

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

And you need to ask yourself, “Is running going to help or hurt this situation? Is avoidance going to make this situation worse or better? If I stay and deal with the situation in front of me, what skills do I need to have in order to do that? What would the benefit of that be?”

And then go into learning mode. Go into exploring mode and figure that out for yourself. What do you need to do to stay in the situation and do well, or make it better, or influence it in a positive way?

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 34. Today, we’re going to talk about how to manage fear. So, I think, for a lot of us, we hear the word fear and we automatically make this negative connotation where fear is bad. And so, we’re going to kind of go through and do a little bit of a deep dive around fear.

Because, believe it or not there is a spectrum when it comes to fear. There is healthy fear, which we all need, that keeps us safe and it helps us be productive in our lives. And then there is unhealthy fear, which can really put us in fight, flight, or freeze and can wreak havoc in our lives and in our relationships and just how we feel in general. So, we want to talk about this spectrum and how you can kind of get more in balance with a healthy fear response before you go too overboard with fight, flight, freeze.

So, here’s is an example of healthy fear. Healthy fear is something like, “Hey, don’t jump off that high building, you probably won’t survive it.” That is a healthy fear response. An unhealthy fear response is a fear of heights. It’s an overexaggerated fear response that, if you’re up high, you’re going to die.

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

That is starkly different than having a healthy caution around, “Hey, this is kind of cool. I’m up high. But I should probably be careful. I should probably be wise on how I walk. I should be wise on how I hold my balance.” Like, that’s healthy fear. That’s being aware of your surroundings and responding appropriately.

But in this spectrum of healthy and unhealthy fear, it can go from no awareness to over the top awareness, like with the example I just gave. And so, diving deeper, I think most of us resonate more with unhealthy fear. Probably healthy fear is a newer concept to you, and so, healthy fear can also be, like before you talk in front of people, there’s probably a healthy amount of fear, like, “I should probably bring my A-game.” That’s healthy fear.

Healthy fear is like, “Hey, I should probably bring my A-game because I’m going to be in front of a lot of people and there’s a lot that I want to communicate, there’s a lot I want people to get out of...” let’s say you’re doing a presentation or something. That’s healthy fear.

And that healthy fear is going to kick on a little bit of adrenaline, which is going to probably help you perform better. But it’s healthy because it’s helping you be productive and it’s helping you be aware of your surroundings and how you want to present yourself.

Now, unhealthy fear goes into stage fright. You go onto stage and you’re frozen. You can’t get your message across. And so, those are the big spectrums. Now, maybe in the middle, you have a panic attack before you go on or you’re so anxious you’re sweating when you’re onstage.

Those are all signs that maybe fear is getting bigger than you. You still might be able to present and do a good job, but it might be with an extreme amount of effort. So, if you saw what I did there, that was a spectrum, like mild, moderate, severe.

So, here’s the problem with unhealthy fear. So, the examples I just gave you really are more related to, like phobias, because I think phobias are as

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

far to the other side of the spectrum as we can get. But there are other ways that unhealthy fear can show up for you and wreak havoc in your life and in your relationships.

Because unhealthy fear, undetected, it can lead to anger outbursts, impulsive bad decisions because fear is mostly based within our imagination. Did you know that? We might, depending on what we're imagining might happen, we might take action on something that may not actually be there.

But we feel like it's there because our brains have cooked up a very scary scenario. And now we're convinced that it's possible, it could happen because maybe we've heard a news story or maybe we've had a past experience where we've got some kind of evidence that maybe this could actually happen, and now we're hyperalert. Now we're responding to a hypothetical fear response in our brains and we're gearing up for a fight. We're gearing up for a way to protect ourselves.

And what you have to remember is part of your brain is lighting up with fight, flight, or freeze. It's all part of your survival mechanisms. And so, it's doing it because it wants you to survive. And when we pull up worst-case scenario, it's a way of our brain saying "I don't want to be surprised by anything bad to happen. I want to be prepared."

But sometimes, we're preparing for something that never comes or we're preparing for something that doesn't actually meet the current situation at hand. We need to get a balance on what we're terrified is going to happen and be based in reality of what is happening.

So, there is this thing called projection. It's one of Freud's defense mechanisms. And it's supposed to be this thing where we project – it's exactly what it sounds like – we project our deepest fears on other people. We can project them onto things. And we can project them onto situations.

And they are based on our deepest fears. One of the most common ones that we project is rejection. Like, a lot of times, we can project our deepest

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

fear of being rejected or abandoned on other people. And they may or may not be doing this. But because it's our deepest fear, we've already accused them in our brains and we activate all these defense mechanisms and fight modes to protect ourselves.

