

Ep #32: How to Support Yourself Through Anxiety



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With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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I never want to say, “Stop being curious...” because curiosity is how we grow. The second we stop being curious is when we stop growing. And so, we want to grow and evolve and continue to be the best version of ourselves that we can be.

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

Hey, hey, everyone, welcome to episode 32. Today, we are going to talk about how to support yourself when you are feeling anxious. And being we are in a worldwide pandemic at the moment, anxiety is not exactly something we are in short supply of. So, I'm hoping that this episode will be useful for you in trying to learn how to support yourself when you are feeling anxious.

So, I think most of us who wrestle with anxiety will all agree that anxiety creates a host of symptoms we would rather not have. And so, our knee jerk response when anxiety comes up is to get rid of it. We just want to move on. We don't want to deal with it. We just want the symptoms to stop.

And so, we do this in a variety of ways. Usually, our go-to is to try to figure out how to numb it out. And we do this in a variety of ways. We start eating foods. We start talking to people. We start engaging in technology. We start distracting ourselves with whatever and anything that will sort of numb out the anxiety.

And this makes a huge amount of sense. I mean, anxiety is incredibly painful. It's incredibly stressful. And it can kind of make us feel helpless because we have all these intense symptoms and we don't know what to do with them.

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Some of the most common anxiety symptoms are, you know, feeling edgy or restless. You have this excess of worry or overthinking. Like, once you get a thought in your head, you can't get off of it. You just ruminate and it just cycles over and over and over again.

Sometimes you might have difficulty just even managing your thoughts or your feelings. It can feel like it's just this out-of-control thing that has a mind of its own. And no matter what you do, you can't stop it. And the most annoying thing that people say to anxious people is, "Calm down," or, "Don't worry about it."

It's like, really? If I could do that, I would. But that doesn't work. When our anxiety is really, really high, logic and reason goes out the window. And so, this is why we can get really down on ourselves when it comes to anxiety. I hear all the time, "I don't know why I just can't focus."

And, you know, sometimes, with anxiety, anxiety can create focusing issues. It can create difficulty concentrating. It can create difficulty focusing. And sometimes your mind just goes blank. If you think about all the energy that anxiety takes up in your body and in your mind, of course you're going to blank out.

It's an enormous amount of energy that is going into feeding this really high emotional on-guard state, which is kind of what anxiety is at times. And so, this can also increase muscle tension or soreness because we are so amped up with anxiety, we're probably clenching and clamping down in our bodies in ways we don't even realize.

We are probably clenching our fists or we are shrugging our shoulders. It is very, very common for people with anxiety to have muscle tension. It's also very common to have GI issues.

So, we kind of have these spots in our bodies when we have anxiety where we hold it, where we hold parts of the anxious story. And so, as that gets played out on a regular basis, we kind of create a hub, so to speak. We

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kind of create an area in our body where we feel the most anxiety come and go from. So that's kind of how I mean that in a metaphor.

So, also, anxiety causes difficulty with sleeping and trouble falling asleep trouble staying asleep, or just waking up throughout the night. And so, these are all really common anxiety things. So, if you experience any of that, okay, it's normal for anxiety to manifest in this way, and no, you are not crazy. It is anxiety.

There's a stark difference between being crazy and having anxious symptoms. But anxiety can make us feel crazy because all of these things are just listed, you know, have a huge spectrum of intensity. They can be incredibly loud, big, and intense. Or they can be kind of just mild, almost like a pot on simmer.

It's like it's always there, it's always an annoyance. And then something happens that triggers it and it boils over. So, everybody's anxiety manifests for them in their own unique way based on who they are, their life experiences, their personality, their support systems. There's a lot of factors that go into how someone's anxiety manifests itself.

And so, this makes total sense. So, let's pretend that you have all those symptoms. If you have all those symptoms happening, it's going to be difficult to function. It's going to be hard to function at work. It's going to be hard to function in relationships. It's going to be hard to function in everyday activities because we only have so much mental and emotional space for things.

We only have so much mental and emotional energy in a given day to spend on things. And if you have an anxiety disorder or you have anxiety that is running around unmanaged, a lot of that mental and emotional space has to go to containing that.

And if you don't know how to do that, you might be employing tactics that aren't working so well. And it might be doubling your workload. And it's so

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fascinating to me because, statistically, people with anxiety are the last people to reach out for help.

