

Ep #31: How to Strengthen Your Relationships During Isolation



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With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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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...

Hello, my friends. Welcome to episode 31. Today, I want to talk to you about relationships. And largely because, in a culture of fear and in uncertainty, we have to put energy and time into the things that we can control. And our personal relationships fall within something that we have control over.

It is also the thing that is likely to be there when this pandemic is over. So, the relationships that you have now are likely to still be there when this is over. And so, we want to take tangible steps, we want to foster healthy connection with the people that are important to us because, if we do that, we are setting ourselves up for stronger bonds when this is over.

Because, believe it or not, in crisis, there is a huge amount of potential for relations to grow in depth, for relationships to grow closer. And when we get through it, it's the time that we reminisce most, where we look back and we're like, 'Remember when...'

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And so, in some ways, this time is precious. And in some ways, it matters a lot. And so, it's the one area of our life that we can create some helpful predictables around. But it requires us to take some healthy steps in order to make that real.

So, in this episode, I want to talk to you about how you can support your relationships in the time of crisis that we're in, because I want them to be intact for you when it's over. Our relationships should be there when this is over, and so, let's start utilizing some of this time off to really connect with people in healthy ways.

So, believe it or not in this whole relationship thing, there's a few things that you need to know. And the first thing you need to know is, you have to manage your own mind, your own emotions, and your own reactions.

So, I'm sure you were first going to think I was going to call out something about the other person. But we can't control the other person. We have limited control over what other people do. And so, if we take a viewpoint of that, then we're putting ourselves in a powerless position. And we already feel powerless about so many other things happening in the world; I don't want that for you.

So, let's start right where we can control things, which is within ourselves. And again, if we don't know how to do this, that is what therapy is for. That is what coaching is for. It's what online courses are for. There are plenty of resources out there in the world that can teach you how to do this very thing.

Because the problem is, in relationships, when we have not worked on our own stuff, when our own stuff is coming up and we project that stuff onto other people, it creates an enormous amount of conflict because you yourself are putting something on another person that may or may not be true.

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And so, your first step in healthy relationships is to own your own, okay. Own your own relationship with yourself and catch yourself before you start projecting all of your fears and anxiety and anger on another person. Because it's stuff like that that takes relationships down fast. And I don't want that for you.

So, sometimes in the beginning stages of this, it's as simple as just noticing what is coming up for me right now, what am I afraid of, and what do I want to do about it? So, if my reaction is leading me to yell at my spouse or yell at my kids or yell at my friend or a coworker or whatever it may be, you want to catch yourself before you do that and notice, is this an issue that I should be bringing up with them? Do they have any real play in this problem? Or is this a me thing? Meaning, do I need to just talk to my therapist about this or do I need to journal this out? Or do I need to take 20 minutes to calm down and walk around the block and reflect?

Because we need to be clear on what belongs to us versus what belongs to another person, okay. These are boundaries; learning what is mine and what is yours. And a lot of this starts in our emotional world because we can create a hell of a lot of conflict in our relationships if we are attacking people for no reason; when it's really our own stuff that's popping up and getting in the way of us articulating our feelings clearly.

So, first, you want to acknowledge what is coming up for you. And I want to point out here, I did an episode a while ago on expectations. And this is very true in crisis. Depending on who we are, our personality, our life experience, the way we're wired, our perception, we are going to handle crisis differently.

We are going to handle struggle differently, and so we need to have respect and care for how we respond and react differently in crisis situations. Because one person may not always be wrong just because it's different from you.

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And if someone's being over the top, a lot of times, that means that they feel overwhelmed and scared and they need support, just like you do when you're being over the top. And we've all been there. None of us is perfect. We've all lost it from time to time.

So, let's just be really real about that. There's no shame or blame in that. That's part of the human experience. Sometimes we are really proud of the way we respond, and sometimes not so much.

And it's not really a good use of our energy to give into that shame story. It's a better use of our time to spend time nourishing ourselves and figuring out what is coming up for me, what do I need in this moment, and how can I move forward in a healthy way so that I can get the support that I need? That is what you need to consider for number one.

Number two is obviously communication. I'm sure you knew I was going to say that; communication. So, let's say that you've already taken this first step and you're like, "You know what, I need to address this with this person. Because every time I bring up a concern, they roll their eyes and it makes me feel unimportant."

So, maybe that's something, after some reflection, you realize, "I would like to bring that up in a healthy way so that they can offer support, or so they can be aware of it." Like, sometimes, people don't even know what they're doing. Sometimes, they definitely do, so don't get me wrong. Sometimes, it's very intentional to roll your eyes and make someone else feel stupid. But other times, people don't even realize what they're doing.

