

## Ep #43: Making Decisions with an Anxious Brain



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Nicole Symcox**

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## Ep #43: Making Decisions with an Anxious Brain

Making decisions is actually something we train our brain to do well. If you train your brain to sit and stew in anxiety, it will do that every single time there is a decision to be made.

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

Hey, hey, everyone. Welcome to episode 43. So, today I want to talk to you about decision making. And decision making is something I think we all wrestle with, but if you have an anxious brain, you wrestle with it in a whole new torturous way, right?

Because when we have an anxious brain, it's always serving for danger and potential catastrophic outcomes. And you know none of this. All you know is you feel panic in your chest or you feel butterflies in your stomach, or you just feel worried all the time.

It starts being like living in a body full of alarm systems that just keep going off. And many times, we don't understand why, which is part of the frustration of having an anxious brain.

Now, if you have an anxious brain and then there's a decision to be made, the trouble with that is that the anxiety piece will be serving for every potential bad outcome.

And so, as you are deciding between two or three different options of something, you know, you have the potential to feel really, really stressed out or really, really anxious, or really, really on edge. Because we're like, "Well I don't know what the right decision is. I could really see it going this way. Or I could really see it going that way. But if we do that, then this bad

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thing could happen, or this good thing could happen, and oh my gosh, oh my gosh.” And then, you’re in tears.

Those kinds of conversations with ourselves usually end in frustration and tears. So, let’s go about this a whole other way. So, first, we’re going to acknowledge the anxiety. Anxiety is an alert system. We’re going to thank it for alerting us that there’s potential danger and potential threats.

Now, that sounds counter-intuitive. That sounds fucked up. You’re like, “Why the hell would I thank anxiety of all things?” And it’s part of creating the whole self. Instead of condemning ourselves or yelling at ourselves for being anxious, we need to change the narrative.

We need to see it for what it is, which is it’s an alert system. It causes a physiological reaction and it causes overthinking. And when you’re trying to make a decision, overthinking is the adversary. It is the thing that will put you in what we call decision paralysis. Yes, it’s a thing.

I mean, you can overthink to the point you cannot make a decision anymore. Your brain is so exhausted from considering the options, it’s almost paralyzed. And then you’re stuck and now no option seems like a good option. And for a lot of people, you know, that are ambitious or high-achievers or you have kids that you need to make decisions for, for the school year, there’s deadlines.

So, getting into decision paralysis is not great. And then it starts another negative story, like, “Oh my god, why can’t I just make a decision? This is so hard…” fill in the blank with all of the negative self-accusatory statements that you will fill in the blank with. So, let’s just knock all that shit off.

Let’s just acknowledge that is. I feel anxious about making a decision. There are pros and cons to all of these decisions. So, I notice I’m having anxiety right now. It is showing up for me and it’s alerting me that there is potential danger.

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We want to acknowledge what it is and we want to try to ground ourselves from the anxiety. So, this is where, when you've heard me talk about in other episodes, how we ground ourselves. So, we need to do something with the anxiety first.

All that anxious energy is not going to help you make a decision and it's going to wear you out. So, you first have to acknowledge it and you have to do something that's grounding for yourself. Like, do you need to listen to music that calms you down? Like classical? Or do you need to listen to ocean waves. Do you need to look up some cool videos on Pinterest, like just watching waves crash?

Pinterest is really cool in terms of you can literally search, you know, nature or ocean. And now they'll show you little videos with audio. And so, I think this is really cool because if you're a nature person, you have so many options. And just spend a few minutes just kind of watching that.

You're not making a decision in that moment. What you're doing is you're grounding yourself. Or, you can get a stress ball or a weighted blanket or something that makes you feel grounded. Don't skip this step, friends.

When you're anxious, you have to acknowledge the energy that is in your body because it is putting you into, "We need to do something, we need to do something, high alert," right? It's like high, high, high alert and it feels crazy-making. And so, you have to honor what's there. And you need to step into, how do I get myself grounded in this moment?

And so, it might be watching a couple of calming videos. It might be sending some time just doodling or drawing or journaling out just some of the anxious static, as I call it. Because sometimes, when anxiety feels so strong, we have a hard time navigating because there's all of this anxious energy.

And I kind of call it static just because it feels like a lot of noise. It just feels like a lot of annoying noise that we can't really name. And so, the first step is you need to get some of that energy to come down. Once you get more

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grounded, then you're going to be more capable of accessing the logic side of your brain. But it's very hard to think logically, make decisions, when everything in your emotional system is telling you something is wrong or something could go wrong. Do you see how those two things don't add up?

So, you have to address the first thing first. Now, the next thing, of course, is the obvious. You need to assess the pros and the cons of the decision you are about to make. What are the potential benefits and what are the potential costs of each decision?

And then, you kind of weigh that against each other. It's like, do the benefits outweigh the potential cost of making this decision? Because in some situations, the pros and cons list can be almost equal. And those are the hardest decisions to make. But there are some decisions in life that are just like a slam dunk, you're like, "This is easy, of course, I'll do this. Of course, it's decision A."

But sometimes, there's not always good options. And sometimes, you don't have a lot of accurate information to go off of. And so, you kind of feel like you're flying blind and anxiety hates that. Anxiety hates that. It already is on high-alert for unpredictables. And then, if you're actually telling your anxiety a story that there are lots of unpredictables, what do you think's going to happen?

It's the same thing as telling a two-year-old that there's a monster in the closet. But don't be afraid of it, it only comes out every now and then. Okay, that's, like, fucking terrifying. So, what you told me is that a monster does live in the closet and it can come out at any time. Okay, same idea. Don't do that to yourself. You won't enjoy it.

