

Ep #35: Healthy and Unhealthy Emotion



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With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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We don't need to do a contest of who has it the worst. It's just not helpful to anybody. We own our own experience and we support others in theirs. There's no comparing in it. There's just support, empathizing, and figuring out what to do that's going to help you feel better in the process.

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

Hey, hey, everyone. Welcome to episode 35. Today, we are going to be talking about having healthy emotions. I know for us, here in California, we have been in shelter-in-place for about eight weeks now at the time I'm recording this. So, it depends on when you're listening to this.

So, we are going on eight weeks. And it was just extended for another 30 days with very little changes. And so, I think people were hugely disappointed that we're not able to get any of our freedoms back or remnants of our old life, that this shelter-in-place order didn't change a whole lot.

And so, I notice that that created a mix of emotion from people. It's like we all want to do what is right for the health and safety of everyone involved in this thing. And yet, there is a very strong grief process that is happening for people over their old life.

Like, I think a lot of people at this point feel like this has been going on for a really long time, and we want the aspects of our old life back. And so, a lot of us are grieving and not even realizing how many losses we have been experiencing, you know, emotionally and otherwise, like just physical freedoms. Maybe we've lost our jobs or we're homeschooling.

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Like, this has turned our entire worlds upside down. And so, I think to have a shelter-in-place order be extended with very little change was extremely discouraging to people. And so, I watched a rollercoaster of emotion that happened after this last shelter-in-place was extended.

And so, I thought it might be good to just talk about what is healthy emotions and what is unhealthy emotions, and how do we manage that inside of ourselves so that we can feel good and internally supported?

Many times, I hear from people that they hate emotion, like they hate that they have them, they hate that they don't know what to do with them. And above all, I think emotions can sometimes make us feel powerless. Like there's no solution to this, it just feels like wasted time and wasted energy.

And I think I want to caution you from thinking that way because, when you think that way, you are denying a piece of yourself. And denying a piece of yourself is never healthy. That is never a good thing. That is a path that leads to pain.

Denying our own experience, or if you've had someone else in your life deny your experience, those things are incredibly painful. There are plenty of people that were raised in environments where their feelings, their emotions were never validated. And in fact, they were invalidated. And it's traumatic.

It is very difficult to have a reality – perception is reality. The way we perceive the world creates our own internal reality. That's what that means. And so, to have someone tell you your perception is wrong or you've got it twisted or to make you feel bad for having a feeling is a very destructive process. And so, if we do this to ourselves, we are exacerbating a problem internally.

So, what am I saying? I am saying that invalidating your feelings either internally or having someone else externally invalidating them are equally toxic. And so, we can't control what other people say. We can control how

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we internalize it, how we hear it, and how we respond to it. And that is where your power is at.

But if you don't take the time to nurture, support, listen, and hear your emotional experience out, it's going to be very difficult to do those things. Like, if our default button is just to go into numbing out, blocking out, or going into rage fits or being anxious or depressed, like if we go into these dark places automatically because we're not supporting our emotions, that's how bad habits get started. That's how dysfunctional coping mechanisms get started.

It leads to a host of pain. So then, you've got the original pain, and now you've got all the pain that's coming with it because you haven't addressed the root of it.

So, let's just squash right now that idea that emotions are bad. And I think this gets into parenting at times. I think, for parents, it is very difficult to see your child struggle, to see your child in pain. And so, our knee-jerk response is to make the bad feeling go away. Like, we give it ice cream. We try to give it a smile. We try to go into fix-it mode.

And fix-it mode is not something our emotions understand. That is something our logical brains understand, the part of you that plans, that executes, that solves problems, that is a very useful tactic when you are speaking to that part that wants to problem-solve.

But when it comes to emotions, being with someone in their pain, being with yourself in that pain, supporting yourself, channeling that energy in healthy ways, putting it in art, exercising, journaling, spending time with safe people, but not letting it fester, not letting it grow. That's how emotions become unhealthy.

Because when we have a pain or hurt, we have to cope with that in some way. We can't sustain that amount of pain all the time, and so, we create a bunch of protective measures around us that dulls the feeling of the pain. And these are not usually healthy.

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This is usually unhealthy and it can create, you know, reactive responses. It can create lots of anxiety. And this is when we start to get powerless because we don't understand anymore what the problem is. We just know we're drowning in symptoms.

And so, what I want to say in that is if you're having a ton of symptoms, you are not your symptoms. Symptoms are just messengers that something is going on that needs your time and attention. It doesn't mean emotions are bad. Emotions are part of the human experience. It is what makes you human. It's what makes you unique. It's actually what makes you powerful. It's actually what makes you awesome.

