

Ep #15: Trauma and Anxiety Explained



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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And so this gets even more complicated if you've lived in chronic, let's say, child abuse or chronic stress. A lot of times, because you're living in continuous trauma, it can actually create an anxiety disorder because you're just on high alert all the time. You know, your worry systems are highly kicked up and you're always engaged in this process of being really worried and concerned about what's happening next.

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Hello, my friends. Welcome to episode number 15. Okay, so today, we are actually going to do part two of the anxiety episode that I did two episodes ago, so episode 13 was about understanding anxiety. And I've gotten quite a few questions around that, so I thought, hey, let's do a part two and just answer some of those questions here.

So the main question that I got – it sounds like all of y'all are pretty good with this idea that there are biological components to anxiety and there are genetic components to anxiety. Where it sounds like some confusion came up is around trauma. So we're going to take some time in this episode to sort of break down some of the elements of working with trauma and anxiety symptoms, if that is indeed you. So I do think this is probably one of the most widely misunderstood concepts. And so let's take some time to break this down.

So, when it comes to traumatic experiences, this is how it works; whatever you were going through at the time of the traumatic experience happened, those emotions freeze in time. They freeze in your nervous system and they shoot off symptoms, i.e. anxiety, if that was indeed the emotion that froze in time.

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So because in today's podcast episode, we're going to talk specifically about anxiety, I'm not going to get into all the ins and outs of all the other emotions that can get frozen in time, but just know, anxiety is not the only symptom that can freeze in time when you go through a traumatic experience.

There can be a lot of emotions. There can be a lot of symptoms. All of that stuff can kind of freeze in time, but because today I'm focusing on anxiety symptoms, that's what you're going to hear me use examples of and that's what you're going to hear me talk most about today.

So, for example, if you were a young child and your parents fought all the time, like vicious fighting, like very, very scary fighting, you might have a traumatic experience that when people yell at each other, your body freezes or you get incredibly anxious. And because this happened in early childhood, you actually may not know why because, in addition to trauma, sometimes our memories block.

But then there's another element that even for the child who experienced no trauma, a lot of us have childhood amnesia, right, that's what we call it, which basically means, for the majority of the population, most people don't remember much that happens to them under the age of four or five. And so that's pretty normal.

But if you add a trauma element to it, trauma, because it takes up so much of your stress hormones, cortisol, and all kinds of things. It can actually create memory blocks in that moment. And so that creates a little bit of an extra complicated layer. And so if you were a young child – let's use this example – and your parents are fighting all the time in this vicious way and it impacted you feeling scared, not safe, and really anxious about what might be coming next, that might be frozen in time in your nervous system.

So, any time anything comes up in your current life – so now let's fast forward and say you are now 25 years old and you're not five anymore, any time there's a disagreement going on, you notice your body freezes and,

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or, you get incredibly anxious. And so that can be kind of confusing because you're like, this fight has nothing to do with me.

It might be your friends or it might be someone else and just maybe even overhearing it or watching it on TV, you notice you tense up and it creates kind of a stress response for you. And so this can be an example of how anxiety can get birthed out of traumatic experiences.

So perhaps you have this unresolved trauma as a child because, as we know, for kids under the age of five, when parents are fighting and there's a lot of chaos in the house, it actually creates a traumatic experience for kids because their number one priority is feeling safe and secure in the home and in their relationship with their primary caregivers.

And so when there's a lot of fighting or uncertainty, that can sometimes feel traumatic to kids because it is threatening their safety and wellbeing. That's kind of how the body and the brain process it at a very young age.

So, let's say you're going through life and you notice, I have tons of anxiety every time I'm with people that raise their voice. And sometimes, to be honest, friends, it's honestly not that clear cut, where people are fighting and so it reminds me of when people are fighting in my house. Sometimes it does, but trauma is a very complicated issue and don't let tell you anything different. Trauma is complicated and it's unique in how it manifests for every single individual for reasons I've laid out in previous episodes.

A lot of it has to do with your personality. It has to do with your biology. It has to do with your environment. And it has to do with your level of resiliency, how much support you have. I mean, there are so many factors to why trauma and traumatic experiences manifest differently for different people. So that's why I don't like to get on this comparison game of, like, "Oh well she had it so much worse than me so I shouldn't be complaining."

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No, that's wrong thinking and that's minimizing your own experience and that's actually just hurting yourself, okay. We need to own our experiences, no matter how big or small they are, and we don't compare them to other people. So we let other people heal from their experiences and take ownership of what they need to do to make themselves better. And on the flipside, we own our own story and we own the parts that impacted us and we take responsibility for that and we heal and we move forward.

Do you see why the comparison game just does not work? Trauma, anxiety, a lot of these symptoms that manifest are very unique to the individual. And truth here, every single person is deserving of healing and a fresh start. But comparing yourself against other people is going to get in the way of your process because you are denying your experience. And most people don't realize that.

