



Come Together with David Baum

EPISODE – Aimee Maxwell: Adrenaline and Acceptance in Australia.

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<https://cometogether.me/aimee-maxwell-adrenaline-and-acceptance-in-australia/>

DAVID BAUM: Hello everyone, this is David Baum. I'm in Seattle. I'm with Aimee Maxwell, who is in Australia. Aimee is a practicing psychologist, and a moderator of the Positive Deep Adaptation group, on Facebook. Hello, Aimee!

AIMEE MAXWELL: Hi there, David!

DAVID: Are you safe from the fires?

AIMEE: Yes, at the moment I'm safe. It's smokey today. And there's a bushfire about three kilometers away that is successfully under control at the moment. But that's because I'm on the outskirts of one of our major cities and they are pretty much safe at the moment.

DAVID: Do you know anyone who has had to evacuate or otherwise been affected by the fires?

AIMEE: A better question would be: Do I know anyone that hasn't been affected by the fires? Because the answer would be no, I don't.

DAVID: What kind of effects have you been seeing?

AIMEE: Have I seen much here? The fire around the corner? I haven't seen that. I haven't been to look. That's a crazy thing to do, to go and be a Lookie-loo. Not just for personal danger, but because it makes it more difficult for emergency responders to get in, if there's people there trying to get a look.

But I understand how natural it is, a human response because it's like.... We're alive because we're the sons and the daughters of people who went to check what the problem was when they smelled smoke. And so we all have this natural inclination to go and do that. But no, I haven't done that.

DAVID: Does it change the feeling even in the city to know that this immense...?

AIMEE: Completely.

DAVID: In what way does it change the feeling?

AIMEE: It's dominating conversations because it can't not, it's too big. It's too much. The destruction is too intense. We've never evacuated people of a seaside village with a Navy ship before. We've never had thousands of people in the water on the coast, on purpose, watching as the land burned in front of them. That's not been.... We have bushfires, we're arid, we are drought-prone. This is not that. I mean this is that! This is that on steroids!

DAVID: So this is a new level of catastrophe.

AIMEE: It is! It is such a new level that I think we are living in 1984, with what my prime minister says. It is so remarkable the way what's leaking out of the federal government does not match up with what's actually happening on the ground.

DAVID: Are they ignoring the problem?

AIMEE: No, I wouldn't say they're ignoring the problem. I would say that they are in the "Don't panic" phase. And so they are.... You know, we see that in Deep Adaptation that notion that those in power will try to placate, or calm, put a balm on for the masses, so that the masses don't panic and make things worse for themselves. And there's a big element of truth to the masses panicking and making things worse themselves. So I think they are doing the things that need to be done, but they're not doing anywhere near enough, And they're not doing it anywhere fast enough, and he's not acknowledging what's actually going on.

DAVID: From your standpoint, as a moderator of Deep Adaptation and a practitioner, I guess I would say, or participant, has the magnitude of this disaster changed your thoughts about what adaptation needs to be, or what's possible?

AIMEE: Oh, David! Yes, but I wish you hadn't asked.

DAVID: I'm sorry.

AIMEE: I feel compelled to answer you, but I feel sad. I feel sad at my answer and I feel

sad at that idea.

Yes, it's changed me.

Sydney has been.... New South Wales, the east coast of Australia, parts of Northern Australia, parts of Western Australia, and now parts of Victoria are living under a smoke pall. A smoke pall doesn't allow things to grow. And so much of Deep Adaptation has been talking about local community, and growing our own, and being able to be reliant on the people around you and things around you, right?

And I don't mean heading off to the bush, heading off to Nimbin or Mallacoota to buy a bush-block and become self-reliant. That's not possible. You will die in fire. That's what the answer is, now.

There's so many people that bought those blocks up around the hinterlands in New South Wales, where the New South Wales/Queensland border meets. That's all just on fire! That was never supposed to be on fire.

The idea of a safe space is ludicrous in the face of these fires. The idea of what can we do to.... Like go underground. We can go underground. Underground is the answer. It's the only answer that I can see at the moment. And that comes with obviously ridiculous problems that are insurmountable and will also lead to collapse like...no!

Deep Adaptation now it's like, "Whoa, am I actually ready to die? How much preparation have I done around the house to leave in a heartbeat? What could we do to defend this house?" We figured out we'd need six people, one on either side of it: two on the roof with hoses that we currently kind of have. We're on a steep block. "Could we defend it against embers? We're in a bushy sort of place." It's making me think like that. It's making me think much more realistically now.

