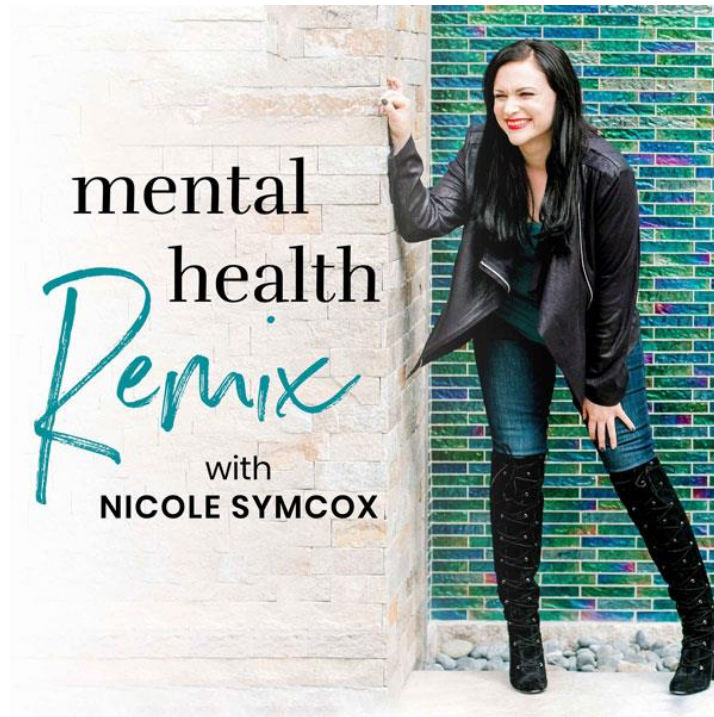


Ep #59: How to Handle High-Functioning Anxiety



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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When I'm in motion or when I'm doing things, I don't feel as anxious. When I sit still and I try to rest and I try to just be calm, that's when my anxiety comes up. So it's an entirely flip of the coin, right? Because as long as you stay in motion, you don't feel your feelings, and you're busy, and you're kind of flying over all of those emotions and thoughts and all of the anxieties, right. It keeps you going.

But on the flip side, if you ever stop, you feel all those things, and you don't know what to do with them. So in a way, it kind of like keeps you in motion. The problem with that is that we have limits on how long our body can sustain being in constant motion.

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.

Hey, hey everyone. Welcome to Episode 59. So today, I want to talk about high functioning anxiety. So high functioning anxiety is probably less talked about because it's not technically a clinical disorder. It's just a term we use to describe someone. I think what gets a lot of spotlight are the anxiety disorders, but there are a lot of folks out there who are overworking, over producing, and overachieving and feeling crippled with anxiety, right. Like working all the time, doing all the things, and doing it well, but dying inside with anxiety.

So I want to talk about that a little bit because I think it's underrepresented. I think a lot of people suffer with it. So sometimes for some people when they have anxiety symptoms, what they do with all of that anxious energy because as we've talked about in previous episodes emotions are energy in the body. You have to do something with that energy. Anxiety has its own charge.

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So for some people, what they do is when they get anxious, it mobilizes them. This is a little bit different than sometimes what you see happen with anxiety disorders. Sometimes with anxiety disorders, you see people immobilized. It's a little bit of the opposite. But there is this flip of the coin where anxiety can really mobilize.

So all of that anxious energy that's in the body gets turned into overworking, over producing, and overachieving. Because when we are engaged in doing or working, we're not feeling our feelings, okay? It's actually a very creative, smart way to dissociate in some ways.

So dissociation is like when we split from the body, and we're not really in our body feeling our feelings. Those are used in extreme life or death situations usually, but that's a very broad term. So when I say that, sometimes when we just fly above our feelings because we're keeping ourselves busy, it's a way to stay out of our body in the same way. Just a different technique.

So a lot of times we develop this, don't even realize it, right? It's all unconscious. We just sort of figure out along our journey when I'm in motion or when I'm doing things, I don't feel as anxious. When I sit still and I try to rest and I try to just be calm, that's when my anxiety comes up. So it's an entirely flip of the coin, right? Because as long as you stay in motion, you don't feel your feelings and you're busy. You're kind of flying over all of those emotions and thoughts and all of the anxieties, right. It keeps you going.

But on the flip side, if you ever stop, you feel all those things and you don't know what to do with them. So in a way, it kind of like keeps you in motion. The problem with that is that we have limits on how long our body can sustain being in constant motion. Okay. Because our anxiety only builds. It's not actually going away when we're in these kinds of habit loops.

The anxiety is still there. The feelings that are driving the anxiety is still there. The experiences that are at the root of all of your anxiety is still there.

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We're just flying above it by doing, doing, doing going, going, going, overworking, over producing overachieving, right.

The twisted thing is a society will praise you for this, right? High functioning anxiety is highly valued because you are the people that get things done. You are the things that perfect things really, really well. So people learn to like this about themselves because they get a lot of compliments. This isn't something that tends to generate a lot of criticism.

