

Ep #6: How to Manage Your Perfectionism



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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Ep #6: How to Manage Your Perfectionism

I think Brené Brown says it really well. One of her quotes from her book is, “Perfectionism is a shield we use to protect ourselves from the pain of shame, blame, and judgment.” And I’m curious, have you ever considered this to be the case for you? Could perfectionism be acting as a shield for you? Could it be protecting you from all your anxiety, or could it be protecting you from anyone seeing it?

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 episode number six. Today, we are talking about perfectionism. And even if you’re not a perfectionist, you will probably find this episode helpful because we’re going to have several tools given at the end that have to do with just being in the present moment and managing your time in effective ways and how to talk to yourself and tell yourself a different story when you’re under stress. So, a little sneak peek there.

Alright, so let’s dive in. Truth bomb here; you are enough. You don’t have to prove it. You don’t have to earn it. You simply are enough. But the problem is, your anxiety is telling you a different story. And it’s telling you a story that is not letting you rest in this idea of being enough.

It tells you a story that you need to do, do, do in order to be enough, in order to be worthy of love and respect. Sometimes, anxiety may tell you this story in such an unconscious way, you may not even realize that this is what’s happening in the background for you; that this might be a part of the source of your stress.

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What we know consciously most of the time is that, when you do things, when you keep tasks in motion, you feel in control. You feel, for a blink, no anxiety. You feel, for a second, that you are fully in control of your life. And this is how perfectionism hooks you.

It hooks you into its story because it says, “When I do things, my anxiety goes down.” But it’s being very sneaky because the truth is, it’s anxiety that is driving all of the perfectionism. And a lot of times, when you heal or treat the anxiety that is the root issue of your perfectionist behaviors, a lot of the symptoms go down.

Alright, so we are going to get into this full force in this episode. Are you ready? Let’s get it. Perfectionism is like this double-edged sword because, on the one hand, you get a lot of positive accolades for all the things that you’re able to accomplish, do well, and efficiently. Like, people really appreciate that about you.

And I also imagine there’s a part of you that appreciates that about you. A lot of perfectionists like this part of themselves. They like that they can get stuff done. What they do not enjoy is all the anxiety and all the turmoil and all of the pressure that comes along with it.

And unfortunately, when it comes to a perfectionist mindset, you do not get one without the other. They will come right alongside each other. And so it’s really important to start adopting a good enough mindset and become flexible in that so that you can live a life that feels more balanced and at peace while being a badass at getting things done. We don’t need to trade one for the other.

And a lot of times, when I talk to perfectionists, they feel like they’re going to have to give up one for the other, and that’s really not true. So a lot of times, when we can get the anxiety down, you can still keep your efficiency and your ability to get things done. But treating the anxiety piece of it just gives you the opportunity to have more headspace, to feel more clear and

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collected without having to work so hard at it. So again, not either or, you can have both, but it takes a little bit of work to heal out the anxiety first.

I think Brené Brown says it really well. One of her quotes from her book is, “Perfectionism is a shield we use to protect ourselves from the pain of shame, blame, and judgment.” And I’m curious, have you ever considered this to be the case for you? Could perfectionism be acting as a shield for you? Could it be protecting you from all your anxiety, or could it be protecting you from anyone seeing it?

Sometimes, our thoughts and behaviors are on autopilot, so unless we stop to ask ourselves these types of questions, perfectionism is perfectly happy to keep you doing life as you’ve always done. And we’ve talked about this in previous episodes; if you want to change your habits, you’ve got to disrupt the autopilot. And that’s going to take you doing things differently and enduring a little bit of discomfort in the process of change.

So here’s the deal with shields; the negative side of having a shield up like this is it can actually block you from intimacy and relationships. Now, that probably feels like we just took a stark left, but I want you to stay with me because it’s not.

Perfectionism makes you a powerhouse of getting tasks done because you’re channeling all of this anxiety into doing things. But this is where the power of perfectionism is limited. It doesn’t translate well into relationships, with yourself or with others, because it’s a little bit robotic in getting things done so much and so efficiently. So, relationships don’t really care for that very much.