And it's also making me think mindfulness is not the answer. It's the answer for some bits of these troubles. But it is not the answer. Seeking individual self-transcendence is not the answer.

DAVID: Okay, now that makes *me* sad! Tell me more about that. What has punctured the idea of mindfulness as an answer, for you?

AIMEE: It's been commodified. It's been commodified by neoliberal capitalism. It's been given to us as a panacea. Ignore the system, ignore the structures. Concentrate on yourself, better yourself. Yourself! Look within; accept what's going on. Notice your feelings; try not to act on them.

It's beautiful. It's wonderful. It works beautifully for people that are in mental distress

when they don't *need* to be, yeah? When a thing is over, when a thing can't be changed anymore. When a thing is inevitable, and it's coming for you. And is that the stance that has to happen now? I have a mind that A.C.T. – Acceptance and Commitment Therapy – and Deep Adaptation dovetail really neatly in together. And I'm going to explore that. But my ideas about change...this can't be individuals.

And the Australian communities are being beautiful with each other. They're not running around shooting each other and bunkering down and like saying, "No! You can't have any!" And that's while food and water and fuel are running out. That's not what's going on. What's going on is people coming together and sharing, coming together and sharing, coming together and sharing. And I am repeating that on purpose because that – coming together and sharing – that's very different to going inside and seeking.

We need to not accept some of the things that are going on. Mindfulness is useful if what you want to do is control yourself from panicking, or if you want to reconcile yourself with death, or if you want to meditate for a while. But it's not an answer.

DAVID: It sounds like you think that fire is going to be a part of life in Australia, for the future.

AIMEE: Fire has been a part of Australia for millions of years. The evidence of that is in the trees. The trees and the shrubs are very hardy. They have long, thin, skinny leaves that don't give up much water. They are often – not often – but the trees in Australia, they will still be standing after some of these fires go through. Everything around them will be gone, but will reseed from the ground.

This fire is part of this natural landscape. We aren't. And what we've done to the natural landscape has been to dry it out. And we've dried it out too much. And we've dried it out so many ways. It's not just coal and greenhouse...it's not just carbon. It was part of the reason that I think Scott Morrison is legitimately able to say: "This is not climate change," is because part of it is water mismanagement. That's not climate change. That's just human stupidity.

DAVID: Do you find yourself reacting in particular ways when you hear news of another fire, another evacuation, an immediate threat? Does it affect your day to day life knowing that this is going on so close to you, but not yet in your very backyard?

AIMEE: Yes. Yes it does. So today my belly has started to turn, and hasn't come back. Actually, my belly started to turn on New Year's Eve, but today it was markedly: "Oh, now you have permanent adrenaline belly!"

My bones have sensed fire. My bones know that something is wrong, and so they're

very helpfully giving me whatever that compound is that they provide so that my brain makes my adrenal cortex give me adrenaline. Thanks brain! That's happening. I'm noticing that happening.

That's where mindfulness can be useful, right? I'm noticing that happening, and rather than taking it as a sign to do something, because that's what my body wants me to do. I am not doing the things that it wants me to do: "Run around! Ahhh! Run over there, find out what's going on! See the fires! Oh my God! See if I can send things to people! Maybe I can drive somewhere and I can be helpful!" Like: "No brain! No, brain, stay here." So I've noticed that.

I've noticed that our brains so easily become accommodated to normal. What's normal now? So the other day, Jason went "Oh, it will be 42 tomorrow" [42 degrees Celsius, or 107 degrees Fahrenheit], and we both went "Oh, yeah? Not so bad." And then we went "What? That is terrible! 42 is really bloody hot!" Now, what we think of as really bloody hot would be like 47 [116 degrees Fahrenheit] or something, right? We've been shifted five degrees up, in a matter of two months. In a matter of two months, my brain has decided that 42 is "Yeah! You know, it gets to that. That's a regular thing!" It's December! It does not get to that. It is not a regular thing! So, yes, I've noticed that humanness.

DAVID: Please describe "adrenaline belly."

AIMEE: (Laughs.) Okay, so I'm thinking where to start. It's a long story.

Adrenaline helps us do things. Your brain reads the insides of your body on two gross axes: Is this all the way from very activated, to very flat? Or is this state all the way from very pleasant, to all the way to very unpleasant.

