

Ep #7: Forming New Habits



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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Some of your challenge in changing your thought patterns and changing your behavior patterns and reaching your goals is learning how to live in the gray. It's learning how to take one small step every single day that's going to add up to a bigger step. And so, when you do this, your brain has an opportunity to record success. But you're also training this part of your brain that change can be safe as well. And so people discount this because they think small changes are insignificant and they're unimportant and they don't matter, and you could not be more wrong.

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 seven. Today, we are talking about habits. And I'm going to start today's episode off with a little bit of a recap from episode five, because some of what we're talking about today actually plays off of the CBT model. And so I just want to chat for a second and a quick review of what we talked about in episode number five, which is basically, in episode number five, we talked about how to think differently.

And I mentioned that CBT, cognitive behavioral therapy, is based on this idea that how we think and how we feel and how we act all interact together. And specifically, CBT believes that our thoughts determine our feelings and our behavior. So in other words, our thoughts, feelings, behaviors interact with one another in one big loop; so basically, one giant circle of cause and effect that we do without realizing it.

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Ep #7: Forming New Habits

And people to find it incredibly helpful to break down their thoughts so that they can see how it's impacting their feelings, and thus their behavior. And of course, when we're talking about habits, most of the time, we see this show up in our behavior. So you can see why episode five and this episode are connected in some ways. So that's why I want to recap a little bit about what we talked about in episode number five.

Because, when you break down these thoughts, feelings, and behavior loops that you're in, you have an opportunity for a deeper sense of control over your thinking and your emotional responses, which can be incredibly liberating.

Many times, when people start therapy, they generally feel pretty stuck or out of control when it comes to their thoughts and their emotions. And people are usually pretty aware of one or the other, but rarely are they aware of the connection between the two and how one is directly playing off of the other.

They are either very aware that they are stuck in a negative thinking pattern or a thought loop, or they are very aware that they are stuck in a behavior pattern that they don't like but they also don't know how to stop. And so once people are able to identify the thought that is triggering the emotional response, they gain a sense of awareness and it empowers them and encourages them to make a new behavioral choice.

And this is the foundation of how change starts in your brain. And I'm not going to lie to you, it is tough at first, and here is why' our brains like to do what they know how to do with as little effort as possible.

Okay, so before you jump to, "Oh my goodness, we're just wired to be lazy humans," let me stop you right there. It's not about laziness. The brain is about efficiency. It's managing so many things about you to keep you alive and functioning in the world that it sets up these "Automated systems" to follow that make it efficient so you can live day to day with as little effort as possible.

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Ep #7: Forming New Habits

Okay, I totally hear how that sounds lazy, but really, it's not so much laziness. It's basically that if the brain can put something in autopilot, so to speak, it will. So this is why changing habits takes time and commitment, because the brain has to work at it for a while before it can systemize and create efficient patterns and neural pathways for things to become more automatic.

And when things become more automatic for us, they generally become easier. We do it with a lot less pressure, a lot less thought, and a lot less effort. But in the beginning, when we're trying to set up new habits, I want you to think about it as introducing a new system into your current system.

So, I'm sure you've noticed, when you are trying to create a new habit in anything across the board, it can take maybe three or four weeks before you're really kind of feeling it and you're doing it with a lot less effort and possibly, potentially even enjoying the benefits of it. And so changing your thoughts or changing your relationship patterns requires a lot of the same brain energy as it does to change habits.

So many times, many times I hear from people, "I'm so lazy," or, "I clearly don't want to be happy," or, "It's just impossible for me to change." And really, it's really just about knowing yourself and knowing the game of the mind, knowing what patterns are actually in place for you and how to challenge those patterns appropriately so you can actually make a difference in your life.

And let me tell you, it takes a lot of grace and compassion for yourself when you're in the movement of this because it does take time. That's why all of those things about quick fixes or quick this or quick that, it doesn't usually last. It's not usually sustainable because there's not enough time in place to really put forth all the step by steps that your brain needs in order to make it a habit or to make it something that happens for you more automatically.

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Ep #7: Forming New Habits

So, an example of this – let's use exercise because I think exercise is one of the most common habits people try to start and then feel like a failure because they can't keep with it.

So, generally speaking, the first three weeks of exercise when you are getting back into shape is pretty freaking miserable. So, if you have not been exercising for quite some time and now you're trying to get back into it, there's a high motivation level at first. You're really pumped, you're really excited about it, and you're really committed to this new schedule.

But, when you try to start getting into the pattern of it or get into the flow of the thing, all of this resistance starts to show up and it feels really hard to continue with it because, well, it doesn't really feel good initially. It's hard because it's not part of your normal day to day life and you don't see benefits right away. So you have all these things kind of working against you and then all your mental chatter is going to come up in a form of resistance to it.

