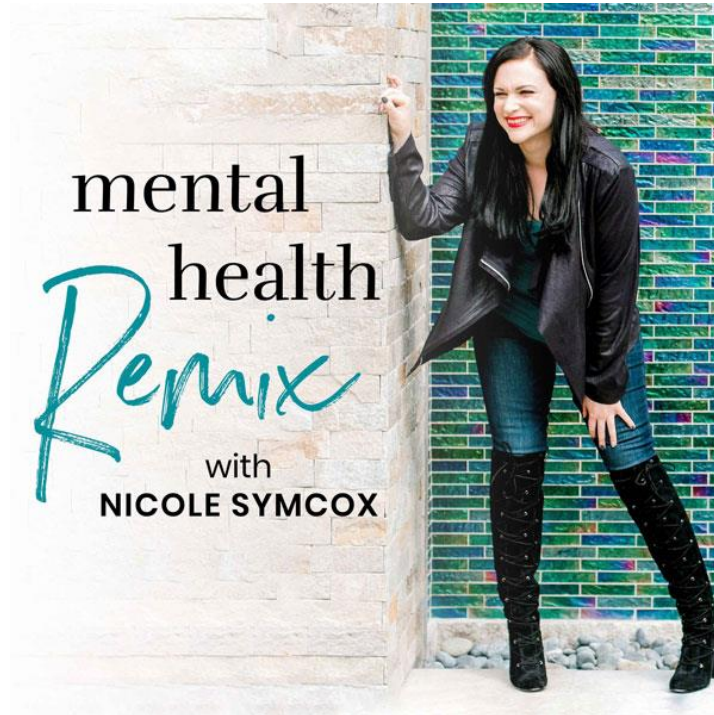


Ep #55: Anxiety Coping Skills for Teens



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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Anxiety is a messenger. It's trying to tell you something, and it has a story. Like it'll start telling a story if it's not getting responded to. So sometimes the story that it's telling you is like you're going to get rejected, or you're going to fail that test. Like this is going to be bad for you, right. So we need to learn how to respond to these big anxiety stories that show up in our brains and in our bodies, okay.

When we avoid certain things, sometimes that anxiety can get bigger because the brain marks that as like, "Okay, cool. I avoided the thing that was making me anxious. Awesome. Safe. Cool. Done." Right? Then what ends up happening is you're reencountering that same experience, and you have even more anxiety.

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 everyone. Welcome back. I am thrilled to be back on the *Mental Health Remix* podcast. We are relaunching. So after taking about a year off to take care of some health issues that I have, I am finally healthy and well and so excited to be back to our normal programming.

I'm definitely going to be telling you guys about what happened to me and just kind of my process and my journey to healing and becoming healthy and whole again in future episodes and just kind of as we go along because it's a pretty long, complicated story. So I didn't feel like I wanted to dive into all of that depth in this first episode.

So what I'm noticing a ton of is y'all are filling my DMs with having trouble with anxiety. It's no surprise given what we've lived through for the last two years of a pandemic. Anxiety is a really big thing. It's a really big topic that's affecting all of us. I noticed in my private practice. So most of you know that I have a private practice in California, and I work with teens and adults

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both. I was just noticing how isolated a lot of teens were feeling during the pandemic. I was also noticing how high their anxiety levels were.

So kind of as a request from several of my clients over the years, they're like, "Why aren't you making podcast episodes directed at us? Like why aren't you like supporting us in your podcast episodes? Like you're only talking to adults. Why aren't you talking to us too?" I'm like you know what? That's a valid point. That is a really valid point. I spend half of my day talking to teens and half of my day talking to adults. So it would only make sense that the relaunch of this podcast be for both.

So I'm really excited for a little bit of a new direction in using this podcast to really support teens with their mental health issues as well as adults. So this is a really exciting direction because working with teens is something I am super passionate about.

So y'all were right. It made no sense why I wasn't including you before. So anyways, moving forward you are included going forward. As a way to express that, this first episode is for you. So we're going to talk all about anxiety today. We're going to break down what it is, what you can do for yourself, and just kind of some things that might resonate with you.

