

Ep #33: Meeting Your Own Needs



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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When you cannot control the environment, when you cannot control other people, you are left controlling yourself. And that is true regardless of whether we're in a pandemic or not. It is not your job to control or think for other people. It is your job to think and control yourself.

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 33. Today, we are going to talk about how to support yourself in hard times. And it sounds like it's probably a topic that isn't all that interesting. But believe you me, my friends, it is so interesting because supporting ourselves, especially in hard times or unknown times, such as the one we're living in right now with this pandemic is critically important.

And so, a lot of times, we spend a lot of our own time and energy thinking and processing through how do we support other people, how do we support ourselves financially? Like, we start to get obsessed with some things that are more tangible.

When it comes to supporting ourselves, that gets a little murky. That gets a little confusing. And so, we put it off and we don't really try for it because it doesn't sound sexy or appealing. Let's make it sexy and appealing, okay. Supporting yourself is going to be the best way forward for you to support others and get through this pandemic with your head still on your shoulders in a good way.

Alright, so, this is a deep dive. So, are you ready for this? Let's jump into this. We're going to kick this off with a theory. So, there is a theory out there, it's called Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. I mean, this theory was born, I think, in the 1940s. It's an oldie. It's an oldie but a goodie.

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And so, if you took basic psyche in college or high school, this is one of those basic things that are taught. And so, you might know it as this triangle. So, if you imagine a triangle and then there are five levels that are called the five levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

So, at the very bottom is our physical needs. The one above that has to do with safety. The one above that has to do with love and belonging. The one above that is esteem. And at the very, very top, we have self-actualization, which is the ultimate of figuring out who you are and living at your fullest potential.

So, I'm going to break these things down. And there is a reason for my madness, so stick with me here. Many of us right now, there's all kinds of shit that is trending on social media about being our best selves and cleaning our houses and organizing and really making this time off, that some of us have, really meaningful.

But I think that actually is putting undue stress and overwhelm on the large population. I think most people are incredibly stressed out regardless if they have time on their hands or not. Right now, we have a culture of extremes.

We have people right now who still have jobs and, for the majority that still have jobs, you know, they're working two or three times harder, more hours, longer hours than they ever have before. And then on the flipside, we have the people that have been furloughed or laid off or have lost their jobs due to this pandemic, and they do have time on their hands.

But just because someone has time on their hands, doesn't necessarily mean they feel good, okay. Time on your hands is just time on your hands. It doesn't mean that you feel good about that, right? You're still going to have an emotional response to that experience.

And so, I think we need to be careful how we're talking to each other. I think we need to be careful and mindful that everyone is in crisis mode, regardless of how much time they have on their hands. Everyone feels anxious and stressed out.

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And I know for us, in California, we're on week six of lockdown, shelter-in-place, and people are getting antsy. By the time this episode airs, we'll probably be on week seven or eight. And so, people are starting to not feel good being locked up in their houses, even if they have a lot going on.

And so, what I want to encourage in this episode is, regardless of where you are, learning how to support your emotional world in times of stress and overwhelm are critically important and is so worth the investment because this pandemic will end at some point. Who knows when, but at some point, the experts are predicting that at some point this is going to end. Fingers crossed, right?

So, let's hold that belief that this is going to end someday. Either way, life goes on. And learning how to support yourself is a very important tool for you to understand. And so, I think in order to make this episode a little more tangible, I want to reference Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs because right now when we're all in survival, I think, for us, the pyramid has shifted.

So, I'm going to go through what each of those five levels mean, how you can support yourself depending on where you are on that pyramid and learning some tools on how to support yourself going forward. Because the very first thing in supporting yourself is honoring your own experience, honoring your own feelings, honoring your own thoughts.

Just because someone has it worse than you, doesn't make your experience less valid. Just because someone has it better than you, doesn't make your experience less valid. We're all human beings and we can only speak to our own experiences.