But when they are unfiltered, they are unchecked, and they are running wild and running your life in unhealthy ways, they feel like a burden. They feel like a pain in the ass. They feel like a never-ending struggle.

So, here's the importance of honoring your emotions. And I think right now, in our current climate, there are so many emotions. This is bringing up old childhood stuff. This is bringing up financial stress, family stress, communication issues. We've all been in this for a long time.

And I think what created such a strong emotional response this last round of extensions was we don't have an end in sight, at least in California. I know a lot of this is state by state, but in California, there's not a huge plan for reopening at the time I'm recording this.

Again, this is an evolving situation. By the time you listen to this, maybe we'll have a plan. I hope that's the case. But people at this point are just living in long-term uncertainty and they're unsure how to deal with that. And so, it is natural that you're going to have an emotional response to it.

But what I'm often hearing is people invalidating themselves because they're like, "Well, at least I have a job. Other people don't have jobs, so I don't have a reason to feel that way." So, that goes back to what I've said in other episodes.

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Comparing your pain to other people's pain is not a healthy expression of emotion. It invalidates you and it invalidates them. We need to honor both. Your experience is yours and it matters because it causes you pain and stress.

In that same process, supporting and empathizing with another person that may be going through more than you are, or going through less than you are, is part of just supporting each other in humanity. Like, just being a human and being supportive and caring.

We don't need to do a contest of who has it the worst. It's just not helpful to anybody. We own our own experience and we support others in theirs. There's no comparing in it. There's just support, empathizing, and figuring out what to do that's going to help you feel better in the process.

So, I'm going to give you a little bit of an overview. So, we've been talking about a lot of different things, so let me just give you a little bit of an overview of what unhealthy emotions and healthy emotions are.

So, when you think about unhealthy emotions, it can look like blocking or numbing your feelings out, screaming and yelling at other people, which I've unfortunately witnessed a lot recently due to the pandemic, feeling a ton of self-hatred and anger at yourself, feeling scared all the time, feeling anxious all the time, or being in fight mode all the time. I'm noticing that people are really quick to jump into conflict with others right now and I think it's because we're just all on edge.

You know, obsessing or ruminating on things that really have nothing to do with you. In other words, sticking your nose in other people's businesses when it's none of your business. Fixing others instead of fixing yourself, like, hyper-focusing on the problems of others rather than dealing with your own shit. And we've all got shit right now, so that's not even a mean statement, it's just real. We've all got stuff right now.

So, not having boundaries, like, saying yes to everything or saying no to everything, like not having a real clear sense of internal or external

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boundaries can really lead to unhealthy emotions, going from zero to 60 with anger or anxiety. And actually, this one goes undetected a lot, but being overly positive, like never really seeing the reality of a situation or honoring the fact that there are aspects of things that are hard, and instead you just sugarcoat it all the time. That can be really unhealthy and it can be really off-putting to other people.

Okay, so those are just like a list. It's just a very, very general list. There's a lot of variants in that. There's a spectrum in everything. If you've been listening to me for a while, you know that there is gray in all of this. We want to stay away from all or nothing thinking and we want to come somewhere into the middle and have balanced perspective, which is a great intro into what healthy emotions can look like.

Healthy emotions are always coming from a balance of power. Healthy emotions are not the absence of negative emotions. A lot of people think it's either, like, bad emotions are all bad and it's dark and it's hellish and it's horrible. And while that can be true, it doesn't mean the answer is to go to the other side where you're happy all the time, everything's light, airy, perfect, beautiful, whatever, because truthfully, that's unattainable.

You might have a day of that. You might have a really good day. And I hear people get disappointed that they can't maintain that over the course of a lifetime. And it's just not realistic. I want you to have healthy, happy moments because that's realistic. And those moments build on top of each other and they build a happy life.

But this idea, I think there's a lot of misunderstanding that healthy emotions mean you feel happy and good all the time. And that's just not true. Healthy emotions means you have a balance of power going on inside of you. The negative and the positive are working together. The light and the dark. Now this is getting into philosophical stuff.

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Like, how often do you hear this? The light and the dark need to balance each other out. It's not one or the other. And so, healthy emotions can look like being assertive. So, let's just start with communication.

If you listened to my episode on healthy communication, I talk about the spectrum of we have aggressive, we have passive, we have passive aggressive, and then we have assertive. Assertive is a balance of power. You are stating your needs and expressing your feelings in a balanced healthy way that gets your message across to the listener.

It's not attacking. It's not hurtful. It's factual and it's a supportive statement to yourself and it's respectful to the other person. That is an example of a healthy emotion when you're dealing with communication.