This obviously starts a very unhealthy dynamic. If you're accusing someone of something they may or may not be doing based on your own fears and anxieties, that is going to cause a lot of distress in the relationship because you're not based on what's really happening. You're running on fear and anxiety.

I mean, the same thing can be true, we can project our fears on situations and then we can take impulsive action that follows. So, the first example I gave you, if you're projecting another person and believing they're doing something to hurt you, you're probably going to react in anger and attack them.

But if it's an environmental situation – I mean, a perfect example of this is this pandemic that we're in. We, as a world, ran out of toilet paper. Why, my friends? Why in 2020 are we going to forever remember the year that toilet paper ran out? Because people projected their deepest fear of not being able to wipe their ass or something – I'm not sure what the deep fear was. But all the toilet paper was bought up.

That was all based in fear. And now I've heard from multiple people, they have so much toilet paper, they're afraid it's going to get moldy and they don't know what to do with it.

So, these are the consequences of reacting out of our fears, projecting our deepest fears rather than learning how to respond to our fears. We need to learn how to respond to our fears so we don't do crazy shit like buy out the whole world's toilet paper.

And so, part of learning how to respond to yourself when you're feeling fearful is a two-step process of honoring, empathizing your emotions; the part that feels afraid. We need to be in touch with this part because we

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

need to learn how to respond to it and calm it down. And logic and reason won't work. Fear does not speak that language.

It is the thing that will make people more pissed off when you're like, "Just calm down and don't be afraid," and they're afraid and anxious. It doesn't work that way. So, we have to learn how to speak fear's language by responding to it in healthy emotional ways.

Because I want you to think about it, much like I talked about in the anxiety episode – I believe that was episode 32, talking about how to support yourself in anxiety – fear is also a messenger. So, you want to think about an alert system and it's going off. And if it's going off in projections or catastrophizing or constantly spinning on worst-case scenarios, a message is surfacing.

Your alert system is going up and it is trying to get your attention. It needs you to spend time with it. It needs you to empathize with it. It needs you to respond in healthy ways because, if you think about this analogy, if a fire alarm goes off, if you just ignore it, it's going to keep going. And the sound is deafening.

Like, it will keep going unless you do something; either A, put the fire out, B, move the smoke to another part, or C, you take the batteries out of the fire alarm. Which I'm not suggesting you do, but I'm just saying, like, you have to respond to the noise.

Think of yourself as an alarm system. How do I respond to the noise so I don't buy toilet paper? So, I don't scream at someone for abandoning me when they may not be abandoning me. Think through these things – or being scared somebody's going to reject you, when that's not anything that the present-day evidence suggests.

This is the kind of stuff you need to slow your reaction down before you start a fight that you don't want to be in. And so, I want you to keep in mind, if you are in reaction mode, fear takes us there automatically. So again, you

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

are a human being. Fear is part of your survival mechanisms. It is part of what keeps you alive on this Earth.

So, having a fear response is not bad. What you do with your fear response is undetermined. You get to decide that. Fear is not always bad. Fear, again, is this spectrum. If you have a healthy amount of fear where you keep your fears in check by honoring your emotions, seeing the situation for what it is, and using coping tools and strategies, you can navigate fear quite well.

And additionally, so, fear could actually become a superpower for you. There is not this world where you're not fearless. Working through fear is what courage is. Courage and bravery work through fear. It builds resilience. It builds strength. There are a lot of gems in there if it's done in healthy ways.

So, let's break this down. I've already mentioned to you fight, flight, freeze. They are primary survival mechanisms. And so, they're very common for people that have anxiety or PTSD. They're also extremely common when you're living in a pandemic. Surprise, yay for us. Not really, I'm being sarcastic.

So, I want to break these down because these are our primary defense mechanisms when we feel threatened, when we feel threatened physically, if we feel threatened emotionally, if we feel threatened mentally. And it goes back to that whole idea; if you're being chased by a bear, you probably want to survive that and not get eaten.

So, you have these survival mechanisms that kick on so that you can survive the interaction. But the deal with modern day living is we don't actually have bears, or bear encounters are very few and far between, depending on where you live.

So, for the most of us, it's our relationships. It's our jobs. It's the way we feel, the way we think, and the experiences that we have had that kick these survival mechanisms on. And so, learning how to respond to yourself

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

when these defense mechanisms are coming on are a key to you getting through them in healthy ways.

And this is not easy, friends. You are not going to solve this issue in one podcast episode. But what I'm hoping is that I'm just going to point you in the right direction. This is why therapy is valuable. Working with a trauma therapist or an anxiety therapist or therapist that's trauma-informed and understands how these defense mechanisms are playing out in your body and in your nervous system and in your mind gives you a chance to heal, to grow, and to learn how to respond to yourself in healthy ways.