If we deny ourselves for the sake of comparing to another human, it helps no one and it makes us feel like shit. It doesn't help the person who's actually going through harder times feel better. They actually just need your emotional support. They don't need you to compare yourself to them. That's not helpful.

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What they need is probably an empathetic, kind, loving conversation with you or maybe they need a meal sent to them. They need support. You comparing yourself is nothing more than a guilt complex that doesn't really serve anybody.

So, the first step in supporting yourself is validating your own feelings, honoring your own needs, your own emotions. What's there for me and what can I do with these emotions that would feel supportive? So, let's dive into this pyramid.

So, the first one is physical needs. This is probably self-explanatory. In the first level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is basically food, water, breathing, basic staying alive. It's very, very basic.

And so, in times of pandemic, that is the first thing that gets threatened. We're in a health crisis specifically. And so, we're worried about food. We're worried about water. We're worried about medication. We're worried about our health.

So, a lot of us, all of a sudden, who might have been at the top of the pyramid with working on self-actualization are now back at the bottom. And that doesn't make you a failure in life. That makes you human. It makes you human, responding to a pandemic that has changed all the rules.

And so, the theory in this is we have to make ourselves feel safe at each level before we kind of move through them. So, once you get your basic requirements, like nutrition, you have air to breathe, you have water to drink, you have food to eat, your mental and emotional state is more available for other things.

And you'll see this throughout history. When people are starving, they are not that interested in their potential. It's not a big need. They are very interested in making sure they have enough to eat. And so, this is how the brain starts going into crisis-mode. We want to make sure we have our basic needs met. And then we have an emotional response to that.

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Okay, the second one on this triangle is security and safety needs. So, this one goes into financial safety. It could go into health and wellness. It could go into safety against accidents, injuries, things like that. And so, it becomes about physical safety.

So, the differentiator between the two, the first one is really about staying alive from a physical standpoint; food, water, that kind of a thing. Safety and security speaks more to environmentals, right? So, do we have money to pay our rent? Do we feel healthy? Do we feel well? Are we functioning okay? Do we feel safe and secure?

And I can tell you, in this pandemic, this second one is what got rocked the most for people. So, we were once maybe at the top and now we're at number two, feeling really scared for our health, our wellbeing, our security. So, this particular need, this is why we're talking about this, has gotten threatened.

And once that is threatened, depending on your history, you're going to have an emotional response to that. You're going to have thoughts around that. And they may not be super-healthy. They may not be super-great. They might be full of anxiety and fear. And so, we want to notice what that is and what do we do about it.

So, the third one is social needs. So, these are things like love, acceptance, belonging, friendships, family, social groups, community groups. All of this falls under social needs.

Well, we're social distancing, so it's not a wonder that we're all activated as fuck right now. So, we just have two needs that I just laid out that definitely this pandemic is hitting. Our social needs aren't being met because what I hear over and over from people – and this has been my own experience as well – online, there is a missing component to human connection.

And so, I've done some reading on this and I'm still kind of exploring, so we don't have a whole lot of data as to why. But there is something about talking to people endlessly through a computer screen that does cut off

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some of the emotional connection and a lot of people kind of discussing the whys of that. And that's not the purpose of this episode, so I'm not going to get into that.

But as we social distance, this is hitting one of our core emotional needs as a human. So, of course we're not going to feel good. We're trying to all figure out, how do we stay connected even when we can't be physically connected? And I think all of us would agree, like, I'm definitely not saying anything negative. I'm super-grateful that we have video chat and that we have technology in a time like this so that we can stay connected.

But what I am saying is that I think we're all collectively noticing that there is a difference in how that feels emotionally when it comes to connection versus being in person with people. So, this is an area that is bothersome for people right now.

So, the fourth one is – it's been called different things. For the sake of this episode, I'm going to call it, like, esteem needs, because I see that one used the most often. So, this is the fourth level. And this has to do with appreciation and respect.

