

Ep #26: 3 Ways to Actually Be Supportive



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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We need to unhook from the story, right off the bat, that we can make anyone feel anything, that we can make them feel supported. We can't. But we can still offer it. We can still model it. We can still be a nurturing, healthy, supportive human in another hurting human's life.

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 26. We are going to talk about three ways you can support someone who's going through a hard time. The most common thing people in supportive roles ask me is, "What can I do to make this person feel supported?"

Okay, so, first, right off the bat, you can't make anyone feel anything, alright? Now, that's a reference back to episode eight. So, if you have been subscribed to the podcast for a while now, you will know that episode eight is all about how you cannot make anyone feel anything, okay. We all feel what we feel as part of the journey and our own inner narrative, the way we have internalized and made meaning out of our own experiences is, a lot of times, the lens for which we hear things from other people. And that includes positive, meaning support, and it also includes negative, like criticism and other things.

So, before we get into this episode, we need to unhook from the story, right off the bat, that we can make anyone feel anything, that we can make them feel supported. We can't. But we can still offer it. We can still model it. We can still be a nurturing, healthy, supportive human in another hurting human's life. That is possible.

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But it is very important, when we are caretakers or when we are in supportive roles, that we get this mind chatter right, right off the bat because if you are focused on the outcome of trying to make someone feel a certain way, you are going to be frustrated and it is going to lead to burnout because it's not actually a possible goal.

So, we need to set a very realistic viewpoint, a very realistic on what is possible when you are supporting someone before we can get into the next three steps that I am going to give you. So, you may need to take a chance to listen to episode eight if you want to reference some of what I'm talking about. But we're basically branching off from that idea and we're taking it a step further.

What can you do when someone is hurting and how can you be supportive to the best of your ability? And again, the first step is to get your own mindset right because if you burn out or get drained, what's going to end up happening is you're going to end up being reactive to this person. You're going to end up getting frustrated with this person. And that is going to complicate an already hard situation.

So, I'm guessing, when you listened to this episode, you didn't think that I was going to call you out first. But things always start with us. Where's my mindset? Where are my emotions? And what are my intentions in trying to offer this person support?

Those are three questions you need to get right, right off the bat. And when I say right, I don't mean perfect. Don't let that little perfectionism mindset get to you. It just means there are three things to consider within yourself before you step out into a supportive role. You cannot get dragged into the quicksand or you'll drown right with them. So, this is very, very important right off the bat.

Now that we've got that all cleared up, you've got your mind right, you've asked yourself those three questions, you're clear on your intentions. You know you can't make them feel anything but you still want to be a good

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human being and you want to be a healthy supportive person in this person's life, so let's do this. Let's break this down.

Alright, number one, believe it or not, many times, people are afraid to come to people with what they are going through, not just because they're afraid of judgment, but because judgment, but because they are afraid that person will make it about them. Okay, what? What the hell does Nicole mean by this?

Let me tell you what I mean by this. A lot of times, when we listen, we have an anxious nervous response to respond really quickly. And so, it was interesting. I remember when I was in grad school and we were learning how to listen – this was very, very early on in grad school. It actually might have been my first semester of grad school years ago. And we were timed.

Like, how long can you sit in silence while someone else expresses their pain? And the reason that this is a skill is that we automatically want to interject our own personal experiences as a way to create connection. We do it with the best of intentions. But when it comes to people that are hurting, that are in pain, one of the best things you can do for them is let them own their own story.

And when you interject with yours, even if you don't mean to, you are actually taking away from their moment. And so, being able to just sit and listen and not interject your own feelings, your own experiences, but just staying with that person in their moment is sometimes the kindest thing you can do for someone. And I know, it's counterintuitive, it doesn't sound productive.

It sounds small and minute, but because it's so counterintuitive to humans on a communication level. We want to connect this way, but connecting our experiences, it can sometimes be the biggest give you can give someone. Which leads us right into number two, listening with empathy.

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So keep in mind with number one, as you are allowing someone to just have their experience, have their emotions, just talking without judgment or criticism on them, you are doing it with an empathetic, compassionate demeanor. So, you're not just listening, waiting for your turn to talk. You're not being impatient. You're not being angry. You're not judging them for their feelings. You're just sitting back and really being with them in their feelings. And that's empathy.