This tends to generate a lot of praise. Like, "Oh my gosh, you did that so well. Thank you so much. Oh, you're just always there for us. Thank you so much for doing this." There tends to be a lot of that, unless you have a critical person in your life who's trying to make you feel like you're not enough, and that's a different episode.

But generally speaking like when we produce and we're saying yes constantly to people and what they want and we're making people happy, we tend to get positive feedback for that. But inside we are drowning. Inside with every yes that we say, it almost feels like we're gnawing at our soul, right? Like we're not honoring ourselves.

Because after a while, you start to become resentful. Why am I the only person that says yes? How come I'm doing everything for everyone? How come I'm always like overscheduled? Why am I doing all these things? Resentment starts to build. But because you stay in motion, a lot of the times you miss these signals. Because these signals are in your body telling you to slow down, address your feelings, address your anxiety, address the things that are coming up for you.

But because there's a powerlessness message that can sometimes be woven into that, we try to avoid it, right? Like we're like oh I don't want to drop into powerless feelings because then I don't know what to do with that. Right. That's a human thing. That's not a criticism. That's just a human thing. Humans don't like to feel powerless. We don't like to feel like we don't

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have a plan. We don't like to feel like we don't know how to get out of our emotions if we're in them.

So we start to just overcompensate for this feeling of unconscious powerlessness. We start to overcompensate to feel powerful by doing, doing, doing. Okay. So, again, brilliant strategy. It's designed to keep you safe when you don't feel ready to look at your stuff, but it has a time limit. Your body's going to give out at some point. It might start small with getting minor colds. People that are stressed a lot get sick a lot, okay. We know that stress affects the immune system.

So there might be also this just general sense of exhaustion all the time. Maybe you're starting to feel the sense of burned out with dealing with people. You're getting a shorter fuse, but eventually your body's going to stop you. Right. Like there's only so long we can go before we start addressing the root issues that are coming up for us. Our emotional buckets at some point becomes so full of unresolved stuff that it explodes.

Sometimes that results in a big emotional burst. Sometimes it's like getting really, really sick. Or sometimes it's just feeling overwhelmed in your relationships. Or, on the flip side, you stop being able to produce as much. You stop being able to overachieve, right, because you're just so drained.

So eventually, this has a time limit on it. It's a brilliant strategy for a little while. But at the end of the day, my sweet friends, we all have to look at ourselves. We just do. We all have to look at what is underneath the hood of our car. Like what is what is making our engine go the way that it's going? Okay.

So we want to handle this. So here's how you want to handle this if you are starting to notice that maybe you are in this cycle, and you want to learn a different way. You obviously first, like the first thing I'm going to say is get into therapy and deal with whatever you're avoiding that's driving your need to overwork and over produce and treat yourself like you're a machine.

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Sometimes, people, this is a message that you get in childhood, right. That maybe you're not worthy or valuable of love. So you learn that you have to over produce. It could be a worth and value thing. Or it could just be an anxiety thing. That you just get a lot of anxious energy, and unless you're in motion, you don't know how to cope with anxiety. I'm not your therapist. So I can't say for sure what it is for you exactly. Those are just two examples of potentials, right?

But getting into therapy and working this out and figuring out like what is at the root? Like why am I doing this to myself? So that way you can like tell yourself a different story. So that way you can do all the things in life and be honoring the roots that are coming up for you. Because a therapist should help you do that in a safe contained way. Like learning about yourself. What coping skills and strategies do you need so you don't get stuck in feeling powerless? How can you rest and feel renewed? How can you get up the next day and do everything that you need to do and do it well? Right?

Sometimes a story that high achievers have for themselves like, "Oh well, if I don't have my anxiety then like how am I going to do all these things?" That's just because you don't know another way, but there's always another way, my friends. You always have options. You just may not know what they are yet. So I want to encourage you today that just because you've done life one way for a long time doesn't mean you have to continue doing it that way. There are choices. There are options.

A lot of times we need a supportive container of going to therapy with a person that we like and trust to really help us figure out a different way of doing life. Like how do we address the hurt and pain that's underneath all of this achievement so that I can do both? So that I can show up for my life and address my emotional world so that I feel safe, and so that I don't get burnt out. So that I don't get to a place where I'm getting sick. So that I can prevent all of these things.

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The problem is that a lot of people wait for the actual fallout before they get into therapy. They wait until it's like the crash. I would encourage you don't wait for the crash. Once you're in the crash, it just takes so much longer to get out of it. If you're seeing signs and symptoms that you need support from a therapist like start now. There's no reason to wait.

Like, that's an old stigma that you have to wait for the crash and the burn before you get help. Like, I don't know where the stigma came from of we need to wait 'till like, therapy's a last resort or whatever. It's like no dude. Therapy is like important. Get in it now before you get there. Like, why do you want to make the healing process harder on yourself? Just start going now.

I know this happens, I think it's starting to shift a little bit more specifically with like couples therapy where couples are seeing the value in just going to therapy before they have big blow outs or just for communication and boundaries and all of that stuff. But it's true for individuals. It's true for teens. It's true for kids. It's true for everyone.