So, feeling accomplished, prestige, personal self-worth, feeling valued and appreciated by others and feeling like you're making a contribution to society and the world. So, this one is why I think we're close to – again, it depends on the timing of when this episode airs. But time I'm recording this, we're about six weeks into quarantine in California. And I think people are starting to feel threatened here because a lot of people have lost their jobs. They've lost their communities. And they're starting to lose their sense of purpose.

Like, this need, this esteem need is really necessary to feeling like you have a place. And a lot of times, most of us find that in our work or we find that in volunteering or we find that in community. And right now, we don't have a lot of options for that.

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Some of us are working overtime, like a lot of healthcare workers are working overtime and there's a lot of other fields that are working overtime right now. But even so, they're working in crisis mode. They're not working from a place of feeling good, right? They're working from a place of essential needs are being met.

And so, on one level that can feel good. Like, okay, good I'm using my skills and practice to really support people in this time of pandemic. But for a lot of people, they're not feeling like this area of achieving goals and having recognition and feeling good about your place in society is really happening.

And so, this is a need, I think, why people are starting to get restless. They're getting sick of staying in their homes and doing nothing, from their vantage point. And I'm even noticing, you know, we're kind of, from a pop culture standpoint, calling it pandemic depression. There's a little bit of depressive episodes that are starting to show up for people that are in direct relation to this pandemic of being home all the time and not having this need met.

Kids aren't going to school. They're doing stuff online and not every kid's having a successful adjustment to that. And parents aren't having a successful adjustment to that. Like, all of this is really, really hard. And so, kind of just noticing, like, it's possible that this area of your life might not feel good.

And so, then at the very top of this pyramid are self-actualization. So, this is the very peak. This is where we're using our talents, our capabilities, our potential. We are living our best selves, if you want to say it in a very cliché way.

We have fully developed who we want to be and we're very interested in self-growth. I don't see this in a lot of people right now. And if you've listened to all those different needs, you can see why. People are getting tripped up on the top four depending on your scenario. Getting to the very

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top and trying to be the best version of yourself and organizing and meeting goals that you thought you would meet one day, that might be where you're at, but it may not be where you're at.

So, what's my point? My point is that I'm hearing a ton of confusion around how you should be behaving right now in the middle of the pandemic. And I will tell you, the first thing is you need to be a nice human. I have seen some appalling behavior out in public.

And so, my first thing would be, be polite, be kind, and don't shit all over each other in public. It's not okay. So, that's the first thing that everybody should be doing universally, regardless of where you are in this pyramid.

But this is how we support ourselves. You cannot offer yourself support if you do not know what the problem is. Like, what are you supporting? And so, I think that this hierarchy of needs is a great illustration because we are in a collective trauma together, worldwide, our needs are being threatened regularly. And it's creating a host of emotional responses, coping mechanisms, defense mechanisms, and we're all just trying to survive the next day of the unknown of when this thing's going to end.

And I think that's the hardest thing for people is it's indefinite right now. We don't have a plan – it doesn't sound that way anyway, as a world at the time I'm recording this. It doesn't sound like we have a great plan, figuring out when this is going to end, in other words.

So, this all creates a lot of unknowns. So, when you're supporting yourself, I think it's important to validate that you are somewhere on this pyramid and identifying, where are you? What is feeling most threatened right now? And what can you do to support yourself? Supporting yourself right now is what is going to create safety and a sense of wellbeing in the midst of all of this uncertainty.

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whether we're in a pandemic or not. It is not your job to control or think for other people. It is your job to think and control yourself.

So, some questions to consider. Where am I? And what do I need to support myself? So, for example, if you're at the top of that pyramid, where you're like, "Nope, I'm good. At all four levels, I feel really good." Then yes, you should be that person who is really, really working on organizing, being your best self, like up there, up top high.

But if you're not feeling safety and security and connected to other people, that's probably going to be your first step. How do I create healthy connection in this time of disconnection? How do I support myself so that I can support other people? Because as we talked about, the comparison game is not helpful to anybody.

