

Ep #30: 5 Ways to Manage Your Mind Through Any Crisis



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With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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Now, I'm going to make some space just to laugh. I'm going to do a watch party on Netflix with a bunch of friends or colleagues and we're going to watch funny things. We're going to watch episodes of *The Office* or whatever it is you think is funny. But really giving space for your brain to relax. Your brain and body are not designed to stay in these high-stress levels for long. You have to allow space for your parasympathetic nervous system to kick on. And the only way it does that is in relaxed states.

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

Hello, my friends. Welcome to episode 30. So, I think we can all agree, for the first time, we are collectively, worldwide, experiencing trauma at the same time. And we're all impacted differently depending on our life's circumstances, our life experiences, and our relationships, and so forth.

But one thing I think we can all collectively agree is the majority of us are experiencing a lot of anxiety and fear around the uncertainty of the Coronavirus. And so, this episode is inspired by what's currently happening around us. But it's going to be a good tool for you to use long after we get through this virus situation.

So, even if you're not experiencing it directly because of Coronavirus, I would still invite you to have a listen to this and see if you can utilize some of the tools and strategies in your own life when you are experiencing fear and anxiety around uncertain things. Because regardless of a pandemic, there are plenty of times in our lives where we're experiencing uncertainty.

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And, when we get there, it automatically flares up panic and anxiety and overwhelm.

Remember, the brain doesn't like things that are unfinished, undone, or don't have a conclusive answer. So, a lot of times, it kicks on all of our survival mechanisms because we feel threatened. Our livelihood feels threatened, maybe our physical bodies feel threatened or our emotions feel threatened. All of these different ways can really kick on adrenaline, kick on our stress hormones, and we can get into overdrive.

And so, you want to actively participate in calming your nervous system down. You cannot live in these high-fear states without physical repercussions of that. The body can only sustain that much stress and adrenaline for so long before you are exhausted or you get sick or you just feel numb and depleted, and I don't want you to get to those places, especially now.

We need to be supporting each other. We need to be encouraging each other. And we need to keep our heads, meaning we need to keep a healthy perspective in the midst of all of this uncertainty. We need to make educated decisions in the midst of all of this uncertainty.

Just because things are uncertain, doesn't mean you have to live in chronic fear and anxiety. But your default button as a human being will invite that because your survival mechanisms are kicked on. And we have a negativity bias that is for this reason.

Your body and your brain want you to survive, and so it's going to kick on all of this panic. It's just all of your alert systems. Your alert systems are going off saying, "Something is wrong. Fix me."

And if it feels like it's not getting the support it needs, a lot of times, it gets louder. So, I want to talk to you today about how to meet those internal needs for yourself and protect yourself from staying living in chronic fear

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and anxiety because you don't have to stay there. But it's going to take some really tangible interventions and it's going to take some really active participation on your part because this won't come easy.

When we are in crisis mode, our brains and bodies want to stay in crisis mode until it's over. And the problem with a pandemic like this, the biggest thing that is uncertain right now, none of us know when this is going to be over. We have projections, we have educated guesses, but the truth is none of us actually know.

And so, we need to manage our minds. We need to manage our emotions. We need to manage our bodies in the midst of this and essentially make the best out of it. It's a shitty-ass situation. I'm not even going to sugarcoat that for you.

And that will lead us right into number one. In the midst of all of this, or even if you're not directly impacted by this pandemic, there are moments in our lives where we feel so scared of uncertainty. And actually, what we need to make space for is allowing our emotions to feel.

And we need to give a little bit of a time limit on this. So, that will be number two. I'll get to that in a second. But number one, we need to name it. We need to name the emotion. We need to name the experience we are having.

In doing so, we are validating ourselves. In doing so, we are empathizing with ourselves. And a lot of us that experience trauma early on in childhood, we never learned how to be on our own team. We never learned how to empathize with ourselves when we felt scared or overwhelmed because we didn't have a primary caregiver do that for us.