They're like, no, I'm just trying to be realistic, that I really didn't have it as bad as that. But it's just not helpful thinking. We all have to honor our experiences, heal from them, and grow. And if you're denying them by saying someone else had it worse than me, that's not helpful to them and it's not helpful to you, okay. What is helpful to both of you is that you own your side of the street and you let them own theirs, okay.

Alright, so I diverted a little bit there but I think that was really important information for you guys to kind of absorb and think through. So going back to traumatic experiences and anxiety – so because now, after I just went on my little rant, there is unique elements to everybody's experience.

So sometimes, somebody yelling isn't necessarily going to trigger when you were little and people were yelling because traumatic memory processes so differently for every person and so it could be something different. It could be that every time your parents fought, you were looking outside and you saw a tree, and that particular tree now is a symbol of feeling unsafe. That's how your memory logged it in.

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So now, every time you see that tree, you have a PTSD response. Do you see how that seems completely unrelated? I can't tell you how many people I see that come forward with these images like this. They're like, "I don't know what my problem is, but every time I see this particular tree, I have a complete freak-out and it makes no sense to me."

Okay, so this is again why trauma should not be dealt with, with anyone other than someone who is trained in trauma healing, particularly therapists. And not every therapist is trauma-informed. Not every therapist knows how to work with these complicated issues. So again, not every therapist is created equal in that we all have our own specialties, we all have our own subcategories of what we're good at or what we're educated in or what we help clients heal from. So make sure, when you're looking for a therapist and you're having some kind of interesting trauma, anxiety symptoms, that you really find a therapist that really gets how to work with that.

This is an example of what we're talking about; so how, from a traumatic experience, you can actually have full blown anxiety symptoms. And sometimes it's not quite so situational. It just really, really depends on what the original traumatic event was. And so this gets even more complicated if you lived in chronic, let's say, child abuse or chronic stress.

A lot of times, because you're living in continuous trauma, it can actually create an anxiety disorder because you're just on high alert all the time, you know. Your worry systems are highly kicked up and you're always engaged in this process of being really worried and concerned about what's happening next, thus anxiety.

A large portion of that has to do with that you have been living in continuous trauma, and so your body and your brain and your emotions have learned bad things can happen at any time and I need to be on top of my game at all times. And thus, you're going to have a host of anxiety symptoms as a result of that.

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So, here's the differentiator. So in order to heal from those anxiety issues, when they're based in trauma, you have to heal the trauma first. Okay, you get some coping skills around the anxiety so that you can function better and be stable day to day while you work on the traumatic experiences that created the anxiety symptoms.

So, the other piece of this to keep in mind is constantly I hear from people that have trauma, and this is very specific to trauma, that mindfulness does not work. It makes them feel more unsafe. They don't like it, and it's not easy to do. And I always affirm people when they say this because this is the truth about PTSD, this is the truth about trauma.

There is a thing called hyper-vigilance, and this hyper-vigilance, you want to think about it as a huge scanner going around and around in circles scanning for danger at all times. And so when you are healing from traumatic experiences, you tend to be on high alert and you don't even realize you're doing this because it's part of your survival make up. So you're just kind of doing it throughout the day and it's become such a big part of you that you're not even really questioning it so much.

But this is what's happening for people, and so mindfulness, although I think mindfulness is really, really great for anxiety, but it's certain types of anxiety and it's for certain types of people. And then for people with trauma and PTSD, a lot of times, mindfulness is not something we incorporate really early on in treatment.

Like, early on in treatment, we need to stabilize in different ways, but mindfulness can come in handy a little bit later on when we're able to heal some of the traumatic experiences and we're able to get the hyper-vigilance piece down a little bit.

And sometimes mindfulness can be helpful for this, but for a lot of people, it's incredibly triggering, and here's why; mindfulness is communicating for you to take down your guard, for you to stand down, for you to not

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overthink, for you to not be on high alert, and that will sometimes make your survival mechanisms dig in deeper.

They will be like, hell no, I am not calming down, something absolutely terrible could happen, a meteor could come from the sky at any moment or an airplane could crash into my house. This is how extreme this piece of hyper-vigilance thinks. It is ready for anything.

And so if you're trying to incorporate a mindfulness practice where you're meditating, specifically meditating – so I want to be really specific. There's a lot of elements to mindfulness that are really, really helpful to people that have trauma. It's the meditation piece that is usually most triggering initially, okay.

And that's because, when we meditate, we're trying to get into a relaxed calm state, and if we're laying on the floor, I mean, we almost just feel like dead meat. That's how a trauma brain is going to interpret that, that you're vulnerable laying on the floor and therefore hell no, right, "No way am I going to make myself vulnerable to an attack."