So, let's identify all three and let's talk about what we do for these things. But again, if you are feeling triggered already, it is information that something in your internal world needs support and I highly recommend you get support in your local state of residence.

So, I'm going to put that right here because I think it's really, really important not to tell yourself a story that you should know how to do this or that this is an easy fix. It is not an easy fix and it is a very hard thing to learn how to do. So, I'm going to break this down for you, but there's no shame or blame if you need extra support in these areas.

So, as I mentioned earlier, three primary survival mechanisms, and they react. The body does it automatically. And so, all of us tend to pick a favorite. It's not really a favorite, but we all kind of have our go-to out of those three.

So, some of us always go into fight mode, some of us always go into flight, and some of us always go into freeze. And really, it depends on who you are as a persona and the life experiences you have experienced. And so, a lot of us have that. But we can experience all three at once almost, which is a clusterfuck of crazy feeling. That's just a horrible feeling, for anyone who's experienced that.

You can kind of vacillate between a couple of them or you can have a primary one which you're really engaged with. So, let's talk about fight. So,

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

fight is triggered in our nervous system when we feel a threat is coming. We launch into fight. Now, this is extremely useful if someone is attacking you physically.

If someone is attacking you, you go into fight mode and your adrenaline kicks on and you are giving yourself a good chance to fight back and survive. This is why your body does this. Again, this is a good thing. This is a very bad thing when we go into fight mode and we're not fighting the right thing.

So, let's go into language that's probably more easy to relate to because probably some of this sounds a little bit extreme. You're like, "Well I don't really do that. I'm not really worried about that."

So, a threat could be someone pisses you off. They insult you. They say something you don't like. They do something you don't like and you react. Now, depending on the button they push within you will decide how far you take this.

And if this goes unchecked, if you're a fighter, a lot of times, you will launch back in fight mode and say things you regret. You will take it to the next level. And so, when this is used inappropriately, you tend to hurt people because you're having an elevated reaction that doesn't match what is actually happening.

So, here's what I want to say about fighter energy. Fighter energy is awesome. It's going to help you survive. It has a lot of pros to it. on the flipside, if it is unchecked or unmanaged and based and rooted in traumatic memories, you're going to have some trouble.

It can be toxic. It can really hurt people. It can hurt yourself. It can hurt relationships. So, this is one that is incredibly powerful, when you get yourself in balance and you learn how to respond to yourself, this one can be harnessed in really healthy ways.

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

And so, one of the first tools that you want to use when you notice – first, you have to identify, “I’m getting in fight mode.” And it’s very distinct. You will notice it in your body. It is a very strong energy.

Sometimes your heart races or your fists tighten up or your shoulders tense up. You feel tense in your legs. Like, you are in launch mode. You are ready to just go after someone or something. And so, you need to first identify, “Oh shit, I’m in fight mode. Okay, I need to breathe and I need to assess what is actually happening and what feels like it’s happening,” because sometimes those are two different things.

So, for example, if you assess a situation, like let’s say your kid’s getting married. Okay, but that transition feels the same as your father abandoning you, you might go into fight mode. You might go into fight mode because you’re pissed off that you’re being abandoned.

However, the truth of that scenario may be that you are not being abandoned, your kid is just getting married, following the normal flow of life, and wants you to join them in a new relationship and a new family dynamic. That’s probably the reality of it.

And I know there’s a lot of variants and I just picked a really hot thing. But what am I trying to say in this example? You need to breathe and stop because you don’t want to attack your kid for abandoning you if they are indeed not. Instead, you want to honor what’s there.

You’re like, “Oh, this reminds me of when my dad abandoned me. What do I need to do to support myself?” Because screaming or yelling or icing someone out because you have decided that they’re abandoning you when they may not be is not a good plan. It’s not a good plan.

So, we need to breathe and decide, like, what is this? And what do I need to do about it. And just a caveat, if abandonment is a thing for you, like, abandonment is a therapy issue. I have not met anyone who has gotten over their fear of abandonment through any other method other than

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

working with a trauma-informed therapist. Abandonment is usually a trauma issue.

And so, knowing that sort of helps you equip yourself with how to support yourself in healthy ways, like learning how to manage that inner child part of you that feels that. But I hope that kind of differentiates for you, like, what is what, because that is what you need to do when you're in fight mode, before you start destroying people and things around you.

Alright, flight is exactly what it sounds like. You run. You get the hell out of there. So, this is the same idea of, if something is attacking you, you run away. You try to run away. You try to escape.

