

Ep #44: Dealing with Situational Depression



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With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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You're not going to magically get the motivation. You have to step into it and do it anyway. But you can make some smart choices in that. Like, who do you want to spend your time with? What do you want to do with them? But don't rely too heavily on your feelings.

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

Hey, hey, everyone, welcome to episode 44. So, today I want to talk about some of this situational depression we are all experiencing. And so, as you know, depression is not something I normally talk about because really my jam is anxiety, PTSD, OCD, and other stress disorders.

And so, I don't usually talk that much about depression. But I think it's really important that we do because the majority of us have some varying degree of it at this point, is what I'm noticing. And so, some of us are cleverly calling it pandemic depression. But really, it's just a clever word for situational depression.

And so, what that means is you can have depression for a variety of reasons. Biochemically there can be something in your biology, your genes, it can be connected to other mental health disorders like bipolar. It can even be connected to PTSD sometimes, if you have a traumatic memory where depression is unresolved, that can show up for you there.

And then, there are other elements of depression which are just situational, meaning you're living in an environment that is creating depression symptoms. And so, what I am hearing – and I know this isn't true for everyone, of course, so take or leave what is helpful to you and what isn't. But I'm doing this episode because I'm just hearing from – it doesn't matter who it is. It's friends, family, clients. It seems like it's universal across the

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board. Everyone is expressing and complaining about having this low-level mild situational depression that's developed.

And usually, how people start that conversation is they say something like, I'm just not happy, or I'm just not motivated, or I feel like my brain's in a fog all the time, or I just feel really irritable and I don't know why, or I just feel kind of blah, you know, it's hard to feel good emotions. And all of those are some trademark symptoms of depression.

Now, they're mild. The people that I'm talking to that have expressed this, they're still functioning in life. They're still showing up and doing what they need to do. It's just harder. It just starts to feel like – mild situational depression starts to feel like you're just climbing uphill for the simplest tasks.

I can't tell you how many moms tell me that they are drained just by breakfast, just by feeding their kids takes a ton of energy now. Again, this all sort of goes into the same bucket of mild depression.

Now, depression, just like anxiety and other mental health disorders, has a huge spectrum. There's mild, moderate, severe. And so, we want to be really careful when we start, you know, dancing with depression, as I'll call it. We start dancing with depression, the problem is, when something starts mild, if you don't use some strategic interventions while it is mild, it has the potential to jump to moderate.

Moderate depression is not fun, okay. If you think mild depression is not enjoyable, check out moderate, okay. Moderate is getting up there with really not feeling good, really feeling lonely, like everything's getting very intensified. But we're not talking about that today, so I won't get too far into that. And then, of course, severe, we're getting into suicidal thoughts and ideations, which some of that can show up in moderate depression as well, but to varying degrees.

And so, again, that's not the focus of today's show. I want to stay focused on the mild situational because I think that that speaks to the experience of

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most people. And so, absolutely, right off the bat, if you are experiencing depression symptoms, you should totally check that out with your doctor. See if medication is a good option for you or if you need to start therapy. Don't wait for depression and just see how it goes. Depression is not one of those things you want to mess with. It only gets more unpleasant the more and the longer it goes untreated.

So, if you are starting to experience those things, and especially if you have any kind of suicidal thoughts, oh my goodness, talk to your doctor immediately. Talk to a therapist immediately. Get on that shit. Let's take care of it. So, there's no reason for you to suffer unnecessarily. Let's get you some support and resources that you need.

So, let's just say that straight off the bat. But for this episode, I'm only calling out those other two pieces of the spectrum because I want to clarify this mild situational depression that we're all feeling.

Okay, so as I listed out, you can feel a lack of motivation. You can almost feel like you don't want to be around people, or everything's just an extra effort and it's exhausting, right? And to keep in mind, anger does tend to be a symptom of depression. We tend to get mad much easier than we used to. We tend to be more irritated by things. We tend to be easily drained.

And when you look around, like if we're calling this pandemic depression, I mean, looking around us, I mean, we are so isolated physically from some of the people that we really love. Now, you might have some people in your world that you're able to be with, but it may not be everyone.

A lot of people have family or friends that live in other parts of the country and because of COVID, it doesn't really make sense to get on an airplane and visit them or see them or whatever. And so, this isolation starts to build. And I'll probably do an episode on that at some point because there's a couple of different ways that we get lonely. It's not just one way.

But assessing this in yourself, is loneliness part of this because I used to be really involved in community, I used to see my girlfriends in person and we

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used to talk and we don't do that anymore and we do it over Zoom, or whatever the thing may be, right? But there is a lot of loss. And we've talked about that all the way along. There's a lot of anxiety because there's so much uncertainty going around.