So if you're an adult, this episode will absolutely work for you as well, but just know that I'm talking to teens in this particular episode. But the thing about anxiety is it's really the same no matter how old you are. It's just the application and how it shows up that is different based, you know, on how you live your life.

So things that teens are concerned with are school, friends, homework, things like that, but they're still riddled with the same kind of anxiety symptoms that an adult might have. Except for an adult is more concerned with work, family, and getting things done, right. So it's just different applications of the same thing. So I feel like whatever age you are, you will benefit from today's podcast, but I'm talking specifically to teens today about anxiety.

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So listen up. Here's one of the first things that you need to understand about anxiety. It is a messenger. Okay? I bet you've never heard that right off the bat. We're like no. It's like this sneaky, annoying thing that just like riddles my brain and body, and I can't think or function, right? It's not a messenger? What are you talking about Nicole?

Okay. So hold on a second and let's break this down. So thinking about anxiety like a messenger. It is part of our survival mechanism. Okay? We need anxiety to function. So as part of our survival mechanisms, it's talking to us all the time to keep us out of potential danger. So that's what I mean by a little bit of anxiety is an okay thing because it's probably keeping you safe. A lot of anxiety is an annoying thing because it's debilitating and keeping you from functioning, right.

So that's sort of what feels different about the levels of anxiety that you can have. But at its root, anxiety is a messenger. It's trying to get a message across. It's trying to tell you something, that you could be in potential danger. So we want to listen to these messages and learn and train our brains to respond in healthy ways as a way to manage anxiety in healthy ways. Okay?

So when anxiety is out of control, it can feel like it's running every part of our reality, right? Like our minds, our bodies, our relationships, our responses, the list can go on, right? Like anxiety can kind of infiltrate every aspect of your life, right? Because it's in your brain, and it's sending it a message, you know, be on high alert. Something could be wrong. Something could be wrong.

It's exhausting when it's on high, right? We can feel wired and tired. We can feel on edge, panic stricken, stomach aches, muscle tension. You can actually hold a lot of anxiety in your body. Many people don't realize that. They just think it's, you know, just an anxious feeling or an anxious thought. But there is a lot of anxiety symptoms that are actually rooted in our bodies that can cause digestive problems and muscle tension, as I already

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mentioned. So using your body as a cue for what might be coming up for you is really a good indicator to start with. Okay.

So one thing to know about anxiety is it's rooted in our nervous system as response to potential threats. Our thoughts and feelings impact how our nervous system responds, okay? So if we tell ourselves a story of I'm so worried that so and so will be mad at me, we might feel anxious around this person. Our body might start to respond to the potential threat of feeling rejected, right? Then you create a whole host of anxiety symptoms and panic.

So the problem is anxiety can feel so physical, but it's difficult to just detach from its story and into a new one, right? Because a lot of times what anxiety tells you is that if you avoid the thing that's making you anxious, you will be fine.

In a way, that's a good strategy when you think about it in theory. Like if you think about in the caveman days when our primal responses to being anxious about something was probably being eaten by something, right? You're probably gonna get eaten by a bear. Probably a really smart idea to avoid them. Like you're not going to win. So that's really good, primal advice, right? Avoid the bear, staying alive.

However, that advice isn't so great for modern day survival. Okay. Because a lot of the things that make us anxious tend to be relationships or things that we need to do or showing up for our day to day activities. So it's a little bit different in terms of while we still have these primal responses from our nervous systems, which are designed to keep us alive, very few of us encounter an actual bear. But that doesn't mean our bodies don't feel like we're being attacked by a bear. Right?

So that's where things get confusing. Because most of the bears for us in modern day are made up in our minds with the negative stories we tell ourselves, mostly by anxiety. Okay.

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So are you kind of with me with this idea that anxiety is a messenger? It's trying to tell you something, and it has a story. Like it'll start telling a story if it's not getting responded to. So sometimes the story that it's telling you is like you're going to get rejected, or you're going to fail that test. Like this is going to be bad for you. Right? So we need to learn how to respond to these big anxiety stories that show up in our brains and in our bodies. Okay.