So people don’t like feeling like they’re a project or a to-do list or that they’re being criticized every second for not doing something to a high level or that everything in life requires urgency. I mean, think about it, you’re probably doing this very thing to yourself all the time; I doubt you’re enjoying that. So we need to be really careful about the story perfectionism tells us because it can sound like a really big critic.

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And so some, I think, of the shield that people put up when they are perfectionists is it protects us from other people really seeing us. And this is why it blocks intimacy, because intimacy is being seen, heard, and valued as a human being. And if you have a shield up or you're only showing the parts of yourself that can achieve and do things really well in life, you're not really showing the human side of you and it makes it difficult for people to relate to you on that level.

And this is where the problem in perfectionists comes is many times, they report to me that they feel incredibly lonely. They feel like people only want to hang out with them because of what they can do, because of what they can achieve, and it's all these outward things.

And it doesn't feel good after a while because human nature, we want to be seen, heard, and understood. Even if we've been wounded in this area, we still desire that kind of connection with other people. And so it's so important to heal this part out or to work on this so that you don't have to live this lonely life that is only based on achievements or what the last thing you completed was.

Because also, striving to get things done creates an enormous amount of stress and anxiety and overwhelm. And if you have an attachment that your worth and value is dependent on that, you're going to feel like an emotional mess.

There's no way for those two to be tied together, and you have to feel good about it because that sets you up to be a person whose love, value, and worth is conditional on what they do, and that is a crappy feeling. That does not feel good and it's going to create a slew of negative thoughts and it's going to reinforce a negative story.

So remember in episode five, we were talking about the stories that we tell ourselves. So if you're a perfectionist and you believe that I have to be perfect in order to be good enough, that is a really negative story. And it's

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going to create anxiety and depression and probably anger and frustration. And those are not areas that we want to stay in.

So when you carry a mindset that I have to be perfect or I can't make mistakes, you're really trapping yourself and it's not realistic because, spoiler alert, perfection doesn't exist. I know, I'm really sorry to tell you that. you're probably really disappointed because you've been working really hard towards this.

But here's the good news; there is an alternative. Perfectionism isn't attainable, but good enough is, and I know what you guys just thought. If you're a perfectionist and you just heard the words good enough, you probably almost had a visceral reaction to that. You're like, "Gross, no thank you."

But good enough really is good enough. It doesn't mean mediocre. It doesn't mean second best. It means living out your abilities to the best of your capabilities with integrity. That's how I'm defining it for this episode.

Okay, so take a load off because that, probably, if you really sink into what I just said, it might feel more realistic. Like, "Oh, I could do that. I can put forth my best effort with integrity, for sure. I can do that." Versus, "I need to be perfect," which is – I don't even know that our brains can come up with a way to be perfect because as humans – at least I haven't met one - perfectionism isn't attainable.

But here's the web that perfectionism weaves; sometimes it can feel like a drug because it does produce positive results in our lives. And so we're not really that motivated to give it up. We like the feeling we get from accomplishments and a job well done. We like being number one. We like this sense of achievement. We like the predictability of checking off a to-do list, but it's a double-edged sword.

And for any perfectionists out there, you know the love-hate relationship you have with this very thing. And many times, perfectionism ends up being

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like this coping strategy that gets born out of chaos. And we don't even realize this until we start digging into it because chaos can be defined several different ways.

It can be internal chaos, it can be external chaos, it can be situational, it could be relational. But anything that we perceived as being out of control, sometimes we can overcompensate for that by developing a set of coping skills. And a lot of times, perfectionism is this giant set of ways to cope with all of this internal anxiety of not feeling good enough. So we overcompensate for it and we just achieve, achieve, achieve, and we show up in our lives and we get things done. So again, double-edged sword.

That's not a bad thing. I'm not saying it's a bad thing to achieve. I think that's wonderful and great. What I think is miserable about the thing is being plagued with that much anxiety, stress, and overwhelm. So that is the purpose of this episode is to address the underlying issue that is creating all the discomfort. We want to keep the part of you that's an achiever, but we want to decrease the anxiety part of you that's getting in your way.

Many times, perfectionists, at some point in their lives, can account for or tell a story when something felt a bit out of control for them. And here's a little bit of some psychology behind this. When we are children, we have these things that are called vows. And sometimes, we do this.

