

Ep #27: How Trauma Impacts Your Relationship with Money



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With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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Sometimes, we don't even know what we value. Sometimes, the trauma has buried that part of us and we are unsure and we are stuck in a survival pattern of maybe avoiding pain or just trying to look good or earning worth in value by having a lot of things or spending money on things that is going to get us praise and compliments. And this can create a disaster for people when it comes to spending money.

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

Hey, hey, everyone. Welcome to episode 27. Today, we are going to talk about how trauma can actually impact the way you spend money. Now, I know for a lot of us, this is probably not a connection that we make, largely because there's a lot of poor education out there about what trauma even is, how it impacts us, and how that shows up in our present day lives.

Because, let me tell you, my friends there are plenty of high-functioning badassess in the world that have had a hard past, they've had hard experiences, and they've had to overcome those things to get where they are. So, trauma is probably not exactly what you thought it was. So, let's go ahead and dive into this.

So, to begin, I think trauma in general is a heavy word. We think of that and we think of these big experiences. And in the therapy world, we call them big-Ts, okay, capital T. and what these traumas are, they are big life events, such as a car accident, someone dying, natural disasters, wars, that kind of a thing.

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I think our brains automatically go there when we say, “Oh, this person experienced trauma.” I think we automatically make an association to a big-T. And so that is all true. Those are all traumatic events, right? And we have to heal and recover from those experiences in order to feel better.

There is another version of trauma that is less talked about and can actually be a hidden problem in your life and you don't even realize it. and that is what the psychology world calls little-Ts, so a lowercase T in other words.

And little Ts are considered traumatic events, but they're low-level. They're not these big events. A car accident, that's a big event. That definitely strikes a memory when you think about it if you were in a car accident, right?

Little-Ts are a bit more subtle and they're chronic, which means you've endured them over the course of many years, maybe it's many months, maybe it's a lifetime. But there is a long enough pattern of experience with it, we would consider it chronic.

And so, with little-Ts, they can be criticism. They can be constantly being made to feel like you're not good enough. Like, these traumas can be kind of vague and confusing. And so many people, until they enter therapy, they don't even actually realize that they've had consistent little-Ts for a very long time.

So, because this is a little bit of a confusing topic, let me give you an example of what I mean by a little-T. So, little-Ts can be trauma that – let's use the example you have a critical mother. But she's not necessarily abusive. She's not necessarily emotionally available either. Do you see how this gets a little bit vague and confusing?

Because people have a really hard time saying, “I have a critical mother and I've never felt like I was good enough,” when a person can see that

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parent's intentions are to help you or to love you, it gets a little bit confusing. And so, people tend to discount these kinds of traumas because they're like, "Well I'm just weak or I'm a baby. All she wanted was the best for me so why am I even complaining about it?"

And when you pull back the layers of these little-Ts and if you were to pull back the actual experiences that are leading up to feeling not good enough, we would have several memories, probably conversations, where you felt trapped in those conversations, where you felt internally stressed out, overwhelmed, and trapped, like there was no way out. This is starkly different than being trapped in a room and starved.

So, people tend to discount it. If you were locked in a room and starved, you'd probably consider that a trauma, and it is. That's a big-T trauma. It's pretty obvious. Of course, that's traumatizing.

But a little-T trauma is definitely more subtle and they're chronic and they're ongoing. And so, it's all these little scenarios; constantly feeling criticized, constantly feeling picked on, not feeling emotionally supported. And as all of these drops of stress into your nervous system accumulate, what ends up happening is it creates the exact same effect as a big-T trauma because all of those little droplets have now added up.

And when they go unprocessed, they become like a big-T trauma. And people can actually have PTSD from little-T traumas that have accumulated. So, little-T traumas tend to be in the relationship world. They tend to be in the relationship world, but they don't always have to be. They don't follow an exact formula because you could have felt criticized by your mother and then you could have gone to school and been criticized by your teacher, and then you had an overbearing friend who also criticized you.

And so, all of these bad experiences start to add up in your nervous system and you start to have almost like a PTSD response any time someone comes at you. Or that's how your body feels, "Oh you're coming at me with

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more criticism. Now I feel like I have to put all this pressure on myself to get it right. There's no room for error, otherwise everybody will see it and I'll be humiliated, or I'll be marked as a failure, or everyone will see that I really am not good enough," whatever narrative you are making with that. And because they're little-Ts, most of this is in your body and unconscious.