When we avoid certain things, sometimes that anxiety can get bigger because the brain marks that as like, "Okay, cool. I avoided the thing that was making me anxious. Awesome. Safe. Cool. Done." Right? Then what ends up happening is you're re-encountering that same experience, and you have even more anxiety because your body's like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. We talked about this. When we don't play soccer, we're safe. We don't feel anxious. So we don't want to play soccer, right?"

So it's a really careful thing that we have to do and deal with. This is, again, coming to understand anxiety as a messenger or the story that anxiety is telling you. Like how do we support ourselves in supportive ways? Because sometimes if anxiety's message is, "Hey, this person, this adult is an unsafe person." Then yes, 100% absolutely avoid them. Like don't put yourself in an unsafe situation with an unsafe person. Absolutely not.

But if the message is when I go to soccer, I'm worried people are judging me because everybody's watching. Okay? This one's a little trickier because it can cause just as much as anxiety of like, "Yo, I don't want to go to soccer. It's not fun. It's exhausting. I hate people paying attention to me." Versus like you can use it if you use it with health, love, and care and responding to your anxiety. Right?

You want to reframe it and talk to yourself a little bit differently. You want to say something like, "Mm, I acknowledge I'm feeling super anxious right now. I hear that I'm anxious. I hear that people could be judging me. I also feel like it's important for me to show up for my team for commitments. I think I'm capable of doing that."

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You can kind of start, and this is just a conversation. That's not a reframe, okay. We're actually going to do reframes a little bit later in the episode. That's not a reframe, but it's an example of trying to have a conversation with your anxiety. The thing about anxiety is if it goes un-acknowledged, it only gets louder. It only gets bigger. Okay.

But if anxiety is just big and blaring and yelling at you all the time, it's hard to use discernment to understand well what do I do? Is this an unsafe person that I should avoid? Yes. Okay, great. That was a good decision. But is this an experience that I should try to work through with my anxiety, such as going to soccer practice because I'm afraid of people judging me? Right?

So sometimes we don't know the difference because when anxiety is so big and so loud and it's telling us such extravagant stories all the time, we have a hard time discerning what's what, right? These bears in our minds just get so big, and we don't know where to go with them.

So part of anxiety management is learning how to step back, and to breathe and to hear what your anxiety is saying to you. It's a messenger, right? If you think about it like even like an alert system, like in your house, for example. So you probably all have, you know, some kind of alert system, like for smoke detectors, right? Like when a smoke detector goes off, it's just an alarm because it senses smoke. Anxiety is the same kind of thing. If you think about it as an alert system, your body is sending a message that says something doesn't feel okay.

Now, a lot of times, you know, when anxiety has a chance to get really big, when we break down the stories that anxiety is telling us, sometimes we've made a lot out of nothing, or sometimes it's really, really valid. So I hope at the core what you're hearing me say is you have to learn how to listen to anxiety and listen to yourself and what you're saying and reframe it in a way that feels doable for you. Okay.

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Did you notice I use the word doable? I did not use the word empowering because people with anxiety hate that. Right? Okay. So a lot of times we think for anxiety is that we want to do all this positive thinking. We want to feel positive. We want to turn a negative into a positive, and that's how we'll manage our anxiety. Like oh, yeah. I feel super anxious about this, but I'm going to do it. I'm pumped. I'm ready. I'm going to handle this. Okay.

But here's the problem. Your nervous system does not know the difference between excitement and stress. It feels the same. So positive and positivity, while it can be well intentioned, can actually stress you out more. If you have tried this technique, you are probably already been stressed out more, right? Like you have felt this. I've heard this from countless teens in my office. They're like, "Oh, it's so annoying. They just told me to think positively. It's like I can't think positively, like stresses me out."

So I want to validate that for you. If you're one of those people that positive thinking is really, really challenging for, that makes sense. Okay. You make sense. Here's the thing with anxiety. It uses an extraordinarily a lot of imagination, right? Because it's imagining the worst case scenarios, and it creates anxiety because it's like oh my gosh. I don't know if that's gonna happen or not, but if it did happen, that would be terrible.

