

Ep #5: 3 Tools for Changing the Stories We Tell Ourselves



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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Most people don't realize the impact that their thoughts have on their life and their relationships. Sometimes, we think so quickly and automatically, we don't even realize the story we are telling ourselves on a daily basis. This is especially true if we are managing a mental health disorder, but it can be true for anyone.

The human brain is wired with a negativity bias, so whether or not you have a mental health disorder, you are still a human with a brain and that brain is vulnerable to negative thinking. So challenging yourself to think differently and programming healthier thoughts is an active practice we can all benefit from.

Welcome to *Mental Health Remix*, a show for ambitious humans who are ready to feel, think, and be different. If you want to stop struggling with perfectionism, build better relationships, and connect with yourself and your potential, this is the place for you...

Here's your host, educator, coach and licensed psychotherapist, Nicole Symcox...

Hey, hey everyone. Welcome to the show. Today we are talking about how to think differently, and we're going to talk a little bit around the stories that we create for ourselves.

Most people don't realize the impact that their thoughts have on their life and relationships. Sometimes, we think so quickly and automatically, we don't even realize the story we are telling ourselves on a daily basis. And this is especially true if we are managing a mental health disorder, but really, it can be true for anyone.

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and programming healthier responses and healthier thoughts is an active practice we can all benefit from.

And actually, this whole idea around stories that we tell ourselves is a key skill in learning how to manage your emotional responses in relationships. We talked about this a little bit in episode four, and so today we're going to dive in deeper to this idea of stories and how this plays out for people.

So let's start here. What is the story thing anyway? Basically, a story line is something we create in our own minds in reaction to a thought, a person, or a situation. As humans, we love a good drama. There is a reason Game of Thrones is epic TV. And we also love a good book, or we love a good piece of gossip.

We love to tell stories. It is one of our foundational things as human beings and we've been doing it since the beginning of time. But believe it or not, we tell ourselves stories all the time. And so depending on how well we are managing our minds, those stories can be full of anxiety, stress, anger, and frustration, or they can be empowering and reality based and focused in the present moment.

So the story thing can be a really useful tool to get your head around when you learn where your thoughts and emotions are coming from and you learn how to flip the script. And this is one of these foundational things that people engage with in therapy.

So many times, when we are new to thought work, the story we are telling ourselves tends to go undetected or unnoticed. And we just automatically believe every single thought that's in our head and we react to it. And I want to just blow a truth whistle on this. I don't even know if a truth whistle exists but it does now.

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So truthfully, thoughts are just thoughts, and you don't have to believe every single one of them. You want to imagine your brain is just a huge processor and it's processing the world as quickly and as efficiently as it can on a daily basis. And so it's going to make interpretations and do what it knows how to do automatically unless you teach it something different because the brain's a great learner. So if you teach it something differently, it'll likely adapt.

So thought work becomes critically important if you want to feel better and think differently, it takes your active participation. This is not a passive process. You have to engage with it, sometimes daily, sometimes hourly, sometimes by the minute, depending on your situation or what's going on around you, and challenging yourself.

We have all been there. I know I've been there where it's like, oh my gosh, I have to challenge and reframe my thought every single minute because I'm dealing with a difficult person or I'm dealing with a difficult situation. So just have grace for yourself around that. I mean, life is life and we just have to learn to live it the best that we can.

So I'm talking a lot about stories, but let me set this up for you, what theory I'm actually specifically referencing. So the theory I'm referencing for this episode is CBT. Cognitive behavioral therapy. And it is this idea that our thoughts impact our emotions and our emotions impact our behavior, and that behavior impacts our thought again, which means we either create a new thought or we revert to the old one.

In other words, our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are this giant loop of cause and effect that happen whether or not we realize it. So probably better to realize it because that's going to give you the biggest opportunity for change and transformation. Whenever we have an awareness about something and some tools on how to do the thing, we have an opportunity to get better at it.

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So when we break down these thoughts so we can see how it's impacting our feelings, and thus our behavior, we have a huge opportunity for a deeper sense of control over how we think, feel, and behave in the world. So do you kind of see? If you were in a workshop with me right now, I would be drawing a giant circle on the board and there would be a bunch of arrows pointing to thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and then another arrow straight back up to thoughts.

And that's where your opportunity lies because you can change where that loop ends. It doesn't have to be the same triggering thought. So you can start with a thought that I'm a failure, you can feel the feelings of defeat with that, you can eat an entire pint of ice cream as the behavior, and then that can circle back up to the thought of well, I'm a failure. See, I just ate a pint of ice cream.

So that's how that thought loop can work in one area. Now, you can do a totally different one using the exact same model but you can choose to have a different response. So same thought. I'm a failure. But the emotional response in that maybe is defeat. And so instead of taking an action that reinforces the defeat, you can take a different action.

So maybe it's crying or calling a friend or reminding yourself of all your other successes and the fact is that you're not a failure. You're just having some trouble getting this right. And maybe after you cry or express your anger, or vent to someone, you can now discharge or exercise – oh my goodness, exercise is great in these moments.

Releasing some of the emotional charge that's there, you can invite your logical brain to kick back on and say okay, I feel like a failure. This is why. Perhaps I can take a different action that might get me a different result. What do I need in this moment?

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And so it might be just as simple as talking to someone and then they help you reframe that and you get back to a new thought, which is I'm not a failure, I just need some additional support. Or perhaps I need some more information or reframing in I'm trying and doing the best that I can do.