Like, y'all will work and suffer through this for as long as you possibly can until you reach your end point where you're like, "I can't take it anymore. I need help." So, I would encourage you, if you're starting to even feel like two of those symptoms of what I'm describing, get some support. Get some help.

Don't wait until you can barely function. Don't clench your jaw and clench your fists and just continue to move through all of this because there's a lot of helpful supportive ways to manage anxiety. This doesn't have to be your forever. It doesn't have to be your everyday. But if you're not managing it in a helpful supportive way, it can definitely start a story that says, "I'll always be anxious, this will always be painful. And I always won't know how to do anything about it."

And that's a very powerless narrative, but it makes sense. I mean, for goodness sakes, anxiety is painful. So, what you're hearing me say is that anxiety is a pain in the ass. I fully empathize and understand and validate, if you are feeling like you are struggling with it and it is hard, it is hard, I agree with you.

And I'm also saying that there are other ways in which you can approach anxiety to support yourself. So, beyond – there's some very simple things like lavender oil, diffusing that stuff, you know, awesome. Exercise is great for anxiety. Journaling is great for anxiety. Art is great for anxiety.

So, these are all awesome things that you should be incorporating into your daily practice. But anxiety goes quite a few steps deeper, okay. So, this is why making sure that you are working with a therapist or someone who is certified and specializes in anxiety is your best route to go because anxiety is so much more than just the brain.

It is so much more than stopping symptoms, okay. Anxiety has roots. Unless it's just a very simple straightforward biological or genetic where

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you just need medication to manage it – and there is a percentage of people that that is true for – but the majority of people are anxious, like, there is an origin story.

So, I'm hoping you're hearing me separate that out. So, while it's true that some people just have anxiety that is just biological and they need just medication and support in that way, there's also another group, and that's the group I'm going to address today, that has an origin story and needs to learn how to interact with their anxiety in a different way.

So, we're going to work through a metaphor. I want you to think of anxiety for a minute as a messenger; a messenger that is full and complete with an alarm system. So, when something feels off or when something is questioned or something comes up, this alarm system is trained to go off to give you a message.

So, thinking about this metaphor that anxiety is a messenger I want you to think about you yourself as a human how do you respond to that? So, the best way to think about this is if you have a home and you have a security alert system. When it goes off, you as a human being need to respond to that, otherwise you're going to listen to a really loud noise for a really long time.

This is the same with anxiety. A message is showing up. An alert is showing up. And unless we respond to the message in a way that can support it and turn it down, it's going to keep going. And so, if this is true in your own body and mind, this is going to be very fucking annoying.

This is just going to be like, "Why can't I shut this alarm off? Why is this alert system continuously antagonizing me?" Same idea. And so, then we get so distracted with the alert system, all the symptoms, in other words, that are going off with anxiety, that we aren't really looking a step deeper into where it started. We're just angry and irritated and tired.

So, we just get tired of all these symptoms and we don't know what to do. And so, we employ all these dysfunctional measures to just make it stop.

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And that's what we talked about at the top of the episode, like numbing out, food, alcohol, people, activities, that suppress these feelings, but they don't actually support them. And so, the goal in this is we want to learn how to support ourselves in healthy ways.

So, believe it or not, a core concept in anxiety management has to do with the relationship we have with ourselves. So, there's all these, what I would call, topical tricks that you can use to help manage anxiety. And then you take it a step deeper. And you kind of think through, what is the root? What is causing this? What is my anxiety trying to say? What is the message that is trying to get through?

And because you're probably so annoyed with dealing with anxiety, you don't want to ask this question. And two, you're probably having an angry response to it, like, "I don't give a shit what it's saying. I just want it to stop."

And I totally get that. You are so burnt out on dealing with all the symptoms all the time, taking it a step deeper to ask it a question doesn't feel possible. So, I'm going to give you a quick little cheat sheet to kind of get this going for you, so you can think about, what questions do I ask myself? What messages might be there?

So, for example, perhaps your anxious anxiety system is saying, "I don't feel safe." Or maybe it's saying, "I'm afraid," or, "I'm confused and I don't know what to do." Or it could be something simple like, "I have excess energy and I need to let it out."

Believe it or not, the body doesn't process excitement or anxiety differently. They process it the same. So, you can have the same high anxiety response when you're happy or excited about something or if you just have all this energy in your body can also create an anxiety response. So, keep that in mind. This is why we want to be curious about ourselves.

Like, what is coming up for me right now with my anxiety? Am I actually happy in this moment and I don't know how to regulate that emotion?