On the other side, when we use too much positive thinking, it's also using the imagination. When we get ourselves really hyped up and we get worried, we're like oh my gosh, but what if I can't do this thing? What if I can't do it exceptionally well? What if I can't care about what everybody's thinking about? Right? It feels unrealistic in other words. Okay.

So this is how we reframe things. We actually want to go for neutral. We don't want to go for negative. We don't want to go for positive. We want to go for doable. Okay? So doable is another way of saying neutral. Okay, my friends.

So let me give you an example of this. This is a tool that you can use to try to like practice reframing things in your brain when you have anxious

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thoughts that are coming up. Okay. So for example, I'm super anxious about a presentation. I'm worried I'll make a mistake, and I'll mess the whole thing up, right? This comes up all the time when we have to talk in front of people.

This totally makes sense why it would make you anxious, right? You have no way of controlling in the moment if you're going to make a mistake or not. It's too far in the future. It's not happening right now. So that is why the more and more you think about it, the more and more freaked out you get. You're like oh my gosh. This is totally possible that I could mess up, right?

So a very unhelpful positive reframe, and I'm sure you know friends and family and whatever, well-meaning humans in your life, are saying these things to you. You've probably brushed it off and been like, oh my gosh. This is so unhelpful. They have your best interests in heart. So we love them for that.

But they might see something unhelpful, which would be a positive reframe, which is like you'll do great. You always do. You're so smart. You're so good at these kinds of things. So that doesn't really help because a positive, that ends up putting a little bit more pressure. As strange as it sounds, you're like trying to help someone. That's, you know, maybe you were this person that's tried to talk to an anxious friend, and they're like, "Dude, you're stressing me out. Like, stop."

Okay, let's go neutral. So in your own brain, instead of going negative, right. We don't want to stay in the negative belief because staying in the negative, anxious belief is only going to make us more anxious. So we got to get out of there. Okay, we can't stay there. We've got to go to something that feels more helpful. We can't go to positive because we have no way of knowing if we can even accomplish this positive thing, right? So we go with doable. We go with neutral.

Which is the neutral reframe for this particular situation could be I'm capable of correcting myself if I make a mistake. Or I'm capable of making

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a decision in the moment. Do you notice there is no emotional charge to those statements? They are neutral. They are doable. They are possible. Is it possible in the moment for you to make a mistake? Yes. Is it absolutely possible for you to correct yourself and keep going? Yes. Okay.

So we want to start creating thought patterns that are neutral, that are doable, that are executionable. Okay. Your body and brain usually will get on board with that and be like, "Oh yeah. Okay. Is that the plan? Cool. If I make a mistake, I'll correct myself. Sounds good." Right?

So this is why it's so important to understand anxiety as a messenger, right? Going back to what we were talking about. Because when you can pull out what is the thought? What is the message? What is my body and brain, what are they saying to me? You can actually pull the sentence out, that belief for the anxious statement, whatever the anxious thought you're thinking about.

You can pull it out, and you do this on paper usually. You can do it inside of your own mind if you've had practice with this, but a lot of people have to do this on paper at first because it's really difficult to keep your thoughts in line in your brain. So you write out what the negative thought is, what the anxious thought is. You reframe it to a doable, neutral one, okay. You take a breath, and you just let that sit and just notice if your body accepts it.

You're going to know if your body accepts it because it's not going to feel as anxious anymore. It's just going to feel kind of solid. Like, oh yeah. Okay, that works. You know? It's kind of like okay. If it's too positive, it's probably going to stress you out a little bit. So use your body as your guide because, as I've already talked about right, there's a lot of anxiety symptoms that are in the body. Anxiety is physical. Like we think about it a lot about like anxious thoughts, but there is a lot of anxiety that lives in our bodies.

So this is a tool that you can start doing like right away. Again, if you can't do this, like if you have a trauma background or your anxiety is just, you

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know, 10 over 10 wild right now, you might have to learn this strategy with a therapist. You may not be able to do this on your own yet, but you will. With practice, with help, you can do this. Okay.

So I don't want you to feel bad if like you try to implement this after today, and you're like, "Shoot, I can't do it. My anxiety just still feels really big, or I'm having panic attacks or whatnot." Everybody's anxiety is unique to them. Okay, there is no one size fits all approach when it comes to anxiety management.