So, how does this play out with money, my dear friends? Let's continue with this example that, let's say you had a critical mother, which then followed into a lot of other experiences with bosses, with friends, boyfriends maybe, where this idea of, "I'm not good enough," is chronically reinforced and you don't even realize it.

And I see this all the time in high-achievers and ambitious humans, in people that are really able to achieve amazing things professionally, but they do it with an intense amount of anxiety, an intense amount of fear, but they do it anyway because they have been able to train and channel all of that anxious energy into doing things. And so, when we think about money, believe it or not, what we believe about ourselves will show up in our spending habits.

And I bet you didn't see that one coming, right? So, the psychology of money is that we spend money on what we value. And here's the trick in the whole thing; when you have little-T traumas, sometimes we don't even know what we value.

Like, sometimes the trauma has buried that part of us and we are unsure and we are stuck in a survival pattern of maybe avoiding pain or just trying to look good or earning worth in value by having a lot of things or spending money on things that are going to get us praise and compliments. And this can create a disaster for people when it comes to spending money because if you're spending your whole paycheck on designer things and you actually can't afford that, that can create a vicious cycle for you because what will happen is you'll just end up accruing all of this credit card

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debt, and every time you see the bill, you're going to be reminded that you don't have enough.

And your brain's going to hear that as, "I am not enough." Do you see how this all kind of works out? And this happens and a lot of times without us knowing it. so now, every time we get a credit card bill, we feel really stressed out. But we feel really good because we have a new pair of shoes that everybody loves.

It's not a great cycle to be in. And a lot of, people end up in therapy once they realize, like, "My spending is out of control and I don't know why." But beyond spending, there are other ways that trauma can affect you. That's just one example.

Another example of how trauma can impact how we spend money is it can be excessive saving. Like, I think the easiest best example of that are those who lived through the depression. There was a scarcity mindset that was developed for those who lived in the depression, and rightfully so.

If you are living through a traumatic period, of course that's going to impact how you spend money. And so, people out of that era either did excessive saving, were incredibly frugal because they were afraid of losing it all, or they went the other side and just spent a bunch of money because they were tired of being uncomfortable.

So, trauma can affect us in different ways is all I'm trying to say in that. And so, a third way that it can affect us is under-earning, okay. so, you might be a highly educated, capable, talented human being, but because you don't believe that you are good enough or you are still buying into an old narrative that whatever you do is not enough and therefore you're not enough, a lot of times, we don't actually make the kind of money we should be paid.

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We don't ask for raises. We don't ask for enough in the job interview. We undervalue how much we should be paid, and so then we end up working for pennies when really, we should be working for dollars. But a lot of this comes from the emotional space of, "What do I deserve to make?" So, believe it or not, earning money dances on all of your emotional shit. Money is an emotional thing.

And anyone who's had money problems, or if you've done really well in life, you get this. So, underearning is another symptom – and I see this a lot with people-pleasers, they're like, "I just don't want to make them mad by asking for too much or I don't want to offend someone by asking so much." And really, it comes down to a value. Do you value yourself? Do you value the work that you do? And what should you be paid for that? What is reasonable?

And so, this is very specific for people that are asking for under what the going rate is or what the market value is, and so that can be another symptom of it.

A fourth one is overworking. All of the workaholics out there are probably going to hate me after I say this, but overworking tends to be a way that people who have lived through trauma stay away from the pain because if you are constantly working, if you are constantly busy, you do not have time to address your emotional world.

So, it's actually a way to fly above all the emotional pain you might be experiencing without actually having to deal with any of it. And so, a lot of times, with trauma, our nervous systems are so overstimulated, we are able to do, by far, more than the average person.

Now, this comes with a price because, by the time you get into my office, usually you're burnt out and exhausted, or any therapist's office for that matter, because we can't sustain those kind of levels forever. So,

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overworking can also be you're trying to earn more, you're trying to, like, make more. You're just like nothing is ever enough.

And so, a lot of times, that is playing up to an emotional wound of, "I'm not good enough." If someone was to ask you, "When is enough enough?" It's kind of like goalpost moving, like, there is never enough, the goalpost keeps moving because once you thought, "Oh, I thought \$50,000 was enough. And now I think \$60,000 is enough and now I think \$70,000..." do you kind of get my meaning? So, it keeps on moving and you keep working.

So, some things to ask yourself to kind of intercept some of these automatic patterns that you might be in without knowing it, because part of the healing process for trauma is even just identifying, like, what is driving my behavior.