So this is why it's so critically important that you put internal and external motivators around you when you are trying to change habits, because left to your own devices, most humans fall off the grid when it comes to implementing new habits. And this is especially true with exercise.

So here's what to keep in mind when you are trying to train your brain to do something new. Your brain is not wired for your happiness. It is wired for your survival. So teaching it to think or behave in new ways that make you feel happy is not actually the motivator you think it is.

So I think a lot of us go for the easy low-hanging fruit on that, which is, "If I was 10 pounds lighter, I would be happy. So I'm going to implement these strategies to make myself happy."

Okay, from a brain standpoint, your brain doesn't actually know what that means. That is not a tangible thing that the brain can execute on. Like,

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Ep #7: Forming New Habits

happy is incredibly broad. It's incredibly wide in its meaning and happy is largely a feeling.

So you can generate feelings of happiness without losing 10 pounds. As we've talked about in other episodes, happiness is an internal job. You can create a moment of happiness for yourself if you take a minute in the morning just to embrace and enjoy your coffee or fully be present with a friend in a conversation or to help someone else out.

Like, there are many, many moments in your life to create happiness. So for you to create a long-term goal just chasing happiness, your brain's not going to know what to do with that. It's like, "Dude, I'm wired to keep you alive every day. I am not wired for some ambiguous idea of happiness because I could create that right now if I wanted to."

But even in those moments, I gave you very specific examples of how you can cultivate happiness in your life in the moment. And so this would be true for long-term goals as well. So your why, when it comes to changing habits, has to be very specific and it needs to be very doable, otherwise your brain is going to have a really hard time staying on board with it because happiness or being skinny or whatever idea you've come up with, that is just way too broad. It just is.

And I think, many times for people, they don't understand this. And so they misinterpret this kind of thought work and this kind of idea around changing habits. And then they start putting negative labels on themselves, okay. And as we talked about in episode five, if you label yourself a failure and then you eat a pint of ice cream to reinforce that idea that you're a failure, the emotion is probably only going to get stronger the more you're reinforcing it in that thought loop.

So here is how you start to change your habits. And it's probably not what you think. And a lot of people that have trauma in their backgrounds or a high-functioning anxiety, they tend to take on a whole lot of things at once and try to make a huge change.

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #7: Forming New Habits

And it works for maybe like a couple of days, maybe a week if you're lucky, and then your brain and your body burn out. They're like, "Can't sustain this, don't have the neural pathways to support it, and I'm overwhelmed, and now I just feel like a failure so I'm just going to stop the whole thing." And that's not really the case.

You yourself, as a self-concept, are not a failure. You need to get curious about yourself. A learner's mindset – what is it that's coming up for me that is getting in my way of creating this new habit? What is coming up for me that is showing up as a barrier for me meeting my goals?

And so this is why taking small tangible steps is always the best path to creating big change, because all of those little steps end up adding to a big one. Think about when you go on a walk or you go on a hike. You don't just accomplish one mile all at once. You accomplish one mile by taking one step at a time. And then eventually, you get to that one-mile mark and you've accomplished your goals. But you have to put one foot in front of the other.

Or even if you're in a car, you have to drive the one mile, but there is no instantaneous arrivals at our destinations. We have to take educated and supportive steps to get where we want to go. And again, this takes time to develop. So you're going to have to offer yourself a lot of grace.

So this is a tip for you. I would invite you to be kind and affirming to yourself for taking small steps every day. And you don't have to puff yourself up and make it all this like big hoopla thing if you're not someone who's like that, but acknowledging your efforts and having grace that you are doing the best you know how to do in this moment is very affirming to you. And it's a good habit to have to have compassion for yourself and grace and affirming yourself as you make change happen in your life because, honestly, that is what's going to keep you motivated.

The more the brain and the body record your success, even if they're little – so do not discount the little ones. I know how y'all think, and do not

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #7: Forming New Habits

discount the little things because your brain will record it as success. This is why this is critically important.

If your brain starts recording a bunch of failures because you're trying to eat the entire pie instead of just taking one bite at a time, you're going to get overwhelmed and you're going to get discouraged and you're going to start creating a negative connotation around creating change in your life. So this is why it is so critical to take small steps.

As your brain continuously records, "Oh hey, I took two steps and I got way closer than I did last time, I feel really good about that. Oh wow, now I can take bigger steps. Oh wow, now I can run. Oh my goodness, now I can run faster. Oh my goodness, now I can complete a mile in nine minutes," or whatever the thing is. Do you kind of know what I mean? So this is why it's important. These minor successes are incredibly important.

So that leads us right into the second point I want to make today. So we have this thing inside of us called the homeostatic impulse. And what this thing does is it regulates things like our heart rate, our body temperature, and our breathing, but it also regulates our mental actions.

