alone.

So the loneliness comes when there's a sense of emotional disconnection, you know, and you feel on the outer in some way you feel like you're not seen or you're not valid and you're not part of something. And that doesn't it just because we have to be physically apart doesn't mean, you know, it doesn't have to open the door to loneliness.

Brad McEwan: Mark have you felt when you're a leader, there's a whole lot of people looking to you for guidance and support. Is there a fear there of it being a bit too much for you at times?

Mark Hand: Yeah, there definitely is, because no one's experienced this before. This is this is new to everybody. And we're making it up as we go along. And sometimes I worry that people will look to us and we will try and be too flawless in our approach. But which is why I think that vulnerability is important. We definitely made some mistakes along the way. We would have done some things differently when we look back. We did some things very well and we learnt a lot about people.

We learnt about which people really thrive in a crisis and were able to stand up and really get the most out of this environment and which ones we needed to cut some slack because they were really stressed by what was going on in the world. And you don't know what's going on at home for a lot of people. You don't know that they haven't got, you know, I guess some family members that are suffering through this more than others. And you know that's why you've got I think we've got to be vulnerable, more open to show that we don't know all the answers, but we're prepared to listen. And if you help us, we'll get to a really good situation and it might take us a bit longer than it would if we had a menu we could pick up off the shelf. But, you know, it's new for everyone. And, you know, we didn't get everything right.

Dr Pippa Grange: Some somebody said to me last week that they, you know, even though the balance sheet screaming at people in business and, you know, people want to sort of crank up and catch up, really the way to approach this period of time because it is so unusual is as if it were just a massive restructure or something like a merger where the principal thing to do is listen and communicate like, triple times what you normally would, because, you know, we're just all in uncertain territory. And we also don't know what the timeframe is on when this might change again.

So, you know, I thought that was really good advice to treat it as if there'd been a massive organisational change. And what would we do in a planful way around that?

Mark Hand: I think that's one of the big issues that no one knows the end. You know, one of the fears for us is just go for two years? Will they ever find a vaccine? Does it is our life changed permanently or is there some return to something that looks like normal in 12 months' time? We just don't know. And I think I think some people don't like that uncertain future.

Brad McEwan: Pippa we can't control many things right now, but we can control our attitude and in embracing the new world, I imagine that is going to be crucial.

Dr Pippa Grange: Absolutely. This is a period of time where, in fact, all periods of time, we can't control our circumstances necessarily, but we can control our approach to it, our mentality around it. And I think that there are most certainly things that we can do individually as well as organisationally to help that.

So, you know, in the book I talk about this sort of overarching method of seeing it, seeing what you're actually dealing with, facing it and looking at what it's costing and how it's showing up and then replacing it and replacing it with something stronger and more hopeful. And those things look like, you know, reinvigorating your sense of purpose. So beyond goals, beyond sort of the idea of what do I have to get done, to something outside of yourself. And COVID-19's offered lots of possibilities of community and creativity in that way. How do we look at what's emerging and become more purposeful around it, especially for other people?

But there's also things like I talk about useful surrender, you know, and useful surrender is okay. The weight of the world and the weight of the future isn't actually all on your shoulders. There are going to be mysteries and unknowns here and how can you let go of that and put your four corners of your feet on the floor and come back to today and be in this moment as much as possible? And how do you self-care? How do you laugh? How do you invoke a bit more humour? You know, just because the smallest shift in the way that you behave with another person can have a profound impact on mood. Dyl was just talking about it in his Zoom calls you know his random sort of zoom calls with people can profoundly shift somebodies experience of the day. And that's a part of surrendering; to we just can't control everything. I think that's so important.

But there's also recognising that the you know, the pen's in your hand may maybe a bit more than you think it is in terms of what happens next. You can author your own story rather than wait for the news channel to tell you what's next. Or, you know, the rule book as we were saying earlier, it's not it's not necessarily going to come in a straightforward way. So what do you want it to look like in terms of who do you want to be? How do you want to show up for other people? What do you want to have, you know, deepened in yourself? So, you know, I think of this as sort of a period for soul making rather than status chasing. And that's a, you know, I think helpful ways of sort of replacing that noise sense of I need to get on with it. And I don't quite feel like things are going my way or I'm not good enough.