When your body finds you in unpleasant states, it often purposefully activates you to shift you out of it. So when your body finds you in an unpleasant flat state, one of the things that it will try to do is to flip you into an unpleasant active state. So at least you try to do something to get out of that state. Unpleasant flat states are things like the flu, or depression, or grief, or paralyzing fear. Unpleasant active states are like rage, or anger, or panic, or running away.

So our brains and our bodies have these beautiful systems set up to help us survive. One of the key drivers of that survival system is the adrenaline response. And the adrenaline response has tendrils throughout your body. It's beautiful response. We are so attuned to it! So it says "Get ready, get ready, get ready, buddy!"

And the way it makes your body get ready is by speeding up your breathing, and

speeding up your heart rate, and opening the capillaries, and stopping digestion, and ceasing – not ceasing, but really slowing down – non-essential functions at that time; like crying would be non-essential function, or digestion, or sleep is not an essential function when you're trying to survive. Shutting those things down.

When it shuts down digestion to the level it does, it feels like "butterflies in your tummy." And when we're standing in front of a rollercoaster or something really exciting, we feel that as a jittery "Ooh! Yay! Ooh!" sort of feeling. And when we are standing in front of a bushfire, we feel that as a "OH MY GOD!" kind of feeling.

So we contextually...we provide contextual relevance to the physiology, completely dependent on the situation. So adrenaline belly can happen in any situation. What we notice it as, is different. Does that make sense?

DAVID: It absolutely does. And you're experiencing this on a chronic basis now?

AIMEE: Yes. And so are many people already, before all of this. This is people who live with anxiety, chronically, live with adrenaline belly, most of them, all the time. It depends what sort of state of anxiety they're in. But this is a super common one, where you just feel sick all the time, and you don't really want to eat.

And that leads you to feeling lethargic and flat, which tells your body to flip you out of an unpleasant flat state into an activated state. So it often makes your body try and give you some more adrenaline to perk you up. It's as though your brain is trying to give you a espressos to keep you going. Yeah. And every time you flatten out a bit more, your brain says "Oy vey! Sure, I'll give you another dose!" And sort of, it just ramps you on and on and on.

DAVID: So there are ways to cope with this.

AIMEE: Yeah, we can definitely help. And also we can let our bodies do what our bodies want to do anyway. You know, when you see an animal get a fright, it often tends to sort of shake afterwards? Or after they've been chased, they do this shaking thing? Sort of this all over body shaky tremble? Do you know what I mean by that?

DAVID: I do. I'm familiar with that. Yes.

AIMEE: Yeah? Trembling, shaking, vibrating, sweating. They're all ways that our bodies are trying to balance, right? They're trying to discharge the adrenaline in ways, trying to get out of it. So it's okay to be trembly and shaky, because your body is ready for action, right? And the trembly-shakies, if you needed to do something, those trembly-shakies turn out to be the way you use good strength to do stuff. But if you're not doing stuff,

then the trembly-shakies can feel pretty awful.

So it's a good idea to try and do something with them. Either getting yourself to be trembling and shaking along for awhile, or do something physical like dancing or jumping about, or if you need to, some clearing and cleaning and heavy work. Heavy work is particularly good for it, because it exhausts your body, and it helps your brain feel like you are doing something valuable. Brains understand manual labor.

Getting overheated is pretty common. So do things to help yourself cool down. Remember to take cool drinks. We often reach for coffees or teas when we're stressed. Anglo-Saxons here have got the whole "Have a cup of tea and sit down." And a cup of tea can cool you down. But it's probably a better idea to be using colder water to sort of keep your system more down. It's a way to discharge, because then your body has to use up the nervous energy it's making heating its internal core. And so that's a way to use the energy, if you see what I mean?

And the other thing about drinking cool stuff is that you don't do that when you're on the run from a predator. So when we stop and pause, and make our bodies digest and swallow, it's a sign to your brain that you're not in any danger, right now. And it helps your body recognize that it can be okay to turn the adrenaline down.

The best way you can really hack into the system is with breathing. So adrenaline makes you want to breathe shallow and fast. The thing to do then is to purposefully take control and either do some four-by-four breathing – So four in, four hold, four out, four hold. That can be one.