So its role is to keep you thinking and behaving as closely as it can to the past because it believes that the past is safe and predictable. Now, for anyone with trauma, PTSD, or anxiety, you're probably looking at your past and you're going, "There was nothing freaking safe or predictable about anything in my past so I want to get as far away from that as possible."

So for you, my friend, I would definitely say, you having to take new small tangible steps to teach this part of yourself that change is safe, that you can survive new situations. It's teaching a part of your brain that wants to keep you in safety and is equating safety with what it knows how to do. Okay, so this is critically important.

And you're going to be mind-blown at the way you challenge this. Because when we have trauma or anxiety, we tend to want to do things in very black

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #7: Forming New Habits

and white ways. We go big or we go home. We are all in, we're all out. It's always extreme. And some of your challenge in changing your thought patterns and changing your behavior patterns and reaching your goals is learning how to live in the gray. It's learning how to take one small step every single day that's going to add up to a bigger step.

And so, as I spoke about just a few minutes ago, when you do this, your brain has an opportunity to record success. But, additionally so, as we're talking about this homeostatic impulse, you're also training this part of your brain that change can be safe as well. And so people discount this because they think small changes are insignificant and they're unimportant and they don't matter. And you could not be more wrong.

So, for example, these are some ways to break up some of that subconscious patterning. So maybe you start to wake up 15 minutes earlier than you normally would without pressing the snooze button. Like, if you're a snooze person, maybe don't press the snooze button. That's a small, small change. Your body is going to record the experience of trying something new, and as you do that more and more, you're opening yourself up for more opportunities for your brain to be more open to this idea of change.

So, this might take a little bit of time as your subconscious adjusts, but it's something that's worth doing. So you actually may want to create a very positive experience for yourself, like rig it, okay, rig the results, as I like to say.

So if you're going to get up 15 minutes earlier, maybe have a reward set up for you, something that you like to eat for breakfast or a special coffee blend or a special tea that you like to drink or new fuzzy slippers or whatever the thing is that makes that extra 15 minutes getting up early enjoyable so your brain can record it as a positive experience.

Another example might be reading a book before bed rather than scrolling social media, learning how to wind yourself down. And so, for a lot of

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #7: Forming New Habits

people that are super, super busy, they tend to have a lot of resistance to doing things like that because they're so bust and they don't get a lot of time for themselves. And so sometimes, that results in like, well I want to be on social media or I want to binge watch Netflix, like this is my only time to do whatever it is I want to do. But, the problem with it is that if you binge watch Netflix on a work night and you're up until 3am watching Game of Thrones, then you're probably going to be really tired the next day and not functioning at your best, then there's going to be a negative habit loop that's in place.

So you want to get ahead of these things. And so maybe consider, for bedtime, maybe you read a book instead of watching TV because, you know, once you turn on the TV, you're just going to be enthralled with whatever episode you're watching and you're just not going to be able to turn it off. So you could consider reading a book. Maybe you consider journaling. Maybe you consider listening to calming relaxing music.

I mean, the choice is really yours, but that's a very small tangible change that you can make. And again, your brain can record it as successful or as helpful.

Another really important thing when you're making changes is to continuously try new things. And I don't mean, like, try and leave things, but I just mean getting the courage up to try new hobbies, to meet new people. You're expanding your abilities and you're expanding your capacity for change when you challenge yourself to do new things.

So maybe you take up painting or you take up chess or you take up hiking if you haven't been doing that. Check out a new lecture or a seminar or something like that. And so whenever you're open to trying new things, your brain continuously gets more flexible.

And so again, a lot of people discount these things because they're like, "You know what, Nicole, reading a book before bed does not meet my main goal of becoming a CEO of a company." And my response to that is, "Yes it

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #7: Forming New Habits

does.” If you’re going to be a successful CEO of some company, you’re going to need to have a flexible mindset.

You’re going to need to be able to have your mental and emotional resources available to you. And so training your brain in this way that change is okay, I’m in control of my life and I feel safe in this place of change is very significant.

So when I frame it that way, do you see the difference? It’s not just about reading a book before bed. It’s about you honoring you, taking control of your life, and learning how to change habits in ways that feel sustainable. And that, my friends, makes you successful as fuck.

Alright, my friends. I’m hoping that some of those tips were helpful to you. So, in other words, to just recap about what we talked about today, is we put in place habits from a very, very deep level in our minds. And in order to really create a healthy foundation for us to make change happen, it starts in small steps. And I outline several options that you could potentially engage with.

And so learn how to have a learner’s mindset, a flexible mindset, and taking control of creating happiness when you can is going to pave the way for much bigger change to occur in your life.

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.

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Ep #7: Forming New Habits

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You can visit my website at nicolesymcox.com/podcast launch 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.