And so, communication is key. So, you want to use I-statements. You want to own your own feelings in the experience, and you want to make a realistic request. So, "I feel ignored when I'm talking to you and you don't turn your head to acknowledge me. When I'm speaking to you, can you acknowledge my presence. It would feel so helpful."

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You have to watch your tone. You have to watch your attitude. So, if you approach this with a bunch of rage and anger – and I have so many people like, “Well I used an I-statement...” and then when we break down what they did, I’m like, “You kind of attacked that person.” So, you’ve got to be careful on your tone and your delivery because, just because you use an I-statement, doesn’t mean you did it properly and it doesn’t give you a free pass to scream at someone.

But really, in this time of quarantine, in this time where we’re around the same people all the time, because we’re sheltering in place with the same people, we are going to get on each other’s nerves. And so, healthy conflict resolution starts with communication.

We cannot function out of assumptions. We cannot function out of anger resentment, because it leads to more of that. People don’t just get the hint. You need to have a healthy conversation about how you’re feeling and, together, cocreate some solutions on how to make this better so each party comes out feeling heard, understood, seen, and supported.

Keep in mind, for the time I’m recording this, everybody is scared, anxious, and overwhelmed. Now is not the time to turn against each other. Now is the time to pull together, support one another, and have healthy conversations.

Number three, you have time on your hands or you’re together all the time. So, make some intentional family time. Make some intentional time with your friends. Make some intentional time with people who are your mentors or whoever. But we’re physically isolating from each other for the purposes of this virus, but we don’t have to emotionally isolate. I said that in a previous episode.

And so, now is a time to really foster as much healthy connection as you can. So, I would create family game night. I would do family movie night. I would figure out what are some areas that we can connect and create

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some happy memories in the midst of all of this scary stuff that keeps coming down the pike, okay.

So, keep in mind, in times of crisis, we are going to remember this for a long time. And what a cool memory would it be to know that, as a family or as friends or as a community, we pull together in times of fear and uncertainty and we really connected with each other, even if it's virtually.

You know, "We made the most out of that. We played games together. We watched movies together. We took walks together..." if your state is allowing it. Whatever you are allowed to do that creates some happy memories – maybe it's uninterrupted family dinner. Maybe it's coffee dates with someone that you haven't seen in a while and now you can see them every Monday morning.

Like, how can you be intentional about creating healthy connections in your relationships right now so, when this is over, you have more friends than when you started, or things are better within your family than the way that they were before? What if that was a goal? What if that was something you were working towards? What if that was something you were developing?

Now, there's no magic in this. There's no guarantee it works. But everything in life starts with an intention and it starts with tangible steps, working towards a goal.

So, what I'm saying to you is if this feels valuable and important, you might want to engage in the process of trying to create healthy communication, healthy connection, so, when we get on the other side of this, we are intact together and supporting each other.

And number four has to do with creation. So, when this is over, you are still going to have your relationship with yourself and you are still going to have your relationship with others. And so, it's important to start thinking about what do you want that to look like?

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Because as I just gave you three tangible steps, this is pulling it all together. So, if it's a goal, that you want to be closer to maybe your son or your daughter, you have a huge opportunity for that right now. So, what do you need to create in order for that to happen so that when this is over, that bond is still in place?

And so, spending time nurturing the relationship with yourself is a good way to nurture your relationship with others. Like, how do you want to create that? What do you want that to look like?

When this is over, there are so many things that are uncertain. We don't know what the stock market's going to be like. We don't know what the job situation is going to be. But we do know, as human beings, we are relational.

And so, even so – and this is why I've been saying don't give up on therapy, don't give up on whatever self-development you are doing, because now is the time to be pouring into yourself more than ever, so when this is over, you're not depleted, you're not done, you don't feel completely burnt out. That instead you took this time to really develop yourself and to feel good in hard moments.

Those are all skills. That's resiliency. Those are all things that are good to work towards. But our tendency, because our survival mechanisms kick on, are to do fight, flight, or freeze when we feel stressed and as if our lives are threatened. And so, to take a step back and to nurture yourself with self-care, but also really taking care of your emotions, you have the potential of getting through this better than the way you started.

Think through that. What are some personal goals that you have for your relationship with yourself? And what are your personal goals that you have in relationship to others? Spend time journaling that. Spend time writing that out and start using your time in intentional ways.

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Relationships are super, super-important and they're not the thing we want to let go of right now. We need each other more than we even know.

Alright, my friends, I hope that this episode was helpful to you. If you notice strong emotions coming up for you or triggers or overwhelm or a lot of confusion over, like, "How do I do this relationship with myself? How do I help other people?" Take it as information that something in your internal world needs support. And then, based on your local state of residence, reach out for help.

More therapists are online than ever before. So, check someone out in your local state of residence. And if you want to work with me and join my online community, you can hit me up at nicolesymcox.com/join. 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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