But there's also this low-level depression of almost feeling defeated by it all, like what can we do? There's not a whole lot of helpful solutions out there in terms of COVID other than we're just supposed to avoid it, right?

And that might be the right answer for right now in the crisis situation that we are in. But your emotions don't love that solution. Your emotions and your brain don't love that. So, they are going to have a really hard time understanding that. Even if logically it makes sense, your emotions are like, "What the fuck? This sucks. I don't like it. I miss my friends. I miss having freedoms. I miss getting on an airplane. I miss seeing people."

And, so, you have to allow for both. You have to validate the logical side of you that's like, "Hey, this is the right choice to keep me and my family safe." And then, on the flipside, we have to honor the emotions. Just because you're making the right choice, doesn't make it the easy choice from a feeling standpoint.

And I know we all crave easy. But easy is not always the right solution. So, in terms of that, we have to just take care of our emotional selves. And that's why we're calling this out. If you are feeling some mild levels of depression, like you are part of the larger collective.

I even heard Michelle Obama say something about this. I forget what the article was I was reading, but she even mentioned that she's experiencing some mild levels of depression. And so, there's a lot happening, you know. And so, I think the most common thing, as I said earlier, is people keep asking and they're like, "I'm not happy and I don't know why. I'm not happy and I don't know why."

And it's kind of like on repeat. And it's kind of like, let's just pause, you know. Let's check it out. Why aren't you happy. And if you look around, it's

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kind of challenging to be happy. And so, I did an episode on this early, early on in the podcast, creating happiness every day, and that's actually talking about the anxiety side of things, but it also applies here in some ways.

Happiness is in short supply. A lot of our freedoms to be able to go do and see whoever we want, do whatever we want is not available to us right now. And a lot of the activities we used to do, you know, for self-care and whatnot are harder for us to do, or in some states, we're not even allowed to do those things. We don't even have spas open where I am. So, you can't do some of the things that you used to do. Every state's different, of course, but even within that, it's just harder to do things.

And so, we really grieve and mourn that. And so, it becomes even more critically important that we take ownership of our mental health and create happiness or create a sense of self-care, that we take care of our internal worlds.

And so, when you're feeling this mild level of depression, what's great about it being mild is you can still play with it a little bit. You can still make a difference in your life around that because it's mild. And so, everything feels like a little bit of an uphill battle.

So, the first thing you want to do is assess your needs, you know. What is lacking in your life and what is possible to create for yourself? Number two is gratitude. Gratitude is really important because it shapes your brain into more of a positive mindset. What you teach your brain to focus on expands. So, if you stay in depressive thoughts all the time, it's going to create more of a negative emotional cycle for you.

And so, you want to take breaks from that because, as I've said before, you have to honor the feelings, let the feelings be, honor them, name them, spend time working with them, and then turn our attention and focus to something else, so you don't get lost in them. We're kind of doing this

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balancing act. We want to name, honor, and express. But at the same time, we want to shift our focus so that we stay functional in life, right?

Because even though things look really, really shitty, I'm sure there's things in your life that you are grateful for. And we even go for things as simple as the sun, for a walk, for petting your dog. You can go so simple with this. You don't have to be grateful for big huge things.

Now, I will say, gratitude is something to be careful with, and that's why I don't mention it a whole lot, because most of the people I see have trauma histories. And gratitude can be extremely triggering for people with trauma histories.

So, if that's you, if you have a trauma history and gratitude is incredibly triggering, I would encourage you to talk to your therapist about that and really unpack what the trigger is there for you. Don't force something that's just going to make you feel panicked. That's doing the opposite of what gratitude is supposed to do. But I want to call that out because I think gratitude and some types of meditation can be really triggering for the trauma brain.

It doesn't mean it's not something we want to work towards. We want to work towards being able to do those things. But we want to do it with safety and care. Don't throw yourself in the whole pool of it if it's really triggering and it's creating a lot of panic. Just talk to your therapist about that and kind of work through that.

Three, make sure you're incorporating activities that you enjoy doing. And when you have mild low-level depression, everything inside of you is going to say, "I don't want to. I don't feel like it. I'm not in the mood." And that might be well and true, but when you're fighting some mild-level depression, you're never going to be in the mood. The mood is not going to arrive. You have to create it. Okay, my friend.

And so, I think sometimes people are just like, "I'll just wait until I have the motivation." And that's just not how depression works. And so, you have to

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start engaging in an active practice. And so, what are some things that you like doing that you are allowed to do? And when I say allowed, it's because of our states that we're in have different restrictions. But what are some of the things that you really enjoy doing?

Is it gardening? Is it a Zoom happy hour with your friends, or is it a walk with your dog? What is it? Is it painting? Is it art? Do you need to take up a new hobby? Do you like riding your bike? Do you like going hiking? Again, state to state, it depends what your weather is right now and it depends what your restrictions are due to COVID. But check that out for yourself. And if you don't know then you get to go into full experiment mode.

