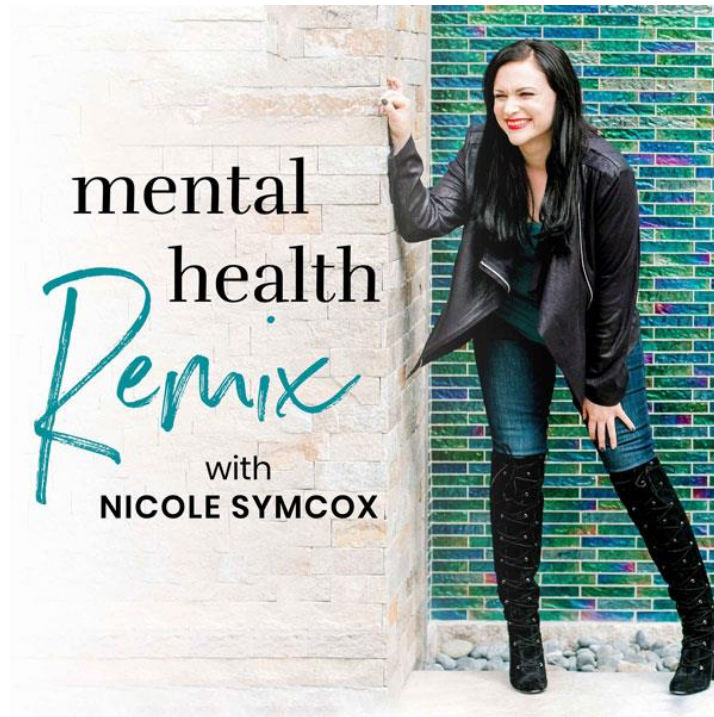


Ep #60: Understanding and Calming Social Anxiety



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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Because if you're not participating in your social world, then your friends circle starts to dwindle, right? Or people start to make up stories about you. Like, "Oh, well, she always says no. Or she always flakes. Or she doesn't want to go anyways." Then that starts a whole negative story of like see? People don't like me. This is why don't go to things.

So we want to be really careful about social anxiety. Because as I talked about with anxiety, what can start as a flicker can turn into a roar, right? So what started as like, "Oh, I feel really nervous if people are judging me. I really want people to like me." That kind of anxiety, what starts as small, then can become bigger based on the experience that we're having in real life.

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 60. So today, I want to talk about social anxiety, which is something I know a lot of teens wrestle with but adults do as well. But social anxiety is incredibly painful, right? It can look like you are normal to the outside world because you put on a fake face, and you just kind of do it. But inside, you're kind of dying inside. You're overthinking. You're double checking. And in severe cases of social anxiety, sometimes you might even be dissociating a little bit and flying above your body or just not even present, right.

So social anxiety can really put a lot of pressure. And there's nothing that anxiety hates more than pressure, right. So if you take anxiety, which is already a stress response, and then you add pressure on top of it to perform, to be perfect, to be liked, whatever the narrative might be, it's going to make anxiety worse. Because we've got a stress on top of stress story that's going on in your brain, and it just makes it so much worse.

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So I want to validate for you, if you're wrestling with social anxiety, it's real. Like social anxiety is a real thing. It's a thing that needs to be tended to with love and care. We have to learn how to respond to our internal world so we can show up in the world around us the way we want to.

There's a lot of reasons for why someone might develop social anxiety. This is different than being shy or introverted. Like there are definitely people that wrestle with social anxiety that even might be extroverts. Sometimes that can be even more painful because your personality is wired to want to connect with people, but your anxiety is getting so big around people it's preventing you to do what you are naturally designed to do. Okay.

So I think social anxiety is one of these things that can feel incredibly painful because you feel powerless against it. It almost can feel like it's going to be predictable. It's almost like you start to get anxious about the anxiety, right? Similar to like a panic attack. Like once you've had a panic attack, it's kind of like you fear having a panic attack. I feel like it can be similar with social anxiety. With social anxiety, you go into social situations pretty confident you're going to be stressed out or anxious to the point you just don't even want to go, right.