So, if this tool doesn't work for you right now, you know, I would highly encourage you to seek out therapy or seek out some additional help because maybe your anxiety is too big right now. That's okay. There's no shame or blame in ever needing mental health support, my friend. Never, never, never, is there ever any shame or blame in that, okay?

It is by far wiser to notice within yourself that you need help and to seek it out and get it than it is to continue to suffer. Okay, because anxiety, unfortunately, is one of those things that does not get better over time. Okay. Anxiety is one of those things that usually gets bigger over time.

So I usually use this analogy of talking to people you know, you want to kind of get help while anxiety is like a campfire. Because once it's a wildfire, it's just so much harder to kind of get back to it becoming a campfire, if that makes sense. I feel like I did a poor job of explaining that, but so let me try this again.

So if you think about anxiety like fire, right. It can be a contained campfire where you're like oh I see where it is. I see where it's coming from. I know what it's doing. But then you're like, oh I'm gonna kind of like—I noticed that it's getting a little bit bigger. It's kind of growing, but I think I'm okay. I think I'm okay. But it's growing. Now the fire is spreading. Now it's going out to the forest, right. Now we have a full wildfire going on.

Sometimes that's a metaphor for how anxiety can feel. It can start somewhat contained and smaller, but over time being unacknowledged and

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unsupported can lead it to becoming where it's 10 over 10. I feel like that's a really important point that we have to distinguish between because I get asked all the time well, what's the difference between a generalized anxiety disorder or just normal worry? Like, how do I know the difference, right?

So normal worry comes and goes. It passes. It just kind of comes and goes at appropriate times and leaves at appropriate times. So, again, right, anxiety is one of those things, it's part of the human experience. You're never going to be completely without anxiety because it's part of your survival mechanisms that keep you alive and alert in this world. But we can keep it at manageable levels where it feels like anxiety is not running your life. Okay?

So when you have normal worry, normal worry is like oops, I have a presentation, and I'm feeling really nervous about that. But then, you know, you do the presentation. You're still kind of anxious. But then when presentation's over you're like, "Oh, I can breathe. I can relax. Okay, cool. Awesome. Done."

Now, with a generalized anxiety disorder, you're anxious more days than not, okay. You're anxious probably more hours than not, right. Let's just be real. Worry doesn't come and go. It doesn't come and go easily. It gets stuck, right. You probably ruminate or you obsess, or your anxiety feels almost like it just gets stuck on a hamster wheel, and you just can't get off of it.

So with generalized anxiety disorder, using the same example, that person is probably worried three days before the presentation. They're worried practically to a panic level up to the presentation, and then they're worried for maybe like, you know, several days afterwards like wondering if everybody was judging them. Okay? That's a very, and again, everybody's anxiety experience is loose. That's in no way concrete, but it's just to give you a tangible example of how the two different things can look okay.

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So there's a lot of reasons for this. There's a lot of treatments for anxiety that are out there, which is so amazing. Like I feel like it's so amazing to be living in 2022 right now because we have so many options for anxiety treatment that we didn't even have 20 years ago or even 10 years ago. Like we have learned so much more about anxiety.

So that's why I'm such a proponent of like if you are feeling anxious more days than not, get help. There is no reason for you to sit and to suffer because anxiety only grows. Like time doesn't heal. Whoever said that quote, I don't know who it is, but it's that old quote time heals all wounds.

Talk to any therapist. We'll all tell you no, it actually just like digs deeper into your unconscious and like festers. So like no. Not really. Like time does not always heal all wounds. There's some wounds it does. But generally speaking, you know, there's just some wounds that are just big, right.

So an example of what I'm trying to communicate is trauma. So if you have traumatic experiences in your past, and I treat a lot of teens with this that have had, like, several traumatic experiences in their life, and their anxiety levels are just out of control. Well, the root cause is actually trauma. Okay.

So we want to think about that. Like I don't think a lot of people understand that trauma can create huge anxiety symptoms, you know. Like your past experiences that feel unresolved, that time has not healed, right, as a way to play off of that again. You need some strategic help. There's just some great therapies out there.