And so, in these moments, why that is so healing is that you are giving a part of you the emotional support and validation it desperately needs. Now, our impulses are to go to the outside world for these things, like to lean on

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a partner or lea on a child or a friend or relative, whoever. But truly deep healing is in this reparenting process where you are able to sit with empathy with yourself.

So, I want you to think about this as an exercise that you can actually do with paper, you can do it with art. But sitting and naming the feeling and just kind of drawing out, like, what the feeling is in an abstract way, it doesn't have to be beautiful, it doesn't have to be perfect, it doesn't have to be anything other than real.

And so, naming what it is and validating yourself, saying, "I know I'm scared. This is why. And here's what I'm doing to support myself." And you're in the moment doing that very thing, maybe by drawing or journaling, but allowing yourself to name it and name what it is.

And number two, so as I briefly mentioned, boundaries are incredibly important. Boundaries provide safety and security for us, especially in uncertain times. So, if you've listened to my previous episode, episode 29, I mentioned how routines kind of do that for us. And that seems like such a super-simple thing, but it can actually be incredibly helpful when we start creating healthy predictables in an unpredictable world.

And the same is true with these internal boundaries. So, we need to put boundaries on ourselves. How long do we sit in these dark emotions? It's a fine balance. You want to sit, acknowledge, validate, and support yourself. In the same light, you can't sit and stew on that all day long because negativity breeds more negativity.

So, what am I saying? I'm saying it is a balance. Allow time and space for you to feel what you feel, and also allow time and space for you to move on and do a different activity, something else. And because we're in survival mode, I'm okay with you distracting yourself right now.

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This is what distraction is for. It's not helpful when we're learning how to thrive on the other side when we don't need distraction, but we are in survival mode right now. And so, if you need to distract yourself after that so that you don't have to sit in these negative emotions, you know, with maybe reading or walking or whatever it is that you need to do to support yourself or have virtual coffee dates with friends, but try to do a balance; letting yourself feel, but also putting boundaries around that and allowing yourself to experience a different feeling or different experience, to put it a different way.

Which leads us right into number three. You need to manage how much negativity you are taking in. So, the first two were about you; feeling your feelings, putting boundaries on how long you feel those feelings. But the next thing is that the media is designed to scare you.

The media has totally cracked the code on how to make humans read scary things. And so, it is so easy to get taken down that rabbit hole and it leads to dark places in our minds because once we read one bad story, then we read another bad story and more people are dying and on and on it goes, there's a stark difference between being aware and educated about what's going on in the world around you and just steeping in it, like a teabag in water.

We have to really regulate how many negative stories are we consuming, how many times are we dialed into the horrors around us? Because this can lead to emotional burnout. You have to put some boundaries around how much you are consuming because it directly impacts your emotional world and your thoughts and your perception.

So, if you spend all day reading the news and reading social media and hearing one bad story after the next, that will equal a negative perspective eventually. Eventually, you're going to start to feel like the world is a dark and scary place. And if you are vulnerable to anxiety or depression, there's potential for that to lead there.

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So, we want to guard our brains, we want to guard our bodies, we want to guard our hearts against that stuff. And so, again, putting boundaries around that. Perhaps you only allow yourself to engage in reading for an hour a day, and maybe it's just the essential stuff.

You want to be informed, but you don't want to be consumed. There's a huge difference. And I've even heard some people are making pacts around this and supporting each other where they're taking days off from the media and one person is basically reading all of the necessary things, highlighting it for their friends, and then they're taking a break from it and the friends pick up the next day, read all of it, and send the highlights.

Get creative. This is a way to filter yourself. You cannot be drawn into every bad story. The human body and brain was not designed to live there without consequences. So, be informed. Don't be consumed.

Number four, make sure that you are making space for positive experiences, positive encounters. Most of us are quarantined at this point, and if we're not being forced to be quarantined, self-quarantine is the name of the game right now.

And so, making sure that you're feeling your feelings, you're validating them, you're spending time working with them in productive ways, you are seeing your therapist or you're seeing a coach, whoever, you are engaging in pouring good things into yourself, number four is about allowing yourself to laugh. And that feels counterintuitive.