And so, kind of slow down your thought process and intercept with questions before you spend money in finding out what category am I falling into and what is the potential root issue of this? Am I overcompensating for something? Am I undercompensating for something? Am I hiding? Am I pretending?

These are emotional questions to ask when you think about spending money. And if you're falling more into the shopaholic piece, it's a good thing to slow down and ask yourself, "What am I feeling right now? What will this purchase do for me? How will I feel after I buy it? And how will I feel when the bill comes in?" Like, that goes back to the very first one we talked about because when we have an addiction to spending, we get a high.

Just like an addict gets a high of drugs, alcohol, anything, addiction is all the same. So, if you're spending money, will that temporary high then wear out into self-loathing? Then we need to start intercepting our behaviors before we get into so much debt that we can't manage it anymore. Because

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once you get into so much debt, it just creates such a negative mental and emotional cycle.

And so, what I want to encourage you with today is, if you have experienced either big-T or little-T traumas, there are tons of different interventions and therapies that are available to you. And so, if you're noticing strong emotions throughout this episode, take it as information that something in your internal world needs support.

And so, when you think about this relationship to money and what you're spending your money on, also consider, what are the root issues of that? Do I have small-T traumas? Do I have big-T traumas, and are those getting in my way? Because I talked to you about earlier in the episode, the small-Ts are quite a bit harder to identify on your own. It usually ends up being a set of patterns that take place in your present life that you don't understand and you certainly can't get control over.

It's like your unconscious is running your life. And that's when you get really, really frustrated. You're like, "How can I be this super-smart and intelligent person and not be able to get my spending under control or have enough money to spend it on the right things?"

And so, because I said the psychology of money has to do with what you value, it might be good for you to take a minute, either at the end of this episode or right now, and just kind of jot down, like, what are your values? What are the dollar amounts you are spending on those values? Like, if you were going to do kind of an emotional type of budget, where is your money going? What is the payoff for spending money in that area? And I mean emotionally.

So, if you're buying a new pair of Tory Burch boots, what is the emotional payoff for buying those boots versus if you were to just get regular boots? So, you're starting to really track your emotional responses. Where is your value at?

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And so, a lot of times, if you look at your budget and then you look, where is all of your money going, a lot of times, it will kind of show you. But until you take a look at this and get a sense of where are you spending money and what do I value in life, you'll just keep doing the same thing.

So, it's good to print out like a pie chart or something to kind of see where your money is going. Now, for example, you probably spend money on food. Well, food is of value because you want to stay alive, okay. Does that kind of make sense?

If you're spending a ton of money on clothes, what is the value behind that? If you're spending a ton of money on education, what is the value behind that and is it necessary? Do you give a lot of donations? What is the value behind that? Do you guys kind of get what I mean?

So, those are some examples. This will kind of help you get to know yourself, get to know your spending habits, because then you might look at this list like, "Dude, I spend way too much money on X, Y, and Z and I don't want to do that anymore because I couldn't really give two shits about Tory Burch boots. Regular boots that are functional and look cute are plenty fine for me."

That's the conclusion you might come to. But you're not going to know that until you actually look at the black and white, meaning like concrete numbers on paper, right? And so, you want to pull that apart, establish your values, and then what I would do is a whole new journaling exercise and do a whole new budget around your values. Like, if you could live a life where you could put money that aligned with your values, what would each of those categories have?

Alright, my friends, I know this was a little bit of a deep episode. I hope it was helpful to you. And above all, what I want you to hear me say about trauma, you can recover. You can heal. And you can learn to manage your life in healthy ways, okay. trauma has this effect that it feels like it's a life

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sentence, that it will be forever, and nothing will ever change. And I want to just encourage you today that that is old programming and that is coming from a very hurt space and a hurt time in your life.

I want you to know that there are ways to work with trauma. You can heal from these things. I think EMDR is probably the best. But I also think internal family systems, IFS, parts work, is exceptionally great. So, these are a couple of things to look for in therapists in your local state of residence.

If you have trauma, big-T or little-T, because you don't want to do talk-therapy for trauma, you want to work with someone who understands how trauma works. Art therapy can also be quite effective, and so just kind of thinking through, is it time for me to heal from this, and what steps do I need to take? Because it doesn't have to be your forever, okay. It's not going to be easy. But it will be worth it. And let me just tell you, you are worth it.

Alright, my friends, I will see you next time. And, if you enjoyed today's episode, don't forget to get on my mailing list so that you can be notified every time a new episode drops. Alright, make it a great 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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