So, sitting with someone in empathy takes us out of fix-it mode. And again, this goes against, like, what we think we should be doing. When someone is hurting, our internal, as the supportive person, our internal alert system is saying, "Problem, problem, problem. We need to fix this problem." It's like this alert that goes off in us and it's like, "Problem, we need a solution." We're very trained to think that way."

And that applies beautifully if this is a logical problem that we need to deconstruct and fix. But when it comes to emotions, that is just not how it works. If you launch into fix-it mode, people can sometimes go deeper into their narrative, "Something is wrong with me as a person and I need to be fixed."

So, we want to step out of, "Let me fix this all for you," and instead we want to lead with empathy; sitting in compassion with someone else that is going through a hard time. Because we don't want people to feel like projects, we don't want people to feel like their pain is a problem. So, sometimes the best thing you can do for someone is to be with them in an empathetic state.

And number three, you want to use reflective listening when you are participating in an empathetic state with somebody else. So, you're using I-statements and you're saying their last three words back to them, or the last sentence they said, you restate it so they know that you heard them. And then you use a follow up question.

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When you utilize reflective listening skills, you are allowing someone to feel heard and seen and it communicates to them that you are present and you are with them. And after you've listened and you've been empathetic and you've used reflective listening, if that person is open to a suggestion, you can ask that.

You can ask very simply, "Are you open to a suggestion? Are you available for a new option?" You can ask things like that, but you need to watch your tone, otherwise it can come across as passive aggressive or it can come across as biting or manipulative. You need to be really sincere in your communication.

But unless that person asks you, "Can you help me fix this," whatever the problem is, a lot of times, people just need support getting through the emotions of the thing. And when we are going through hard times – and again, I'm being extremely broad in general, but it depends on what it is. Some hard times really require some tangible fix-it solution-driven outcomes.

People are having problems with their taxes, if they're going to lose their house, if they're going through some legal battles, or whatever it is where it causes, like, "We need to do some really strategic decision-making, otherwise this is going to get bad really fast," that's a whole separate issue.

But what I'm talking about is when someone comes to you because they are wrestling with depression or they are wrestling with anxiety or they are wrestling with self-esteem or self-concept and really what they need in that moment is just another human being to come alongside them and support them. These are the kind of skills you want to use when someone comes to you in that way.

So, I want to make that really clear because this is a very broad topic; there is a time and a place when we have to go into fix-it mode. It's kind of like, you are going to lose your house if we don't make some strategic decisions. Okay, that is totally different than someone who's coming to you

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in deep emotional pain that really just doesn't want to feel alone, that really just want to feel seen and heard by you, then you want to use these three tactics.

So, I hope that's really clear on how I'm differentiating that. So, for this episode, I am very specifically focused on when someone is going through emotional pain and needs support in those emotional moments, these are the three skills, these are the three tools that you want to use when you're trying to listen and offer support, okay.

So, I hope that clears up any kind of confusion, if there was any. And don't forget, if strong emotion came up for you in this episode or you felt triggered or overwhelmed, take it as information that something in your internal world needs support. There is never shame or blame in getting mental health support in your local state of residence. It's probably the best thing that you can do for yourself, especially if you are in a supportive role.

Believe it or not, if you are supporting a child, a spouse, a friend, it can take an incredible emotional toll on you. So, don't minimize or disregard your own emotional experience when you are offering support to another person. It can be a reason that maybe you need to go to therapy or you need emotional support.

A lot of times, when we're in a care-giver role, we don't pay attention to our own needs. We end up disregarding them and it leads to burnout and I don't want that for you. So, just know that your experience, if you are supporting someone in need, your experience and your emotions around that are just as valid as the person going through the hard time.

So, there's no shame and blame. You are not weak. There is nothing wrong with that. I highly, highly recommend, get your own mental health support. It's probably going to make you a more effective caregiver or a more effective person as you're supporting another person. You've got to put on your own oxygen mask first, going back to that very, very old metaphor when it comes to airplanes.

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Alright, my friends. I hope this episode was helpful in becoming a supportive person when they're going through an emotional moment, and 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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