So, as we break this down, you want to consider a pros and cons list. And in the midst of that, you want to weigh the options, as we already talked about.

Now, really weigh in that you want to make a decision when it aligns with who you are, what your goals are, and what you are equipped to handle.

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So, those are three things to consider. Especially when there's no good options.

So, in the event that, in this pros and cons chart, the cons come up, do you have the mental, emotional, physical, financial, whatever it is, do you have the resources to deal with it? It might be unfavorable, but that's not the question. The question is, can you handle it if it comes up?

And so, you have to get out of this mindset that every decision is designed for your happiness. Sometimes, just hard decisions have to be made and worked through once they're made. We would all love a happy ending where we make a good decision and it all turns out perfect. We love the Disney ending of things.

But that's just not always reality. And especially right now, living in the world we are right now, with so much turmoil and anxiety and confusion and fear, that's just not built in right now. And so, sometimes, it is which of these decisions am I willing to work through given the circumstances? Aligning that with who you are and what your goal is.

And so, even with, like, going back to school is creating a lot of stress and anxiety for parents right now because there just doesn't feel like there's a lot of good options. Some states have made that decision for you. Most of the schools here in California have decided that they're not going back, that they're going to be online.

But even in that decision made for parents, it still creates a lot of anxiety because now we've got an entire school year where we're going to have to navigate parents working from home, kids being at home, getting school work done, making sure they're actually learning this year. Because I know a lot of parents felt like the end of the school year last year, learning kind of didn't happen.

So, anyways, there doesn't feel like a good option, so you just sort of have to align yourself. Like, what are our goals here? What are we trying to

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accomplish? And what feels good and aligned with where we are today? And don't overthink it.

And we're not talking about the school anymore, just to be clear. I'm just going back to basic decision making. So, I was just using the school as an example. But let's just go back into this context of what we're talking about, which is dealing with an anxious brain when you're trying to make decisions.

And so, you need to always come back to center, come back to self, evaluate the options, evaluate yourself, and really kind of just notice what comes up for you as you play out each option. And so, there is this little trick that you can do that, for about 30 seconds or a minute, you just play out two decisions that you're deciding from and you play them out in your mind as if that has happened.

That is the decision. And just take notice, how that makes your body feel. Does it give you more stress and anxiety? Does it give you less stress and anxiety? Like, what is it about that? And play it out for both. And sometimes, that helps people decipher through, "What decision do I want to make? Which one feels good and aligned to me?"

Now, if you're getting intuition or a gut reaction, sometimes you'll get a piece over your body that your brain doesn't totally understand. And so, in that case, you might want to seek out some support or guidance from someone who is actually supportive.

Don't reach out to your critical mother-in-law and ask about a highly sensitive decision or something like that. Be careful who you ask advice from because they're either going to increase or decrease your anxiety.

But then you take that information and you talk to a trusted human about it, or maybe it's a therapist, or maybe it's a coach, or a teacher, or a mentor, or a friend, but someone who fits in the realm of helpful and supportive. And you know who those people are because you leave those

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conversations feeling helped and supported, not stressed out and more anxious, guilty, ashamed, et cetera, fill in the blank, right?

So, that can sometimes, when we have a trusted source that we can kind of talk through where we're like, "I think I might be getting a gut reaction on this, I'm not really sure," okay. Just when you're kind of weighing the options.

And then, when you have that trusted person come back to you and they can reflect back, like, "Oh well this is kind of what I hear you say." What is so fascinating, just as being a therapist, when people come to me with wanting to make a decision – first of all, I don't make decisions for people. But second, a lot of times, their mind is made up. And it shows up in the words and the sentences that they are using to describe the situation.

But they're disconnected from that because they're experiencing so much anxiety. And so, when we ground and get the anxiety to calm down, and I reflect back what I've heard them say, a lot of times, the decision is there.

We just overthink ourselves into an oblivion. And so, making decisions is actually something we train our brain to do well. If you train your brain to sit and stew in anxiety, it will do that every single time there is a decision to be made.

So, making decisions increases that decision-making muscle, which is why we want to make decision. We don't want to sit and stew on it too long because you're creating a behavioral process in decision making that is not enjoyable and not fun. So, that's why you want to stop and address the anxiety that's coming up and you want to make a decision.

You want to practice making good, solid decisions and to have grace for yourself. As always, with everything we talk about, have grace for yourself. Sometimes, the answers are hard to find. But getting mad at yourself, judging yourself, wrapping yourself up in guilt and shame over the decision is not going to make it much better.

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So, we need to step out of all of that narrative and we need to do something about the anxiety. Now, if you have an anxiety disorder, you might need some extra help with a therapist or a doctor or something. If you just can't get grounded and get the anxiety to come down, you might have something else that's going on and you might want to get that checked out with a therapist or a doctor, you know, if overthinking is just really ruining your life right now.

So, anyways, in that, there's always options. There are always choices. We want to keep our eyes and our mind open to things. If we just acknowledge, like, this is hard for me, I might need some additional support, there's nothing wrong with that, literally nothing wrong with that. Good for you for acknowledging that. Good for you for figuring that out and going out and first seeking out why you can't get your anxiety down, you know. That's a good first step sometimes.

So, in all of that, as I always say every single week, if strong emotions came up for you when you were listening to this podcast or any of my episodes, take it as information that something in your internal world needs support. And 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.

Alright, my friends. And if you've liked today's episode, feel free to rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. When you rate and review it, it actually helps other people find the podcast. So, if you have a minute to give it a rate and a review on Apple Podcasts, that would be awesome. Alright, I'll 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](http://nicolesymcox.com).

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