As we've talked about with anxiety, anxiety is not the thing where time heals, right? That old saying time heals old wounds. Like no. That doesn't happen with anxiety. Anxiety doesn't work that way. Anxiety is a fire, right? Like we need to figure out like can you keep it contained as a campfire? Or is it going to explode as a forest fire?

So if you're an anxious person, I think there was some kind of study done that anxiety people are the last people to reach out for help. If you're high functioning, you're even last in line to get for help. Because you're like, "No, I can like brace. I can just do another day and tomorrow will be better. I can work through it." Right? You're used to working through things on your own. So that's a story.

So I think stepping into therapy to help you reframe that story that you don't have to do it all alone. That there might be other options to do this, to meet your goals, to do what you want to do, but to treat yourself like a human.

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Because you are. You're a human that's deserving of love and respect, and not to be treated like a machine by yourself or by others. Okay.

That's where we bring into number two, boundaries. So in treating yourself like a machine, you have to learn internal and external boundaries. Yes, they are different. External boundaries are things that you set with people or things around you, but internal boundaries is also the way you talk to yourself and what you allow yourself to do. Both are critically, critically important to learn, okay.

So when you start to learn boundaries for yourself and for others in learning how to treat yourself like a person, this is a game changer. Boundaries are really hard. I mean I taught a whole course on this. If you're interested in it, it's at nicolesymcox.com/boundaries.

But I taught a whole course on this because this is like one of the foundational things that you learn in therapy. Like learning boundaries, understanding how they work, and how to implement them and how to stick to them. So that is what my course is all about when it comes to boundaries. I taught that course a long time ago, but everything in it is still relevant to today, of course.

So that is what I would say. Boundaries are extremely important, especially if you have anxiety. Especially if you're a yes person who's always saying yes, you need to learn how to say no in a healthy way. Okay?

So number three, routine. Create a routine that supports you feeling healthy and happy. Okay? It is the little things that add up over time and become a big things. So this is why a routine is so critical. When you specifically add good things into your daily routine that support your wellbeing, it helps keep your body and mind balanced. Once you find the things that make you feel well, you will feel more protective of your boundaries around keeping them.

So you might not have boundaries and you're like I don't even know what I'm protecting. But when you start to feel good inside, you start to know

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what you're protecting. Like you're like, "No, this is important to me. My energy is important to me. Waking up and not feeling like shit the next day is important to me. So I'm going to learn boundaries and learn how to say no to protect my mental and emotional energy." Which is what boundaries are for. Okay?

So routines need to be intentional. So how do you start your day? What do you need to feel balanced and ready to start your day? Okay, do you need 15 minutes of quiet in the morning? Do you need to exercise and stretch? Do you need to go on a walk? Like what are the things that you need to incorporate in your daily routine to help you to feel good every day?

This is something that is really, really important if you're an anxious person. Because anxiety will tell you a story that you don't have time for any of that shit. You don't have time for 10 minutes a day of being quiet and doing something that's honoring to you. Or you don't have time for journaling or you don't have time for a walk.

The truth is, is that yes you do. Yes you do. It's just that anxiety's voice is taking up so much space in your nervous system, it feels like you're overflowing and you don't have the time or space for it. So you have to start telling yourself another story, which is I'm making time for it. I'm making time for the things that help me feel like me. I'm making space for time for things that make me feel good. Or however you want to reframe that.

So going on a 10 minute walk, or reading a book, or whatever it is. I mean listening to music, dancing, like art. I mean the opportunities are limitless really, but what do you need to incorporate in your routine that helps you feel good? This can be even as simple as two minutes of mindful breathing. Like just noticing your breath through your nostrils and out your mouth, in and out.

Two minutes a day doesn't sound like a lot, but it is a lot because we need to learn to teach you how to expand your window of tolerance for sitting in the moment. So start with two minutes. If two minutes is too much then do

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one minute, right? 30 seconds. It doesn't matter what your starting point is. Any starting point is great. Then once you reach that goal, then you add on 30 seconds. Then you add on another 30 seconds. Then pretty soon you're doing it for 10 minutes, and you're getting these little brain breaks.

That can be really helpful throughout your workday. Because that's something that you don't have to leave your desk or your office or whatever. You can do it when you're sitting in your office or wherever you are. When you're in class, it doesn't really matter. So that's why these are like really important things and strategies.

So do you see what I mean? Anxiety tells you a great story that there's like no other way. There's no other way of doing things, but there are so many other ways of doing things, my friends. So many other ways of doing things.

So lastly, I want to offer for you if anxiety is driving you to over produce, you have to learn how to manage it. Managing your anxiety directly relates to managing stress. Anxiety and stress play off of each other like crazy. So we need to learn how to manage our anxiety in healthy ways so that it can support you in your daily life.

So if you want an easy way to start to do this, I highly recommend getting my workbook Anxiety Remix. It's on my website at nicolesymcox.com right there on the front page. Just start with some coping skills and strategies. Start with some journaling prompts. Start with learning some boundaries. There's a section in there about boundaries.

Like there's a section in there about communication. There's a section in there about coping tools and strategies for anxiety. Like just start with something easy if you don't feel ready for therapy or other things right now. Just start with something simple. Okay. All right, my friends. I will see you next time.

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