It's not true for everyone, but sometimes, in certain circumstances, when we feel out of control over overwhelmed, as children – and they're all unconscious – we make these vows to ourselves that we will never experience that kind of pain again. And we start to employ behaviors at a young age to prevent feeling that helpless, caught off-guard or out of control feeling again.

And so the trouble with that is that pain freezes in time. It hasn't processed forward and the story hasn't ended on it. And so it actually is replaying right alongside whatever behaviors you employ to overcompensate for it. So,

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because this episode is on perfectionism, we're directly referencing perfectionist tendencies.

So, for example, if you were a child, perhaps you decide, "I'm not very good at relationships. So I'm going to be really, really great at doing things, getting things done, and that will make me good enough." And again, a lot of times, we do this unconsciously.

Sometimes, people can remember when they actually truly thought something like that, but a lot of times, it's unconscious and it ends up creating this chaos circle for us because there's just a lot of pain that is buried underneath all of these overcompensating behaviors. And that is why therapy can be so helpful because, when you go back and support and heal the child in you that was wounded or hurt in some way, it a lot of times drops some of the symptomology that it is creating.

And as I said before, a lot of people that are perfectionists become that way unknowingly as a way to shield themselves from criticism and judgment and a way to feel good enough in the world. It's almost like this giant set of coping skills that gets born out of anxiety and it channels through doing.

And it's a really interesting idea because I think we think about anxiety disorders and we have some stereotypes in our mind or some stigmas of what anxiety looks like. But the truth is, anxiety is a cluster of very similar symptoms from person to person, which is why it's in the DSM. But they manifest uniquely person to person.

And this is why therapy is not a one size fits all practice. You want to work with a therapist that can really see you and see how your anxiety is showing up for you in your life specifically, not just from a textbook because there are many highly, highly anxious people who are very high-functioning, but they hide it and they channel it through doing things or they channel it through other activities.

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So you never really see some of the more high-functioning people fall apart because they're holding it in so tightly. But this, my friends, if this is you, this will have an expiration date. So I would really encourage you to step out and get support or help if this is you and you're holding your emotions really tightly.

So here's the thing; there is no amount of perfectionism or achieving that will make you invincible to pain, criticism, or judgment. So we need to work towards getting a more balanced mindset so we can have a more attainable goal for ourselves emotionally. Because what is attainable is learning that you are valuable, despite your mistakes, that you are lovable despite your ability to perform, and you are good enough when you act with integrity and not perfection.

And so here's the good news to all of this; it is possible. You can work towards healing parts of yourself that feel scared, anxious, confused, and the parts that don't feel enough. You can take ownership of your life and learn how to feel and be different in the world.

Just because you've done life one way for a long time, doesn't mean you have to stay that way. So, for the sake of this episode, and if you listened to previous episodes, we talked about CBT and some of the stories we tell ourselves. And so it's always possible to flip the script and change the story.

Alright, so, here's three hot tips to help you with your perfectionism. Number one, staying in the present moment. Don't discount this one. If it was easy to do, everyone would do it. And I can assure you, not everyone is doing it.

So, because perfectionism is largely connected to anxiety disorders most of the time, your brain is going to constantly invite you into worry and it's going to constantly invite you into fear about the future and making sure you've done everything possible to avoid any kind of conflict or problem.

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And here's the problem; when we are future-focused, it creates an immense amount of anxiety because we don't have the ability to control the future. It's not here yet. So it creates a bunch of anxiety because we're anticipating something that may or may not happen. Like, we don't know.

We can only control our present moment. So if right now, the time is 10am on a Sunday morning, you can only control drinking your coffee, talking to your friend or sitting on the couch with your child. You can only focus on the present moment. And this is a key skill and just anxiety management in general.

But it's a significant challenge for perfectionist because your anxious brain can jump ahead to 14 different catastrophic scenarios really, really quickly. Anxiety is phenomenal at this. And so we want to fight back in terms of grounding ourselves and staying in the present moment with what we can control.

I can control drinking my coffee right now. I can control the words that are coming out of my mouth right now in this moment. Does that make sense? And so you want to start applying that as an active practice because your brain and your anxiety are going to fight you on this. And so once this becomes a habit for you, it does become easier to do. But because we're so wired for worry as perfectionists, it's going to have to be an active practice that you're going to have to do some self-talk around.