You get to dabble in a whole bunch of fun things and decide if you like it. So, now might be the time to start figuring out, what are some things that I like doing since I can't do some of the things I used to do, what are some new things that I could do?

Number four, self-care is incredibly important. But this goes with number three. You may need to find some new things to do that fuel you, that make you feel good again. Because some of the things that we used to do for self-care aren't really easily available. And so, do you want to get yourself some lavender oil to diffuse in your house? Do you want to get a waterfall? Do you want to just be able to listen to some sounds? Or do you want to take up meditation? Do you want to take up yoga?

Three and four kind of go together because we need to incorporate and make room and space for fun and enjoyment and refueling ourselves. We don't want to get in a trapped mindset where we're like, "Well all the things I used to like doing, I can't do anymore." Because it is highly, highly likely – and again, I don't know the future, but it's highly likely that a lot of this COVID shit is going to be continuing through the end of 2020. I don't think that's a surprise to anybody.

But again, things could change. I'm hopeful that's not the case. But there's a strong chance that the rest of 2020 – and we've got a lot of months left.

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And so, we want to take ownership of this and try to make the ride of this not so miserable.

Okay, and number five is depression can make us want to isolate. It can make us feel like social interactions are draining, they're hard, and they're overwhelming sometimes, okay. So, you are going to have to actively talk to yourself in your brain about seeing people. Because your knee-jerk response is going to be, "I don't want to see anybody. I'm too tired."

Well, if you keep that up with a pattern, it's only going to get worse. It's not going to necessarily get better. And that's a very general statement because I don't know you exactly and what your exact situation is. But speaking from just knowledge of depression and how that works, you have to learn how to dance with it.

And so, part of learning to dance with it is doing the opposite action. Depression will tell you – and you have to remember, depression is a cloud that sits on your head that is external from you that is talking to you, if you want to use that as a metaphor.

So, if depression is sitting on your shoulder talking to you, it's like, "I don't want to see people. They're annoying. I'm too tired. I don't want to do that thing because I just don't want to. I don't have the motivation for it." You're not going to magically get the motivation.

You have to step into it and do it anyway. But you can make some smart choices in that. Like who do you want to spend your time with? What do you want to do with them? But don't rely too heavily on your feelings. Your feelings are starting to misfire that they don't want to do anything, they want to stay isolated. They just feel sad. They feel angry. Those are starting to become the default emotions.

And those default emotions, just like in the Inside Out movie, they're only going to speak from their perspective. So, if you are fighting some low-level depression and you notice these feelings coming up, that's a conversation depression is trying to have with you. And so, you want to think about, what

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can I do that I know will actually help me? Because depression is saying another thing.

Keep in mind, depression doesn't have a whole lot of wisdom. It just knows it feels like shit. So again, it's this two-step process of honoring what's there, like I notice I feel lack of motivation, but I'm going to do this thing anyway because I know it will help me. Sometimes, we have to just persevere through that and do the other thing.

Now, if you can't do the other thing, again, seeing a doctor or a therapist and really getting some strategic interventions for your type of depression are key to your success. So, don't just give up if you're like, "I can't push through." That is one of your first signs that it is time to talk to someone. Don't wait and allow that to fester and just grow and get bigger. That's not the life that you want for yourself.

And then lastly, of course, exercise is super-important, but it's going to fall into this motivation category. You're not going to want to do it. It's going to feel tedious and you're going to have to really do a lot of self-talk around that. But the endorphin release is really helpful for people with depression. You've got to get moving, especially now when so many of us are still working from home, raising kids from home.

I know in California, kids are not going back to school. And so, parents here in this state are kind of juggling all of that, between working fulltime, having their kids home fulltime and being able to make time for themselves. So, I get it. There's a lot of things to consider. But you want to keep doing the things that do help you feel good. Because that is what's going to keep you moving through this process and get you through this hard time.

Alright, my friends. I hope this episode was helpful. If you have strong emotions or noticed triggers or you're assessing yourself and you're like, "Depression feels thick, man, I don't even think I can do any of these things that you're talking about, Nicole, I just feel too sad and depressed," Take it

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as information that something in your internal world needs support. Never, never ever wait when it comes to depression.

If you're feeling depression symptoms, you need to get on that shit ASAP. Talk to a doctor, talk to a therapist, and start figuring out techniques and strategies you need to support yourself so it doesn't get worse, so that you can start feeling better. Because that is so possible. Depression will tell you it's not possible, but it is possible.

And if you enjoyed today's episode, if you would please leave a rating and review on Apple Podcasts, it helps other people find the podcast and I would so appreciate it. 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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