Brad McEwan: And that, I imagine, resonates with you, Dyl, because a lot of those tools and strategies that Pip talked about, you're very familiar with things like humour, that's a big part of who you are.

Dylan Alcott: Yeah, 100 per cent and that was one way that I found that it helped me break down the stigmas around myself that I held on myself, but also the people around me, you know, with my disability are I think I'm funny. I might not be funny, but sometimes I like to think that I am Brad.

But I will say that I couldn't agree more to what Pippa says then is that the events around us aren't the be all and end all decision maker about what happens. It's our mindset that we bring towards these events that really determines the path that we can take at the moment. And I like that analogy of that we've got a pen in my hand that we are the author of our own story at the moment because, yes, there is a lot of stuff going around us. But what we can control is the way that we bring our decisions and our mindset to what's going on.

And it's something that I've learnt in my sporting career to do but I've also tried to put into my personal lives. And I'm going to that toolbox a lot at the moment. Because every time you turn on the news or whatever, there's something else hugely negative happening and that can have a strain on you. You know what I mean? And you have to make those decisions, to sometimes, you know, stay up to date but push them aside and to look after yourself and to have a life and to do things that you need to do to make yourself and your family and the people that you care about feel better.

Brad McEwan: So a question for all of you, and we'll start with you, Mark, if we need to make the most of the lighter moments. Can you give us an example in the last few weeks, perhaps when you had a real good belly laugh, something that made you feel great?

Mark Hand: Probably something I've seen on TV – I've watched a lot of English television lately. I got stuck into a few English cop shows, which I really liked. Line of Duty, if you haven't watched that, that is an absolute cracker of a show. But I probably took a leaf out of my son's book who doesn't really watch TV. And he goes from YouTube to YouTube and he just finds watches something that throws him out to another link. And instead of watching something on TV, a series of I've just let myself organically fly the way through the YouTube world and find things I probably otherwise wouldn't have found.

Brad McEwan: Yeah, nice. What about you, Pip? What have you enjoyed one of the lighter moments that helped get you through?

Dr Pippa Grange: I love a bit of irony, you know, so I've had to travel a couple of times lately and be in airports and it's and, you know, to get back in an airport. And in that sort of, you know, process of being necessarily close to people when you're thinking about social distancing and everybody sort of, you know, trying to follow the rules. And it is quite stressful. But I did have a really good laugh last week when I saw somebody with a pair of, like Marigold Yellow washing up gloves on at the airport and like, almost a full has Hazchem suit. But then they had their mask. They were just wearing a chin strap, really they missed the nose and mouth. And it was just I thought, well, what do you do? You know, you've just got to see the lighter side in people's adaptations. Sometimes we over adapt and I think you've just got to, you know, remember that there's this a whole lot of fate in among your efforts to stay well and, you know, see the irony in it as well.

Dylan Alcott: I've been making myself laugh on this call because I reckon Mark you look like a really cool DJ with those headphones on right now I reckon.... I'm just thinking that you have, like, this underground DJ career. They're a good, good set up.

Mark Hand: I probably know less about music than most humans. OK.

Dylan Alcott: Very good. Very good.

Brad McEwan: We'll wrap things up in a moment. But I have a question that will resonate with a lot of people. How big a role does spirituality play for those people that are spiritual right now?

Dr Pippa Grange: You know, I think that if you already have a spiritual faith, that's part of the wonderful ability to let go a little bit and assume that the world's not on your shoulders alone. And that's extremely valuable. But the basis of a lot of spirituality is also our connection to the rest of humanity, isn't it? And the ability to sort of reach out and be our very best for other people. So they're useful things.

But when we say spirituality, you know, that doesn't have to define people or beliefs into categories. I think that there's something wonderful about just connecting and in a spiritual sense to our communities and to other people around us at the minute, that's just super valuable. That's where the protection is, that's where the sense of in it together really is in this. There's just such power in that for uncertain times. So, yeah, I think it can be a very powerful way of seeing the world at the minute.