Like find a trauma informed therapist that knows how to work with trauma, PTSD, whatever it is you're wrestling with, and seeing if they can help you. Like EMDR, art therapy, brain spotting, IFS, also known as internal family systems therapy. Those four types of therapies for trauma are just excellent. So I would definitely seek out a therapist that knows how to work, who's trauma informed, who knows how to work with those kinds of things.

Secondly, like there's just a reality that genetics play a role in things, okay. Like, sometimes we have anxiety because it's passed down to us just like

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everything else. So you know, in your family line, if you have a lot of anxious people in your family, there's a chance that that's been passed on to you from a biology standpoint, right? So medication can be a great option and seeing a psychiatrist for that. You know looking at medication and seeing if there might be something that would be helpful for you is also a great option.

It's not always genetics. I mean, it can just be you know, a lot of people take medicine. Again, no shame or blame in that. Like it's just smart to use the resources that are available to you from science that can help you feel better, right?

Sometimes it's a combination of the two. Most people don't usually do just medication that I've come in contact. Usually it's medication, and it's therapy. It's usually both. But there are also plenty of people that just do medication or just do therapy. It's totally your choice and based on your unique situation.

The third way to kind of treat and help is learning coping skills and strategies, okay. This can actually be a starting point, especially if you're in the beginning stages of feeling like oh my anxiety is just like starting to get big. Or it can be just like a great adjunct to if you're in therapy already or you're seeing a psychiatrist and you're doing medication or whatever.

Coping skills and strategies are incredibly helpful. Okay, these are usually done in the beginning stages of therapy, or these are things that you can take courses on or you can get coaching on right. Like learning helpful ways to regulate your emotions, to retrain your brain and how you think, right?

They're very, very important because coping skills are the things you're going to learn in the moment, okay. They're the thing that you're going to use when you're having an anxious moment, when you're feeling panic and overwhelm, when you're feeling like you're ruminating and you don't know what to do. Or when your emotions are getting so big, you don't know

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where to put them. Okay. So coping skills are critically important to managing anxiety and managing your mental health in general, right.

So this is why I actually created a program for teens specifically. It's called Coping Skills for Teens. Wom, wom, so creative, right? But yes. It is a program specifically for you guys because I know how important this is because you guys are so busy. My goodness, your schedules are crazy. So you're on the go constantly.

So I feel like you just need good education and good strategies on how to help yourself in anxious moments that you can use at school, you can use at, you know, your extracurricular activities. You can use it home when you're stressed out. Like an area where you can really learn how to support yourself in stressful moments.

So what I've done with this program is I've created three areas where you can get help. Because what I've noticed in working with you guys for so long is that your parents, a lot of times, don't understand what's going on with you. So one of the things that I've incorporated in this program is parent education to help your parents understand what you're going through. Because the number one thing I hear from you guys is, you know, my parents don't understand me, and they're not supportive.

So we want to really bridge a gap where we can help your parents be more supportive to you because that is their intention, right? They want to be supportive to you. So they have online modules where they can learn how to be supportive to you and anxiety. The same thing is you have online modules to learn how to support yourself in anxiety. Then we have groups where we can process our feelings together so you can like not feel so alone in it.

It's a really cool program and something that you can do. If you're already working with a therapist, this does not conflict at all. Like you can still work with your therapist. You can do this on the side. Or if you want to start with this and then do therapy afterwards. It's totally up to you.

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But it's covering the three major areas to really support you with anxiety because coping skills are so, so, so important, especially in the beginning stages and when you're trying to learn. Like what is anxiety saying to me? How do I respond to myself in healthy ways? This is what the program covers right, as an example.

So I just want to encourage you wherever you are in your anxiety journey. If you are noticing that anxiety is getting big for you, if it's getting super annoying, get help. It doesn't have to necessarily be with me, but just reach out. It is okay. There is no shame and blame in getting mental health support in your local state of residence. Okay. It is the best thing that you can do for yourself.

All right, my friends. I hope you found this podcast helpful. Find me on Instagram. Send me a DM. Let me know. 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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