So this is one of your biggest challenges this week; stay in the present moment. Don't get ahead of yourself. Stay in control in the present moment and just notice for yourself if that brings you some relief, or if you notice that you feel different.

And this may not be easy for you to do at first and so I really invite you to have grace for yourself because any time you're trying something new, especially when it comes to your thoughts and emotions, it requires a lot of patience and grace for yourself until you can do it with more ease.

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And if you're a perfectionist, you're probably going to challenge yourself to staying in the present moment and expect that you're going to get it right away. So, avoid all of these extreme thinking patterns and just stay in the present moment.

Number two, put time limits on yourself. As perfectionists, we love to perfect. I mean, it's like a drug, you know. We can revise at it, try again over and over and over again until we get it right, until we get it perfect. But here's the problem; it's exhausting. It is downright exhausting and that much overthinking is probably destroying you on the inside a little bit.

You can get lost in this illusion that if you work at it long enough you can get it perfect. And I'm guessing that you've probably had an experience in the past where this actually worked for you. You were actually able to get it perfect and you felt so immensely good about yourself and you've probably been chasing that moment ever since.

But the problem is that there's not enough hours in the day to constantly work and perfect and be human at the same time; enjoying your relationships, enjoying your life. And so you want to put time limits on yourself when it comes to tasks and define for yourself what good enough is.

And again, good enough does not mean mediocre. Good enough does not mean subpar. Good enough means best effort with integrity. So once you have completed a task to that, you are done; done, done, done. Don't think about it anymore. Just allow yourself the feeling and accomplishment of done and move onto being human.

Go see a friend. Go hang out with your kids. Go drink coffee. Go enjoy yourself. Like, you have to incorporate some balance in your life in order to lower some of your stress and anxiety levels. Like, this is essential for perfectionists because we're always trying to do so much for ourselves and for other people, we have to learn to take care of ourselves in a kind compassionate grace-filled way.

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Number three, I want you to create an affirmation for yourself around good enough. So, because I know good enough is a triggering experience for perfectionists, they don't like it, they associate a lot of negative connotations with it. And I think I've given you quite a few examples of how you can reframe the good enough.

But if what I've said doesn't really stick for you, I would encourage you to find what meaning can you put around good enough that would lower your stress and anxiety when you're trying to engage with tasks. And you don't want to go to an extreme positive. A lot of times, positive affirmations can be really triggering for people because they don't feel attainable.

So again, you want to go with a more neutral realistic thought change, rather than extremely positive. And so once you come up with this affirmation for yourselves – so for this episode, we came up with this idea; good enough means I have put forth my best effort with integrity, and that is good enough.

That maybe might be an affirmation for you. But you can flip it to whatever you want to be, but it has to be something that viscerally, in your body, makes you feel calmer, makes you feel capable, and takes the pressure off. Okay, so that's how you know if you actually figured out the right affirmation for yourself; you're going to have a visceral experience to it.

Okay, and then you want to repeat that affirmation to yourself daily because when we repeat things to ourselves, it starts to take root. And that's why it's important. You want to be careful of the things that you tell yourself because, as that silly quote goes, "You're listening, be careful to what you say about yourself, you're listening." Okay, and your brain is wiring things together all the time, so be careful what you say to yourself.

And of course, if this is triggering for you, get help. There's no shame in that, not at all. And I know perfectionists don't like to reach out for help or support because they feel like they can do everything on their own, but I would really challenge you, don't be a lone ranger for the rest of your life.

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Get support, seek out help with a therapist or a group or something that feels supportive to your internal world. And because as we talked about at the top of this episode, you are good enough. You are lovable, despite your ability to perform. You are valuable despite your mistakes, and you are good enough when you act with integrity, not perfection.

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 world 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.

Lastly, if you enjoyed today's show and you don't want to worry about missing an episode, you can subscribe on Apple Podcasts, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. And if you haven't already, I would really appreciate if you could leave a rating and review to let me know what you think and help others find this podcast.

You can visit my website at nicolesymcox.com/podcastlaunch for step by step instructions on how to subscribe, rate, and review. Alright, my friends, I will see you next time.

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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