So a lot of times when social anxiety goes untreated, that's kind of what happens. We stop wanting to go to things because we're like I can't manage it. I can't get it to calm down. It gets too big. It's too overwhelming, and I'm too drained afterwards, and I don't even like going.

Then this starts a negative cycle. Because if you're not participating in your social world, then your friends circle starts to dwindle, right? Or people start to make up stories about you. Like, "Oh, well, she always says no. Or she always flakes. Or she doesn't want to go anyways." Then that starts a whole negative story of like see? People don't like me. This is why don't go to things.

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So we want to be really careful about social anxiety. Because as I talked about with anxiety, what can start as a flicker can turn into a roar, right? So what started as like, “Oh, I feel really nervous if people are judging me. I really want people to like me.” That kind of anxiety, what starts as small, then can become bigger based on the experience that we're having in real life. So we want to be really careful about this, and we want to catch it early on.

So this is definitely one of those issues. If you have really bad social anxiety or you're seeing the beginning signs of it, there's no shame and blame in getting mental health support in your local state of residence around that. Because when it comes to anything with anxiety, a spark can turn into a roar really quick. So we want to honor the flicker. We want to start where we are and get some tools and strategies in place before it has a chance to grow and create narratives and stories and other people are involved and criticisms and comments and all the things.

I'm sure if you struggle with social anxiety, as I'm talking about this, you're like, “Oh, my gosh, I know exactly what she's talking about because this is what it feels like. It starts to feel like a sandwich, right? It just one thing leads to another to another to another, and we get really lost in it.” So I want to give you some ideas on this podcast of things that you can do to do some starting points of how to help yourself start to manage it.

But, again, highly recommend therapy. Because social anxiety can actually be rooted in trauma. You absolutely need to work with a therapist who's trauma informed to heal from trauma, okay. Trauma is very specific. Trauma requires specialized treatment. There can be a lot of times when someone heals from their trauma story, that the social anxiety symptoms start to go down as well. So sometimes trauma can be the root of social anxiety, right?

What I think is interesting that a lot of people don't know that sometimes you can do really well one on one with people. Then you notice when you get into a group or into a classroom, you start to shake a little bit, right. You

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start to notice like I don't want to talk in front of groups. I don't want to talk in front of people, or you just don't feel that comfortable.

So there is a theory that a lot of times when we go into group settings, such as a classroom or small groups like to work on a project or whatever, that it mimics your family dynamics. So whatever role—and I've done an episode on this too about family roles. How in our families, unconsciously, we're all assigned these different kinds of roles in our family, and we kind of carry that with us into life.

So what some of this research was suggesting is that when you get into groups or group settings, you start to play out your family role. So if you are in an environment where you're highly criticized for everything that you say, you may go into a group setting feeling a little bit worried about being criticized. If you were criticized a lot, you might be very worried about that, and be very cautious about saying anything, right.

So I throw that in there because I think it's kind of interesting. Like, if you kind of think about maybe what your family role is and just kind of noticing like does that show up for you in group settings? It may not show up as social anxiety, right? Like you might be the clown in your family. That's a role. A clown is someone who diverts things by making people laugh, by being the funny one. So maybe when you go into group settings, you're the funny one.

So that goes off the topic of social anxiety because we have social anxiety, you definitely don't feel like a funny one. That's not usually what's happening unless your anxiety's pushing you that way, which it could. But usually, social anxiety feels paralyzing. Most of the time people with social anxiety feel a little bit overwhelmed, paralyzed, powerless, and have extreme difficulty in social situations. It doesn't usually kick on some of our better features, so to speak. But that was just an example of like we all have these different family roles.