Everything in your body and brain will fight against this because you're in survival mode. When you're in survival mode, the brain doesn't feel like it has space for anything because it's fixated on solving a survival problem.

So, that is what's happening there. And it can almost feel like a challenge in shifting gears. Like, if you've ever driven a car and you don't really know how to shift gears, sometimes our brains can feel that way when we're in

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survival mode, that we can't even make space for anything positive or it enrages us to even think about making space for anything positive.

Those are just survival messages that are being sent to protect you. So, again, we acknowledge them. We say, "I know we are afraid. I hear you. I see you. I spent x amount of time working with you," because I'm assuming you've already done number one. "Now I'm going to make some space just to laugh. I'm going to do a watch party on Netflix with a bunch of friends or colleagues and we're going to watch funny things. We're going to watch episodes of The Office," or whatever it is you think is funny.

But really giving space for your brain to relax – your brain and body are not designed to stay in these high stress levels for long. You have to allow space for your parasympathetic nervous system to kick on. And the only way it does that is in relaxed states, when you're sleeping or sometimes when you get massages, but nobody's getting massages right now because that's a cesspool of germs, so no one's doing that. But I'm just using it as an example to share with you.

There's certain activities that we can do to support that part of our nervous system turning on. And we want that because it replenishes us. It refuels us. It relaxes us and it gives our body a chance to refuel so that we can go and fight the next battle that actually shows up, so that we have the energy for it.

Because we run into dangers, once we're in burnout, then if something does happen, you're out of resources to be able to deal with it, okay. So, again, this goes back into balance.

So, take tangible steps, even though we are social distancing, you don't have to emotionally distance. And so, make time to do things you enjoy with other people online, or whatever you feel is enjoyable, like a hobby. But do something that takes your brain out of all the scary stuff, out of all the heavy emotions that you're feeling, and allow yourself to breathe.

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And number five, journaling has never been more important than it is now. This is going to be the thing we talk about for decades. This is going to make the history books for sure. And so, keeping a journal – and if you have kids, this is actually something you can do with them. Let them keep an art journal as well.

Some kids don't journal really well with words. Some adults don't journal really well with words. And so, you can easily put color to paper, crayons, markers, paint, whatever supplies you actually are able to get or have. I have heard that art supplies are harder to find right now.

So, don't put any rules on it. whatever you have available to yourself, let it be. And let kids do this too. Kids are being impacted by this as well, just in different ways. And so, this can be like a healthy coping skill that you can use going forward.

Alright, my friends, I hope that was helpful. I am creating an online community to help support people through these hard times, and so if you would like to get information and join my online community, go to nicolesymcox.com/join.

And lastly, if strong emotions came up for you in this episode, please, please, please reach out to a therapist in your local state of residence. At this time in history, more therapists are online than ever before. So, don't miss out on taking care of your mental health because you can't physically go in and see them. Telehealth is a thing. It can be a good thing. So, try it out before you discount it, okay.

Tale all of these strong emotions as information that's something in your internal world needs support. Don't ignore it. Don't push it aside. And don't wait to work on it. This is a perfect time to really support yourself. So, I highly encourage that for you, and to keep in mind, we are in a culture of fear right now, which means triggers are all over the place.

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You might have unconscious triggers you don't even realize. Therapy has become paramount for you. So, that would be my encouragement to you. So, if strong emotions came up for you or you started to identify some things in yourself, some of these interventions I have you feel hard or they feel stupid or overwhelming or you're making judgments on them or they don't feel possible for you.

Whatever it is that feels negative around that, again, take it as information that means that a part of you needs support and it's trying to figure out how to get that. So, let's slow it down, see it for what it is, and give ourselves what we need because you have to remember, these podcast episodes are general.

So, my hope is that it helps you. But if there's certain things that don't feel true to you, you don't have to do them. You don't have to do them. You do need to honor yourself. Give yourself some love and support and spread that around to other people. Everybody needs it right now. So, let's all be good humans.

Alright, my friends, once again, if you want to join my online community, hit me up at nicolesymcox.com/join.

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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