This is kind of how this hyper vigilance narrates in your head. And so I don't want you to feel bad. If you're someone who has a history of trauma and you're not able to meditate, it's okay. There is not a one-size-fits-all for every single person.

You want to use what works for you based on the stage of healing that you are in. So for a lot of trauma survivors, they have to build up to doing these meditations. So sometimes it's like 30 seconds, and then it's a minute, and then it's a minute and a half. But a lot of times, you have to almost build up your window of tolerance that you can get into a meditative state and survive it. That alone is a corrective experience all by itself.

So, if you're a trauma survivor, I want you to learn to just accept and honor where you are now and use tools that support you where you are now. There's not shoulds. Just because meditation is a good thing, doesn't mean

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it's the right thing for you right now, and that's okay because if you're working with a competent therapist, I'm sure that person is giving you plenty of tools and strategies that do work for you right now.

You have to remember, the healing process is fluid, so it's always morphing and it's always changing, in a good way. So I know the trauma brain can hear change is something negative, but we mean this in, like, okay well I got through this part of it, and now I'm at this level and now I need this kind of support.

And you might get to a point where mindfulness is all of a sudden something that's really helpful to you, specifically the meditation. And so that's great.

You have to remember, the end goal is just to try to make you feel as safe and secure as possible and you are the biggest component, you are the biggest element in that, and learning how to do that is part of the therapy process. So, first of all, if you're even doing this, I am so proud of you. This is hard, hard work, but it is so, so worth it in the end.

So I hope that this episode sort of cleared some of the confusion around what I mean by anxiety and traumatic experiences. And to be honest, guys, there is so much more to be said on this topic. I mean, this is, like, my specialty area. There is so much to be said here. So take what I've said just as an educational tool for yourself and really embrace where you are in the healing process, you know, and taking the time to just affirm yourself and encourage yourself to keep going, okay.

So, if you are healing from traumatic experiences and anxiety is one of your primary symptoms, journaling can actually be a really great tool, okay. And so it's really just a total emotional dump on paper and you don't keep it. And you do it with handwriting because there is an element between handwriting and your brain that gives a bigger release than typing. I mean, you can type if that's your only option, and I know a lot of clients do that,

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but there is an added benefit to doing actual handwriting on paper when it comes to discharging emotion.

And so getting into a habit of 15 minutes a day of just completely unfiltered emotional dump on paper where you don't lift the pen from the page, you just really go for it. If you do that every day, that can kind of build up as an outlet for you. And the more you get some of these charged emotions, because we've talked about it in other episodes, emotions are energy in the body, they need a place to go.

So you want to make sure that you are journaling as a way to get some of that emotional energy out. And then you don't have to keep it. It doesn't mean that you have to keep it. So journaling like this isn't like, "Dear Jonny, I love you so much. You're so cute." Okay, no.

This is like, "I want a hamburger. Why does life suck? I can't believe I'm so mad at her. She always does this to me," and you just go. It's like a vent session. The pen never lifts from the page. You time yourself for 15 minutes and you integrate that as a daily practice.

You don't have to keep it afterwards, especially if you've got some snooty people that you're living with that will probably read it and judge it. Just rip it out and shred it. You don't need to keep it. However, in that vent session, there might be something that you'll want to bring into therapy.

And something that comes out, you're like, "Whoa, I did not realize that this person I'm so mad at reminds me of my old babysitter who always made me feel..." X, Y, and Z. So sometimes in these vent sessions, there can actually be some insight that pops out in the midst of everything that you're saying.

So you want to keep the insight part, take it to your therapist, and work through that, and then just get rid of the rest. You don't need it. You don't need to hold onto it.

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The other added benefit of throwing it away is it's almost like symbolic of just getting all that static anxious energy out, in a way. Like, you don't have to own it anymore. It's now on paper. You've not shredded it. You've now let it go. So that's a second step in it that you can do, if that works for you. It won't work for everyone, but for some people, it can be a really freeing tool to be like, "I got it out on paper and I don't have to hold onto it anymore."

Because, when we have anxiety, we are holding onto so much negative emotion and we are holding onto so much we don't even fully understand, it can be quite freeing to just release it and let it go in a really tangible way.

Alright, my friends. I'm hoping that this was helpful. And as always, if you notice that strong emotions come up or you feel triggered while you're listening to these podcasts, please seek out mental health support in your local state of residence.

There is never shame in getting help or support. It's probably the best thing you can do for yourself. So I highly encourage you today to take ownership of your mental health and get the help and support that you need.

And lastly, if you liked today's episode, please take a second to rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. It really helps other people find the podcast. And we want to get this into the hands of as many people that really need it. So I really appreciate your support. If you liked today's episode, please take a moment to rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. Alright, my friends, I will see you next week.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Mental Health Remix. If you like what you've heard and want to learn more, go to nicolesymcox.com.

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