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So sometimes when we get into group settings, if you have trauma and your family dynamics and then you have social anxiety, sometimes it's just reminding you of—Maybe unconsciously it's reminding you of not getting positive feedback or being not really sure where your places or not really sure what to say.

But anyway, so just ideas. Not saying that's true for you because, again, I'm not your therapist, but just very generally speaking about what are some possibilities, and why therapy is so important if you have social anxiety because it can be a lot deeper than what meets the eye. We always want to treat the root of things to help us feel better.

But just to start with some potential tools that you may want to use is one thing if you have social anxiety is to really start to manage your breathing. So I've talked about this before but there's been studies done, right, on people with depression don't breathe enough, and sometimes people with anxiety, we breathe too much.

So if you're like [rapid breathing], right like if you're breathing a lot, you can kind of be putting your brain into a panic state, right? Because you're tricking it and teaching it that like I'm in danger. I need to get out of here. Because when we breathe faster, we breathe heavier. Like think about exercise. You breathe fast and heavy when you're running. You breathe fast and heavy when you're doing cardio. Like when we're kicking on like we need to go, go, go right. We're breathing fast, and so it speeds up our heart rate.

Now, when you have anxiety, your first step is to get your breathing in check because we don't want to get to a panic attack level. We don't want to get to that level where we're freaking out beyond belief, right? So getting your breathing in check is really, really important.

So you can sit down in a chair, or you could do it standing up. Relax your shoulders. You can put one hand on your belly and the other on your chest, and you breathe in slowly through your nose for five seconds. You notice

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that the hand on your belly will rise, and the one in your chest shouldn't move, okay. So you're holding your breath for two seconds, and then you're slowly letting it out through your mouth for six. You repeat this until you feel calmer, okay?

Once you're calmer, it's important to start a new story, right? Because anxiety is such a great storyteller. With social anxiety, it's usually things like everybody hates you or nobody's gonna like you or you're unworthy of love and respect, or whatever the negative anxiety story is.

So once you get yourself into a calmer place, start with a neutral story, as I've already taught you neutral thoughts in Episode 55, right? We're going to reframe this. I'm capable of getting through hard moments. Or I'm capable of talking with people, okay? If that doesn't feel true, you need to reframe it to what does feel true. Because neutral thoughts only work if they are true, and your body will know if you're lying. So you can't tell yourself a lie. Like, you can't lie to yourself, right? Your body is the big truth meter. It's gonna be like I call bullshit on that. That's not true.

So make sure it's aligned. You'll know it's aligned because your body will accept it. Right? Your body will be like, "Okay, cool. Yeah, I can do my best with integrity. That feels true to me. I can do that." Just start that and start with a game plan. What are some topics I'm good at talking about?

This is something that's important, I think, with social anxiety is to do a little bit of prep. Like what are the subjects that you're good at talking about? What are the jokes that you're good at telling? Are you a good reflective listener? If you blank and don't know what to say, can you just ask questions? Can you just ask someone to get them to keep talking since you don't have anything to say? Right? So these are all social skills and things to consider. If you're going into social situation, you want to just be kind of prepared for how are you going to handle it.

Now, again, you can't be prepared for every scenario, especially when it comes to social situations. Because well, I mean, that includes people and

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people are unpredictable, right? Like, we can't predict the movement or the speech of every person in the world. So we have to just learn to rely on ourselves. That whatever happens, we're going to come up with a solution. That is some of you preparing, okay.

Prepare can also look like at what point do I need to leave? I need to put forth my best effort. I need to interact with people. If I get flooded or I feel like I'm gonna have a panic attack, how do I excuse myself so I can leave and go breathe? Like, can I go to the bathroom? Can I go outside? You know, whatever I need to do? Do I need to go on my phone? Like, what is the plan if we start to get to panic? Because this is teaching to regulate. Then we come back, and we do it again.

You want to do this in small increments. You don't want to jump into like big scenarios where you have no way out, like going to a party. If you have bad social anxiety and you're going to a party for like five or six hours with no ride home, you might feel a little bit trapped by that.