And in some ways, I think illustrating a chart like this kind of helps us to check off where we're at. So, at the very bottom, if you're struggling with having enough food or water, it's probably not the best time to put a bunch of pressure in yourself to do a bunch of projects.

Let's first get you feeling safe in that area first. Is there somewhere we can reach out? Can someone do grocery shopping for you? Like, what is the issue there and how do we support ourselves in that?

I think the second one, security and safety, one of the things that falls into that is health and wellness. And so, while you can't necessarily control some of the health things, you can control what you put in your mouth. You can control if you're taking a walk. You can control what your thoughts are right now. You can control if you are managing your emotional and mental health in therapy, with friends, with groups.

This is the area you can actually take a lot of tangible steps to make yourself feel safe and secure when it comes to feeling healthy and well. And that's going to be counter-intuitive because everything I just said, there's going to be a part of you that's like, "That's not fucking true and I don't feel that's true at all. Take that as information.

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When we are triggered, it is messages from our past that feel unresolved and we need to swoop in and support ourselves in ways. So maybe, it's you don't feel like you have a plan for wellness or you don't have a plan for eating healthy or you don't have the motivation to do that.

And I would strongly encourage you, if you're starting to feel depressed, now is the time to reach out for therapy. The problem with anxiety and depression is it works on a spectrum; mild, moderate, severe.

So, what can start as mild can easily jump to moderate. And once we're in moderate, it's easy to jump to severe. The sooner you intervene, the better off you have the potential of being.

So, I would encourage you, if you're starting to have some mild depression setting in, where you're feeling a lack of motivation, you're not showering, you're not taking care of yourself and this area of health and wellness feels really, really hard, you may need mental health support and there is absolutely no shame or blame in getting it.

So, number three, with social needs, as we talked about, online is probably best. But I actually think talking on the phone versus having to look at yourself is sometimes better. So, it's up to you. Kind of notice what feels true to you, staying in touch with people. Just because everyone's doing Zoom calls right now, doesn't mean you have to.

And I know, for a lot of people that are still working, it's kind of a burnout to have to constantly do Zoom calls. It's hard on our eyes and all those things. So, in our off time, find other ways to connect with people and definitely stay in connection, you know, joining online groups and all things like that because social needs right here is also what can play into depression and anxiety and mental health issues.

We need to feel loved and supported by other people. So, what I would encourage you to do is to support yourself and put yourself in a position to support other people as well.

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And then for the fourth one, you know, esteem needs, and so this is where hobbies come in and participation in activities and academics and your job. You know, find certain areas in your life that during this pandemic you feel like you're contributing, you feel good about yourself in participating in and understanding having a balanced perspective that it's going to look different right now; it does look different right now.

And so, what can you do, what is within your power to positively impact the world, the community, your neighbor, you know, can you do grocery shopping for someone? Can you bake bread for someone who might be stuck at the safety, at the very beginning of the pyramid? Maybe you have enough food. Can you share it?

So, these are all things that we need to consider and think about. And so, my hope is, in that pointing this out, it normalizes for you why you are flipping out so much. All of our needs are being threatened right now.

We're being threatened on a physical level. We're being threatened on a social level. We're being threatened on a mental level because anxiety and depression are now starting to set in. And so, part of learning to support yourself is identifying where you are, what doesn't feel secure, and what building blocks do you need to put in place to create a solid foundation to feel secure again, and then learning to build off of that.

Alright, my friends, that is it for today's episode. If anything triggered you, we're talking about internal external needs, so I imagine some parts of this may have been triggering for you. So, if that is the case, please reach out to a therapist in your local state of residence and start getting mental health support.

There is no shame or blame in needing mental health support, especially now. So, reach out in your local state of residence and get the help you need. And lastly, if you don't want to miss an episode and you want to stay up to date on what we're talking about here, make sure you're on my email

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list and we'll send that info to you every week. Alright, my friends, see you later, 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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