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Because believe it or not, that can create an anxiety attack. So, anxiety is not always negative. Finding out, like, what is this saying?

So, when you think about that and you think about, what is this message that's coming up, then you can kick on this more logical, empathetic, nurturing side of yourself; the side of yourself that will probably show up for another human being if they said this very same thing to you.

If another human being came to you and said, "I don't feel safe," think about how you would respond to them. You would probably first ask why, because that's human nature. And then, you would probably employ empathy or try to offer support to that person to help them feel safe.

So, you want to think about these things for yourself, almost as if you're having a conversation with another person. So, this is very, very hard. It is so much easier for us to do this for other people, but then when it comes to doing it for ourselves, we get stuck.

So, what I want to encourage you to think about, I'm encouraging you to think about anxiety differently. I'm encouraging you to explore how to change your relationship with it because this is one of the most important things to learn how to do. And it's very hard to do this on your own. So, you might need a safe person to help you. You might need to do this with your therapist. You might need to work through this with a friend, like having someone else support and help you figure this out.

So, this is where journaling and keeping a log – this is a different kind of journaling than what I normally talk about. So, keeping a log as you get curious about yourself, like, what is the message coming up for me and how can I offer myself support in this moment?

So, for example, one of the things I said is I have excess energy and I need to let it out. A very simple fix for that is what are you going to do with that energy?

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Your body is sending you a message that it has excess energy and it needs to let it out. You can come into that and say, “I hear you. Why don’t we exercise?” Or, “Why don’t we talk to a friend and process some of this energy out? Maybe I need to verbally process my feelings at the moment. or maybe I need to let energy out through art.”

There’s many ways to let emotional energy out, and so those are a couple of examples. And so, once you employ that activity, you’re marking how you felt afterwards. So, you’re noticing the message that’s coming up for you, what is it saying? And how did you respond to it?

Sometimes, we have to do this on paper. It’s very difficult to do this in our heads until we have a good handle on it. So, you can do this on paper or you can do this with a safe trusted person to help you kind of brainstorm and figure out solutions for this. And then you write it down. And then you write down how you felt after the activity was complete. And then you save it.

It goes with that idea of, like, work hard once. Keep this log because it’s going to be a cheat sheet for you essentially. Because many times, we all have similar messages inside of ourselves that continuously come up. It’s not always new ones.

A lot of times, it’s the same one. I mean, this isn’t a perfect science, but usually, we all have about maybe the same seven that kind of pop up on rotation. And so, as you get curious and embrace yourself and offer yourself support and you’re keeping a journal of those things – and sometimes it’s a little trial and error, you know.

You might offer yourself support and you’ll be like, “Well that didn’t work.” So not get discouraged. You are being curious. If that didn’t work, what can you try instead? This is trial and error; figuring out how do I support myself? Do I just need to sit out in the sun? Would that help make me feel happy, or would that make me not feel happy? And so, keeping a journal and a log of this – that’s what I mean by journaling.

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In this case, we're keeping a log; cause and effect. What is the message? How am I supporting myself? What was the result of that activity? And track it. And then you can go back to it as a cheat sheet for yourself when you're feeling anxious so you don't have to continue to think about this all the time, even though, of course, as a therapist, I want you to always remain in curiosity.

Curiosity is a key component that we support. And so, I never want to say stop being curious because curiosity is how we grow. The second we stop being curious is when we stop growing. And so, we want to grow and evolve and continue to be the best version of ourselves that we can be.

Alright, my loves, I am hoping that this episode was helpful for you. This is a little bit of a different take on anxiety. But I want to encourage you, the tool I gave you today has to do with keeping a log and I walked you through how to do that.

And so, my hope is that you're going to find some success in this. I want you to be successful in learning how to manage your anxiety. And, of course, if strong emotions came up for you in today's episode, if you felt triggered or what I'm asking or what I'm suggesting feels really, really hard and impossible, please reach out to a mental health professional in your local state of residence.

There is no shame or blame in getting mental health support. And right now, there's a lot of therapists that are online. So, even though many of us around the world are quarantined, many of us are online. And so, I would encourage you to take it as information that something in your internal world needs support. And anxiety is a very triggering thing. Take care of yourself. You are worth it. so, please reach out for support in your local state of residence.

Alright, my friends, and if you enjoyed today's episode and you never want to miss an episode, make sure you are on my email list. I'll let you know

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about the topic coming up and anything else coming up that is special and unique. Alright, my friends, I'll catch you next time. Bye.

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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