So as you're healing from social anxiety, you kind of want to take it in increments, right? Like maybe have your own car with you, have your own ride home, so that if you do get flooded and overwhelmed, after putting forth your best effort, you're like you know what? I've done the best that I can do. I feel completely drained. I can't continue, and I need to leave. Like, what's the plan for that? Like, how are you going to exit the situation? Okay.

The other thing to keep in mind is to take the focus off of yourself, okay? People with social anxiety I feel like are hyper aware of themselves, and not paying as close attention to other people around them. So that is part of what makes social anxiety bad, right? We're overly focused on everything we're saying, everything we're doing that we're not aware of what's going on around us.

So this can create a failure situation because A, we're so focused on us that we're not paying attention to the social cues that are going around.

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Then we start a negative story of like, “Well, people just don't like me.” Well, it might not be that people don't like you. It just might mean that you were stuck in your head, and you miss something, right. So if you're missing something, you can't respond to it.

So kind of taking some of the focus off of yourself, like most people are pretty nervous in social situations. Like, I think as humans, we're all really worried about how we're perceived and if people are going to like us.

So most of the time people are so consumed with their own worry about themselves, they're really not that worried about you. Like we think people are way more concerned with us than they actually are. Like people are more concerned with themselves. Like you're probably not the only person in that room with social anxiety or who's feeling nervous or unsure of themselves. They're working really hard to manage their own brain and their own body. Okay.

So you want to take some of the focus off of yourself and be careful about the negative stories that you might be saying. So turning the focus on to someone else or paying attention to the social cues that are going on around you so that you can respond in a good way, right? Because if we're not paying attention, we don't have an opportunity to change.

So those would be some ideas just to start with. Again, if you're in the moment, using your senses or progressive muscle relaxation are all great things that you can do in the moment that aren't really noticeable. Because when you have anxiety, the last thing you want to do is to use a coping strategy that is noticeable. I think progressive muscle relaxation is a great one because that just requires you squeezing your fist and then letting it go and breathing and squeezing your fist and letting it go. So those are things that can be really, really helpful in the moment.

So these are all things that I teach in my Anxiety Remix workbook. So if you are struggling with needing anxiety, coping skills, especially for

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moments like this, you're like, "Oh, my gosh. I have this thing to go to. What do I do if I get anxious?"

That's the strength of having a workbook with you because you have all the tools and strategies right at your fingertips. And you can learn how to do them ahead of time so that you're prepared in the moment. You can pick and choose which one you want to do, right? If you're like, "Well, this one's not going to work for me. Everybody will see it. Or I don't like that one. That one doesn't even work for me." Like the last thing you want to do is try an anxiety coping strategy and have it not work.

So you want to do these ahead of time, which is why the workbook is like 75 pages. Like you have so many options of different coping tools and strategies to use for anxiety. Not all of them are going to work for you. I mean, that's just part of it, right? That's just part of mental health. If it was a one size fit all, we would have a very cookie cutter experience in therapy, and we don't, right. We're all unique individuals. We have to find what works for us based on our personality, our experiences, our nervous systems, etc. Right?

So I would highly encourage you start there and get my Anxiety Remix workbook. It's on my website, and just start with some tools to get your anxiety managed so you don't feel so powerless. Right? Like I think a lot of times with anxiety, we feel so powerless against it, and we don't know what to do. The truth is that there's a lot of options of ways to support ourselves, especially in anxious moments with people.

So we just want to be prepared. Otherwise, our anxiety just gets bigger. We're like, "Oh my gosh. I don't have options. I don't have strategies. What do I do?" Right? So if your first starting point is just learning some coping skills and strategies, I highly recommend getting the anxiety workbook. Again, it's right there on my website, and let that be the start of your journey to learning how to manage your anxiety differently. All right my friends. I will talk to you next time.

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