What's interesting about this one is this can actually show up in relationship patterns. If flight is your thing, you might be an avoider. You might be someone who runs away when things get hard. And that's all based in learning how to survive things, that perhaps you learned, when hard things happen, if you can run away and get away from it, problem solved.

Because with each of these defense mechanisms, every solution you come up with and survives, your brain hardwires that in as a good solution. So, if running away is how you got out of painful situations, you're probably going to start that as a pattern.

Do you see how these things weave in? It's not just as simple as, like, let's say a bear is chasing you and you run away from it. But what about the metaphorical bears that are in your life? What about the lessons you learned as a child when things were chasing you? What did you do? Did you run? Were you successful at running?

This can create some survival mechanisms where it's hard to stay in place. Maybe you run away and you just learn to run when things get hard. And so, you need to pause and breathe and you need to ask yourself, is running going to help or hurt this situation? Is avoidance going to make this situation worse or better?

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

If I stay and deal with the situation in front of me, what skills do I need to have in order to do that? What would the benefit of that be? And then go into learning mode. Go into exploring mode and figure that out for yourself. What do you need to do to stay in the situation and do well, or make it better, or influence it in a positive way?

Alright, and lastly is freeze. Freeze is exactly what it sounds like. You freeze. So again, it goes back to those primal mechanisms. If you play dead in the animal kingdom, some predators will overlook you. Some predators will sniff around you and walk away.

And so, that is where that mechanism is birthed. It is the body's last resort. You're probably going to first fight or you're going to flight. You're going to fight it off or you're going to run away. Probably going to be the first two.

If you don't have those two options, if you're cornered and you have no way out, the body is going to freeze. It's its last hope at survival. And so, the problem with this is, if you've had any kind of traumatic experience, you can have intermittent freeze responses to seemingly benign things. It becomes part of your nervous system.

You just freeze every time you feel threatened because this, again, is how you've learned how to survive. And your body does this – freeze is one of the most intense experiences for anyone who's ever had it. Like, when your body freezes, you can't just unfreeze. It's involuntary.

And then, once your body unfreezes, you have to make a choice, like am I going to run away? Am I going to fight? Or how am I going to get myself to safety, is the question.

And so, when you're feeling frozen, that is a lot of times a traumatized piece of yourself. And so, you need to speak to it as you would a small child who is scared of a monster in their closet. You need to come alongside it with time, with space, with gentleness and kindness.

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

And this goes against everything in your system as I say this. You're like, "I don't like this. I don't want to do this," because there's part of you that's in fight mode, like, that doesn't even feel comfortable because you feel afraid.

You have to get your nervous system back to safety. Do some tangibles, like what can you touch, what can you play with? Clay is really good. Are there tactile things that you can play with? Glitter jars, things like that. How do you get your nervous system back to safety?

Because if you're in a fear response, you're not feeling safe, even if it doesn't make sense around you. So, you have to take time and attention to create some internal safety. And again, if you don't know how to do that, you need to talk to a therapist because this is a very hard thing. Freeze is a really challenging issue. So, I want to just create realistic expectations around that.

So, the goal with all of this is try to get yourself in balance. When you notice what your fear response is lighting up for you, you can start to get smart about it. You can start to have a healthy response or learn the tools to have it.

This is why, in therapy, coping skills are so important. When you learn coping skills and strategies, you are able to respond to yourself in healthy ways. You're not just throwing spaghetti at the wall hoping that you don't feel anxious today. That doesn't work.

Hoping anxiety or fear isn't going to show up is not a good plan. Fear will continue to show up unless it is supported. Anxiety will continue to show up unless it is supported. So, learning coping skills and strategies is a key factor in the healing process, long before you get to any of your trauma stuff, before you get into the deeper waters of what's going on.

You need to learn some tangible coping strategies and tools. It's a very important part. This is why I spend so much time – I have my own online community where I teach this monthly. It's a very important thing for people to have tools and skills to work through their shit. And we all have shit.

[Mental Health Remix](#) with Nicole Symcox

Ep #34: How to Recognize and Manage Fear

I don't even say that in a mean way. We've all got shit and right now, in this pandemic, we've all got shit, okay. So, that's what I want to say about that. And again, just to reiterate, if strong emotions came up for you in this episode or any part of this episode, take it as information that something in your internal world needs support.

There is no shame or blame in getting mental health support in your local state of residence. It's probably the best thing that you can do for yourself because learning how to heal and respond to fear in healthy ways is where your power is at. We want you to get to a place where you are managing fear in healthy ways.

Alright, my friends, and if you loved today's episode, make sure you're on my email list so that you get all the updates about what we're talking about and all the things that I have going on. Alright, my friends, have a good week. 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.

© 2020 Nicole Symcox, All rights reserved