So you have an opportunity to reframe the thought to a more realistic neutral viewpoint. Do you notice I did not change the thought to a positive one? Negative to positive does not always work. So you want to start with baby steps and change it to something that's more realistic and neutral and something your brain can actually take action on.

That is how you start challenging some of these patterns. So that is tool number one. So I hope you caught that, and if you didn't, I would encourage you to re-listen to the track on that. And here's the thing to keep in mind. If you've found maybe doing that felt difficult or it was actually anxiety-producing to try to do that on your own, just get curious. Take it as information and then take that to your therapist.

Why are you so emotionally attached to this idea of being a failure? Why is it so difficult to reframe and change the behavior and thus change the thought? And so this is great information because not everybody can do this right out the gate. They need a lot of support and a lot of help.

And if you have PTSD or a trauma history of some kind, CBT can be really hard to do by yourself without some additional support from a therapist and utilizing some other modalities such as EMDR, art therapy, somatic experiencing, some things like that that can help to heal and support the area in your life that was traumatized, or maybe you have a traumatic memory around that.

So again, you're never stuck. It just gives you information that something deeper is at play. There's always a reason. When we have unconscious resistance to doing something tangible or logical in our lives, it gives us

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information that probably something from our past is interfering, and that's okay. That's also an opportunity.

It's also an opportunity to heal and get better and seek out the right support to get you there. But CBT is still a good tool to have in your toolbox, especially while you're working on the deeper stuff. So I just want to do a little – just kind of let you know a little bit about that so that you can set realistic expectations for yourself, especially since we're working with the thought of failure. You are not a failure. You're just finding what works for you.

So a second tool for you is around keeping a thought log. So you can actually keep track of your thoughts that are coming up and your emotional responses to that thought. A lot of times we have to start here because like I said before, we've been programmed and wired to do life one way for such a long time, much of our stuff is on autopilot.

And so we have to actively disrupt the system any time you want to disrupt autopilot. And your best-case scenario for doing that is first to get clarity and awareness around it, why you're doing what you're doing, and noticing these sneaky – and they are sneaky sometimes – these sneaky quiet automatic thoughts that play in the background of your mind and start making reactive decisions for you.

Because if you think these automatic thoughts so quickly without your awareness, your response and your reactions to it are going to be fierce, and you're probably just going to react into a behavior that you have programmed in. So this whole circle that I was talking about with CBT, we do this in 100 different ways sometimes.

And so when we become aware of it and we become equipped with how to handle it, we open up so many possibilities for change in our lives. So I would encourage you if you're new to thought work, or even if you're not

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new to thought work, we're thinking lots and lots and lots of thoughts all the time and we're reacting so much to the thoughts in our heads and what other people say.

So just kind of noticing what is a thought I'm thinking, what is the emotional story I'm creating around this, and what are my options for change. And so when you actually write some of this stuff down, you can actually see and interact with it in a more logical way. And so again, if this is triggering for you, just keep in mind, something deeper might be going on and that's okay. There's support for that.

So that is tool number two. And then tool number three, what I would invite you into is becoming an observer of your thoughts. This is actually a mindfulness practice. So part of mindfulness is we learn to become an observer instead of a reactor to our thoughts. We step back and we notice thoughts passing through, almost as if they're clouds in the sky.

So mindfulness is about being in the present moment and staying grounded and just noticing. And I've noticed in working with clients, when they become observers of their thoughts, it actually gives them a lot of information because when we jump in with reactivity or our stories start to play, we can't actually hear what's underneath all that. It becomes so noisy and loud inside of our own emotions, inside of our own heads, we can't empower or equip ourselves, or even hear ourselves think.

So when we step back into an observer role and we're just noticing thoughts as they're passing through and avoiding making meaning out of them, and this is just a practice. I don't mean walking around the world ditz in it with literally your head in a cloud, that's not what I'm saying here.

But when you're noticing a theme and you're noticing a reoccurring thought process that is constantly triggering for you, taking a moment to just take a

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step back and just notice them as you would just notice anything, and just see what that is about for you and maybe do some journaling around that.

Because again, it's the stories that we create around these thoughts that create the emotional charge and then we have to take action on that. So we talked about that in earlier episodes that emotions create a ton of energy in the body. And whenever we have energy in the body, we have to do something with that, and that's true for anxiety, it's true for anger, it's true for sadness.

That energy needs to be responded to with care and support and we have to give it an outlet of some kind. And that outlet really shouldn't be on another person. That outlet shouldn't be hurting yourself in some way. There are ways to discharge emotional energy and productive and healthy ways.

So I know I gave you quite a few tools today, but here's your week's challenge. Notice the stories that are coming up for you and work to change them. If you were a script writer and you could write an epic ending for how you want this scenario to play out, what would that look like? What thoughts would you have to tell yourself? What emotions would you have to feel and what actions would you have to take?

And as always, I want to do a little disclaimer here as a way to empower your sense of wellbeing. If you notice things come up for you when you're listening to this podcast such as strong emotions, feeling triggered, or feeling stuck, I highly recommend you seek support from a mental health professional in your local state of residence.

You have to remember, triggers and emotional responses are just information that something in your emotional work needs support. And there is absolutely no shame in seeking out mental health support from a licensed therapist, doctor, or professional in your local state of residence.

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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.