Another one is to do progressive muscle relaxations. But first of all, do it by encouraging over-tension in the site. So when your body wants to tremble and shake and be overly tense like it does with an adrenaline reaction, purposefully clenching parts of your body one by one, and then releasing them, encourages your brain to do what it wants to do with those muscles, which is really, like, use them, right? So when we clench and tighten and get a whole heap of tension in the muscles, and then release it, your body gets a feeling like "Oh, it's happening! What I want to be happening is happening." Helping all of those things discharges energy and lets your body return to its balance sort of naturally, because it can and will.

In Australia, however, your body won't return to a balance in a hurry if you're flicking through disaster news. So I would urge everybody listening to this not – not, not, not! Resist the call, the bad salesman in your brain that says "Check it out. You've got to find out what's going on! It's really important that you know!" It's not, unless it's around you.

DAVID: From outside, it looks like the fires in Australia are a fairly good indicator of

impending collapse. The climate has changed enough, and human degradation of the land has advanced enough, to cause unprecedented, unimaginable catastrophe. Is that true?

AIMEE: Yeah, that's true. That's really sad.

DAVID: Given that: You are close to it, what would you say to those of us who are far away coping with our own things, but nothing like the fires that are there? What would you say? What have you learned? What should we look forward to?

AIMEE: So I've been thinking about this. I suppose some of the things that I would say is:

It's going to happen far faster than you think it is, and it's not going to happen in any of the ways you've imagined. And the magnitude of difficulties is exponential. Even with my three weeks supply of food and water that I'm supposed to have – that the Department of Agriculture tells me to have – what comes after?

I think part of what I'm thinking is that: Don't get lost in arguing about who's right and who's wrong, anymore. Or who's to blame and who's not to blame, anymore. It's really just what people are doing. That's really what matters. It's not to say, don't talk about things. It's just, you know, if you find yourself really caught up in something that is very specific, zoom out. Because this is bigger than that.

And everybody thinks they're doing the right thing. There's very few evil people in the world, truly. And even them, I think with my understanding of mental illness, those people are different. There's some humanity that's a bit different in them. "Evil." Meh! It's a value judgment, and it's one that's come through from old religions trying to make us do what they want us to do: be scared of death, which is also foolish.

So I would also say that: Why be scared of death? I mean, I'm scared of agony. I don't want to die in agony. That's what I'm scared of, is pain. Oh, this is not helpful! Or answering your question, I don't think.

DAVID: (Laughs.) Okay, no problem.

AIMEE: Is it?

DAVID: Yes. But.... In the face of this kind of mayhem, we look for any kind of wisdom that makes itself apparent. So I'm just trying to ask what....

AIMEE: Make peace! Make peace with the people that you need to make peace with. Make love, and I don't mean sex. I mean make love to everybody around you. Like...

God! Open your heart. Do things, connect with people. Do things around you that are meaningful.

Don't get to a point where you go "Oh, but if I... I would've.... I would've!" Don't let yourself get to that point. "Oh, but if I'd known, I would have done blah blah blah blah blah!" And I'm not talking bucket list: go and snorkel, or climb a reef, or bungee-jump off stuff. Although that, you know, I'm sure has its place for some people. I'm talking more about the stuff of your soul, the stuff of your heart.

If there are people that you want to talk to, talk to them. If there's things that you want to say, say them. If there's things you want to wear, wear them! If there's ways you want to dance, dance them.

Stop worrying about what we think other people are thinking about us, because it is wrong...it is wrong, mostly. And we're all thinking the same things. We are not different. We're so busy signaling, aren't we, all the time how different we are from each other. We're not. When fire's coming down through your town, nobody's different. Everybody's the same. And that extends down to the geckos and the koalas and the bugs and the kangaroos and the cows that are trying to outrun the fire too. Everybody's the same. Lean into that now.

DAVID: Amen!

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And that's the story for now, and what a story it is!

That was Aimee Maxwell in Australia, where she is a practicing psychologist. Aimee is a moderator for the Positive Deep Adaptation Facebook group, where I also volunteer. One of the great things about participating in the Deep Adaptation group is that you get to meet and talk to wonderful people from all around the world.

A transcript of this interview is available on my website at <https://cometogether.me/>. If you'd like to discuss what you've heard with me and other people, please join the [Come Together Conversation Group](#), on Facebook. (The link is on the website.) I'm David Baum, in Seattle. Until we meet again, farewell!

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