

Ep #42: Learning and Unlearning



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With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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So, a lot of this process in therapy of unlearning is unburdening. And it's all this pain, the frustrations, just all the emotions and the feelings that we've been holding in our bodies for a really long time. And letting some of that go, that's the feeling side of things, and that has to happen.

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

Hey, hey, everyone. Welcome to episode 42. So, today I want to talk a little bit about learning and unlearning. So much of the healing process that we engage in when we're on the journey to meeting our professional goals and meeting our personal goals, what we're up against a lot of times in the healing process is we are trying to unlearn unhealthy behaviors that are no longer serving us.

We are unlearning thoughts. We are unlearning beliefs that we are currently guiding our life by. And so, it's a very interesting process when you are healing. Because I think people sort of, you know, enter therapy thinking, like, "I just need to learn tools and then my life will be fine." And so, there is a complement.

So, while there's parts of that that are true, just learning tools isn't the whole thing. It's part of it. It's absolutely part of it. But you absolutely need both. You need to unlearn some of the unhealthy coping mechanisms that you've been dealing with for a lot of your life, that were birthed out of survival, that were maybe birthed out of trauma, birthed out of severe anxiety, birthed out of dysfunctional environments. Like, whatever that is for you.

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Because you have to think, when you are in the moment and you are surviving something that is dysfunctional or unhealthy, you're likely to come up with unhealthy coping mechanisms in that moment just to survive, right?

And again, not a you thing. It's a human thing. Like, we do what we can until we learn better, and then we do better. And so, some of the pain in the process of healing is just pulling all of this apart. It's like pulling back some of our belief systems.

And it's interesting because in working with clients, sometimes this is where people get fearful. Because they're like, "If I pull apart my whole paradigm of how I feel safe in the world, that feels scary." And so, this is where the learning part comes in. So, we're learning and we're unlearning.

Because as we let go of some of the old dysfunctional beliefs, some of the old dysfunctional thought processes, some of the different behaviors that we've done that are no longer serving us, we are learning skills and tools and different ways to show up in the world to replace them.

Now, these two things start working together. And there is a big difference between just learning – because if you're just learning, you're just teaching your brain. You're not necessarily feeling, right? Thinking, feeling, two different things, okay.

You become a superpower when those two different things actually complement each other and start working together on the same team. But most people that enter therapy, they've either got the feeling side out of control or the thinking side is out of control. But they're not in sync with each other. And so, some of that is getting those two sides of ourselves on the same page and working together.

So, a lot of this process in therapy of unlearning is unburdening and it's all this pain, the frustrations, just all the emotions and the feelings that we've been holding in our bodies for a really long time. And letting some of that go, that's the feeling side of things. And that has to happen.

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It has to happen with support. It has to happen with guidance. It has to happen within the safety context of a trauma-informed therapist because they are the ones that are well-versed and knowledgeable in how to unpack traumatic events. Because you can't think your way out of it. You have to feel your way out of it.

But these feelings are triggering. These feelings are overwhelming. So, you don't want to necessarily do this by yourself. You want to do it with a guide, with someone who knows the ins and outs of what you're going through and can kind of guide you, can kind of help regulate you and help you stay focused on the right thing.

It's important to bring this up because I hear from so many people, they're like, "I don't understand. I do the self-care. I learn all these skills. And I still feel like crap." And the answer to that is, it's not that you're doing the wrong things. It's that you're doing a lot of the right things.

Your missing piece is you haven't entered into the feeling phase. The feeling phase is the uncomfortable phase. The feeling phase is what we all try to avoid. The feeling phase is when we start to really face ourselves. And it's scary as shit. Probably the scariest person you'll ever come up against is yourself.

And that's why people, I think, want to stay in the thinking mode because if they stay thinking, then you don't have to feel. And so, these two things need to go together. You're going to have to feel your way through the healing process and you're going to have to think your way through the healing process.