Brad McEwan: So a question for all of you, what are a few simple tips and strategies that you've been using that people can take away watching this to help with them overcoming fears and embracing the new world, Dyl?

Dylan Alcott: I think that the biggest thing that I've learnt and that I like to pass on is that people resent and try and steer away from having fears. And they put up, as we said, an armor and things like that. It's a completely natural part of life, you know what I mean, and we're all going through this together, and it's completely normal to feel the way that you're feeling and don't fight it.

But also don't internalise those fears, because I think talking about it and communicating it is the best ways to overcome them, but also become comfortable with them and use them as a positive part of your life.

Brad McEwan: And Mark, what's been working for you?

Mark Hand: I moved overseas in the 90s, I lived in India for four years with the bank. It was such a foreign lifestyle. And I saw so many of the expats really struggle because they couldn't replicate their life over there. They couldn't do the things that they were used to. So my realisation was, you know, I'll be here for up to four years, I'll go back to what was my lifestyle previously so I may as well embrace everything that's different at the time. So I ate different foods, I went to different places; I made lots of local friends and didn't hang out so much with the expats.

And so I just sort of embraced it thinking it's going to change again one day. So I've taken that approach into this into this lock down effectively. I like routine. I've got a different routine to what my normal routine is. But I've embraced it. It'll go for as long as it goes. I'll make the most of it. But at some stage, my life will go back to something that looks a bit more like it did before. I don't think it'll ever be exactly the same. I might work from home more than I've ever done before. But I think you just got to embrace what it is and then

accept that you're having an experience in your life that that you'll probably look back on and say, wow, that was tough, but I'm glad I went through that.

Brad McEwan: And Pip, what can you leave us with?

Dr Pippa Grange: I think the thing I would like to leave you with is the recognition that being resilient through something like this does not mean that you have to squash the emotion.

There is nothing about resilience that means you can't also feel sadness or some loneliness or some frustration or, you know, any other kind of negative emotion.

You can be resilient at the same time as allowing space for your emotion. And that for me, is what gives us what I call psychological space. You know, so you allow room for all of it. It's a bit messy. Is going to be messy. The mess is OK. You can still you can still find footsteps and still be resilient through that. It doesn't have to be perfect.

Brad McEwan: Another fantastic conversation. Dylan, how did you enjoy that?

Dylan Alcott: Awesome. And I mean, I love hearing about people, you know, being vulnerable and hearing Mark about his situation at home and things like that. It's powerful. You know what I mean. And I just feel privileged to be a part of all these chats mate.

Brad McEwan: Mark, so many takeaways for all of us based on the conversation we've had.

Mark Hand: Yeah, absolutely, and I'll certainly be reading more of Pippa's work on the on the back of this. It kind of puts a context behind things that I've intrinsically thought and felt over the years, but never been certain. Like being vulnerable with your staff, I've been certain that that's the right thing to do. But it's good to know that that instinct is there. So I find this fascinating.

Brad McEwan: And Pippa, we so often hear that we learn about ourselves during the difficult times. We're learning a lot right now, aren't we?

Dr Pippa Grange: Most certainly. You know, I think that sort of idea that we improved through adversity is only correct is if we make if we make meaning out of the lesson. And that's what these conversations are. And I think, you know, wonderful to be in conversation and share time with a leader like you, Mark, with an attitude like that is it is rare and it's fantastic. And I can't encourage you to keep doing that enough.

And obviously Dyl and you Brad too, you know, to the openness to bring these kinds of conversations forth with humanity and humour. It's just wonderful. So good luck with the rest of the series.

Dylan Alcott: You're a legend, Pip. Love it.

Brad McEwan: Wonderful. Well said, Dylan. Thank you, Dylan. Thank you, Mark. And thank you, Pippa. And thank you for joining us for another chapter of the wellbeing conversation.

Dylan Alcott: Hey everyone Dylan Alcott again, now we touched on a few topics around mental health throughout that chat, now if that brought up anything for you make sure you reach out to BeyondBlue.org.au or their phone number is 1300 22 46 36. You can also hit up Lifeline on 13 11 14 or reach out to the people within your ANZ teams and they'll be able to help.

And here's a little taste of what's coming up in the next episode of the Wellbeing Conversation.