The second thing is having a response of curiosity when negative emotions come up. For example, what is this trying to teach me? What is my anxiety saying? How can I support myself in this moment? What need is coming up for me right now? Because what we tend to do when string emotions come up is, we judge them. We criticize them. We squash them. But we don't deal with them.

If you've been listening to me for a while, remember, emotions are just information. Information is coming up and you need to approach yourself with an open mind, with curiosity and wonder. What is this? What is this thing? What is it teaching me? What is it saying? And how do I respond to that?

And then, there is learning how to express hard emotions. Because holding them in for too long is going to create displacement a lot of times. Now, displacement is basically when something happens to us, we don't deal with it in that moment because we don't feel like we have the power to. And so, we displace it onto someone else or something else.

So, instead of getting mad in that moment of the thing, you know, we get mad at something else and that energy gets displaced. So, learning how to express hard emotions by journaling, exercising, art, crying, talking to a

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safe person. Start figuring out where your channels are. Like, how do you channel that emotional energy into something that feels safe, productive, and supportive to you?

And a lot of times, you need to do some trial and error to even figure out what that is. And you need to create a plan ahead of time because once you are triggered and your lizard brain is kicked on and you're in fight, flight, you know, you are ready to go, you're in trouble. You are going to default to all of your survival mechanisms, okay.

And so, we need to have a plan when it comes to having strong emotions. Like, what am I going to do in the moment I can't access my logical brain, or I can't think reasonably, or I am so overwhelmed I don't know what to do? So, this is how we plan for strong emotions. We create a plan.

You can do that with your therapist. You can do that on your own. But start compiling a list of ways for you to express yourself and using tools and strategies in those moments.

And lastly, it's important, when you are trying to manage healthy emotions, is to learn how to discern when you need to fix a problem and when you just need to hold space for it. Many times, with emotions, we need to hold a safe space to process them, and they kind of work themselves out.

But if we put a lot of judgment or a lot of agendas or pushing, trying to fix things, we can actually activate a rebellious part in ourselves, or we can activate a self-saboteur or we can activate a part that feels offended by that.

Now, this is getting into IFS or Internal Family System, parts work, okay. It's a therapy method. But you can activate another part that's going to be like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa I don't need to be fixed. I don't want to be fixed. And you're pissing me off that you're even bringing this up right now."

So, you need to be careful and discern when is this a fix-it problem and when is this, "I need to hold space for it," problem. Because both are true.

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There are moments when you are experiencing anxiety, stress, overwhelm. You need to take action in your life. You need to create a plan. You need to do something or you're going to get eaten alive.

So, this is what I'm talking about. I'm not saying you always go one way or the other. I'm saying discern between the two. What is happening now? And how do I need to respond to it? And what feels supportive to me? And what's the plan?

And the plan might be, "I just need to hold space for my feelings. I need to let myself cry for five minutes. I need to journal. I need to process. I need to talk to someone. But I don't need to fix this right now. I need to let the emotion pass."

Thinking about emotions like the weather, they come and they go. And it sometimes is intense, like a major storm. And sometimes it's sunny and bright and fine. So, it's a cheesy metaphor, but it really works when you think about it that way.

So, learning how to discern what's what in the moment. And sometimes, you have to write this out. Sometimes you do have to respond to an email. Sometimes, things are timestamped and it's vitally important for you to respond. And other times, that is counter-productive and not helpful.

And you learn how to discern this by getting to know yourself, understanding your past, understanding your present, understanding what's coming up for you. And these are all things that you address in therapy. These are all things that you work through in therapy.

So, have reasonable expectations for yourself. You are not expected to know all this stuff. It's why therapy is a thing. You go into therapy to try to figure all this stuff out with someone else, getting to know yourself and knowing how to support yourself in healthy ways.

Okay, my friends, I'm hoping that this was helpful. What I want you to hear from me today is that not all emotions are bad and that I want you to learn

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how to discern, how to understand when unhealthy emotions are coming up for you and how to respond to those emotions in healthy ways so you can get back to balance, so you can get back to feeling good again.

I want you to get into a rhythm of healthy emotions. Emotions are not bad. It's just information. And it's a part of you. It is a part of you. And believe it or not, when this part is supported and feels healthy and good, it is powerful. It is very, very powerful. There can be power in our pain. And learning how to heal is the best thing you can do for yourself.

So, if strong emotions came up for you when listening to this episode or any episode, or anything going on right now in the world, there are so many things, reach out for support. Get mental health support in your local state of residence. It is probably the best thing you can do for yourself, especially right now in the midst of everything going on.

There is never shame or blame in getting mental health support. It is a good thing to do for yourself. And if you enjoy today's episode and you never want to miss when a new episode drops, make sure you are on my email list. You can visit nicolesymcox.com and there is a signup bar right on the front page.

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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