You can't have one extreme or the other. Like, it has to be learning new coping skills, learning new thought processes is learning new tools, learning new strategies, and you have to do the deep work with a therapist, learning how to feel, make sense out of your past, make sense out of what you want your future to look like, what are the areas that have been holding you back?

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And sometimes, that requires a little bit of a grief process. And so, some of the active challenge is like, okay, so on autopilot, just to use an example, sometimes when people feel rejected, it's a huge trigger. And so, here's an example of unlearning, of, "When I read that text message, I felt rejected like she didn't care about me and that she was busy doing her own thing."

And so, in that, we might just feel rejected and it hurts our feelings. Now, if we have a trauma story of being rejected, we might react really, really strongly to that. We might lash out and be like, "Well fuck you, I don't even care about you." That's an extreme.

Or maybe we're passive aggressive and we're just cold and we ice them out for, like, a week or something, or the silent treatment. But whatever it is, perhaps one of our old coping strategies is that when we get hurt, we hurt people back.

And so, part of the unlearning in this example would be, when I'm getting triggered, I notice an old story starts to play. My rejection story starts to play. And I have a choice in this moment. I can behave the way I always do, which is what my impulses are telling me to do. I want to lash out. I want to be mean because she hurt me, so I want to hurt her back.

But instead, you know, as I'm gaining insight into myself, I'm going to try to do this a different way. I am going to unlearn my old ways of being in the world and I'm going to step up and use some of the skills that I've learned and I'm going to try this approach differently.

And so, this is how these two things work together, the unlearning and the learning. So, as you step up into the learning, you're catching yourself before you go into autopilot, because behavior gets put on autopilot, as we've talked about if you've been listening to the podcast for a while. And you're stopping yourself. You're thought-checking yourself.

You're checking in on your emotions and you're like, "Okay, I'm going to acknowledge the fact that I feel hurt. And I have a choice in this moment how I want to respond. I can do it the old way, or I can do it a new way."

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And so, the new way might be you ask a clarifying question, you know, like, “Does this mean you’re too busy to help me at all? Or are you just busy in this moment?” Maybe there’s a clarifying question. For all you know, people were – this example, not people, but like, in this example, maybe this person was at the doctor’s office and they were really short because they got called in from the waiting room. Or maybe they got a phone call mid-text, or whatever.

There’s a million different reasons why someone – and of course, there’s the reason they could just be being a jerk. I mean, that’s totally possible too. But you’re not responsible for how other people are behaving. You are responsible for your own behavior and your own thoughts. So, therefore, you proceed differently.

You check in and maybe you ask a clarifying question, or maybe you respond differently and you’re like, “You know what, this hurts my feelings, but I’m not going to retaliate. I’m going to instead reach out to someone else that maybe can help me or I’m going to journal or I’m going to go exercise. But I’m going to go handle and manage my emotions and I’m going to come back to this when I have a clearer head.”

A lot of times, when we have – when we’re angry or we’re having a strong emotion, many times, if you give yourself 20 minutes of space to go do something else, unless you have a clinical disorder, a lot of times, 20 minutes will give your brain a little bit of a break and you can kind of decide, like, how do I want to move forward with this now that I’m not in this high-level triggered space and I’m just reacting?

But the gold in that is learning and unlearning. It’s like, okay I know I could behave the way I’ve always behaved, or I can do something different because I’ve learned other tools and strategies. And this is where course come in. This is where classes – this is where learning all those amazing things that you’ve poured yourself into learning come into hand.

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But it's integrating itself with the emotions of the thing. And so, the two have to work together. And so, as we do this as a practice, as an active practice, as you're catching yourself, as you're processing through your emotions in therapy, as you're working through your past and the messages that are there and as you're changing your own story, this becomes easier.

You start to have a new autopilot. And you have to remember, you do things in a set of patterns, whether or not you realize it or not, we do things in patterns as humans. And so, acknowledging the patterns, disrupting the patterns, and replacing it with a new way of being is how you start to heal, grow, and change.

But one can't happen with the other. You can't just learn a bunch of shit and not let go of the past. And that's why it's such an exchange. And this is why there's a huge benefit in working with a trauma-informed therapist. Because they understand the exchange that's taking place. There is a grief process of letting go of the old. It's not as simple as what maybe your friends are telling you or what other people are telling you, which is just get over it, the past is the past, let it go.

Well, that's not helpful advice. Therapy wouldn't even be a thing if that was helpful advice. Insurance wouldn't pay for it if that was a thing. If it was as simple as just turning off the past so we could just move forward with our present, mental health wouldn't be an issue. But it is because it does not work that way.

It's an active practice that you have to learn and engage with, you know. And that's where you really get to see yourself. It's kind of beautiful. It's painful as hell, but it's also really beautiful at the same time.

And so, I just want to encourage you today that learning lots of things is awesome and I want you to do that. And feeling things is okay too. These two things work together.

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I don't want you to get lost in one or the other. So, your takeaway is, you know, learning skills and tools are extremely important. They really, really are. It's not enough when you have trauma in your background though.

Like, when you have PTSD or trauma or severe anxiety, you're going to need some other things as well because I hear too many people that get down on themselves like, "I just can't change. I feel stuck. I don't know what to do." But they're usually missing this feeling piece.

You haven't done feeling in a healthy constructive way, because you don't want to do that on your own either. Just being lost and stuck in dark feelings leads to more darkness. So, both extremes can exist. And that's sort of the power of healing is we're always trying to come back into this balanced perspective, this place of balance, between emotions and between thoughts.

And in that, we start to manage our lives in a little bit of a different way. But we have to unlearn a lot of the things. Because as kinds, we are just magnets in some ways. We mirror a lot of the behavior that is demonstrated to us. We adapt and we learn. And so, some of becoming an adult is unlearning some of the things you were taught in childhood.

Like, if your dad did something a certain way that you found was horrific or harsh or hard or not helpful to you at all, you may have to unlearn some of that because, vicariously, you may have learned it and you might be doing it and not even realizing it.

So, our conscious brains only hold so much information. It's our unconscious that really has a lot of the over and control over us and it takes unlearning and processing to kind of get to the root of that. And so, it's another example.

Because we see this all the time in marriages. We sometimes play out our parents' marriage, for better or worse, in our own marriages. And so, we have to keep an eye on this. Like, what behavior am I just acting out

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because I learned it and I don't know how to be another way? And what part of this is my choice?

And so, never settle. Do not settle for your behavior, especially if you learned it from someone else. Like, if you were seven years old and you learned that you had to fight, yell, and scream to be heard or seen, let's unlearn that. You can unlearn that, right?

We don't have to let the past repeat itself. But we do need some help. I'm not even pretending or saying that this is something you do on your own, because it's just not. You want to work with a qualified mental health provider to really understand the ins and outs and how that's showing up for you.

But my main message for you today is that you're not stuck. You're not stuck. If you're getting stuck in these patterns and thought processes that are hard for you to leave, it's just information that something inside of you needs more strategic support and needs more strategic help.

Because I listen to people get so down on themselves that they can't do certain things and that they're just not changeable or they just don't have options. And that's not true. That's an old story from somewhere else that you probably need to unlearn and grow from. So, there's power in all of this, my loves. There's always power in all of this.

So, if strong emotions came up for you when you were listening to this podcast or you're starting to think through some of your own past experiences that feel unresolved, please 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 is probably the best thing you can do for yourself.

And if you have trauma, the best therapy for that is to find a trauma-informed therapist, someone who does EMDR, art therapy who's really trained in a specific modality for treating PTSD, okay. That disorder specifically cannot be managed by just thoughts alone. It won't work.

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You have triggers that live inside of your body. And so, it takes doing something like EMDR or other types of therapies that are really designed to support you and help you through the healing process.

And lastly, if you want to stay updated on the podcast episodes, make sure you get on my email list. It's on the front page of my website, at nicolesymcox.com. And 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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