



Episode 642: The Holistic Psychologist on How to Meet Your Self

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Katie: Hello and welcome to the Wellness Mama Podcast. I'm Katie from Wellnessmama.com, and I am so excited to share today's interview with you. I'm here with someone whose work I have followed for a long time. It's Dr. Nicole LePera, who you might know as the Holistic Psychologist if you have seen her online. I really, really love her work and her story. So Dr. Nicole, who, like I said, is called the Holistic Psychologist, found herself frustrated with her work as a therapist, and she knew that she wanted better for herself and her clients. And at the same time, she began to face some hard truth about her own family dynamics, her core beliefs, and her dysfunctional patterns. That led her to an emotional breakdown, which led to her own healing journey. And after two years of deep transformation, she began teaching this work on social media and creating a community of what she calls self healers.

She now has a self healer circle to allow people to go on their own journey of who they want to become. And she also now has a new book called *"How to Meet Yourself"*. And we talk a lot about her work and her book today. I highly recommend her workbook. I will link to it in the show notes if you guys want to check it out. But in this conversation, we go in a lot of directions. We actually start off with a fun, random thing that she and I share that's likely not going to be what you would guess or think.

Then we talk about why so many of us feel stuck and what to do about it. We talk about the importance of habits and why we keep repeating patterns, even if they aren't serving us, including patterns that come from childhood and why these are so hard to break. We talk about the body and mind connection and how to help our nervous system feel safe. And then we talk a whole lot about the parenting aspect of this and ways to model this for our children and how our own connection to self is important for them as well. How to go on the journey to feel safe in our own bodies and to help our children do the same. The most valuable thing we can give our kids in tough moments. We go through some practical things we can do for our own nervous system wellness and for our children so that they have a solid emotional and nervous system foundation as they get older.

And she talks about how our habits are not who we are, that they're likely just a series of adaptations that we've collected based on our environment, but they are possible to change. We talk about the subconscious side of that. We talk about why so few of us know who we actually are and what the authentic self actually even means, and a lot of other directions from there. Like I said, I've really valued her work for a long time. I will also in the Show Notes link to her social media profiles because she posts a whole lot of really relevant content there as well. She's the Holistic Psychologist on Instagram. If you don't follow her, I would recommend that. But let's jump in and learn from Dr. Nicole. Dr. Nicole, welcome. Thank you so much for being here.

Dr. Nicole: Thank you so much for having me. Katie.

Katie: Well, I have followed your work for a while and I will say it's actually really helped me personally. So I'm very excited to get to chat with you today and go deep on a few topics. Before we jump into that stuff, though, I have a fun note in the show notes that might actually be a good springboard into some of our conversations, which is that you've also had a couple of body piercings at different times. And the listeners may not know this, but I have two. In fact, this small thing actually shaped a lot of my early parenting approach because I was not allowed to even get my ears pierced until I was 13. And then I desperately wanted to get a second piercing and my mom would not let me. And so when I was 18, I went a little wild and I think I had 33 at the peak of my piercings and I realized, oh wow, restricting kids doesn't work. So what would be a better approach? But I would love to hear about yours and maybe they came from a healthier place than mine.

Dr. Nicole: Probably very similar, actually Katie, to what I'm hearing. My mom was not a fan of body piercings, tattoos and actually very much in alignment with my new workbook, *How to Meet Yourself*. I always had that instinctual drive. I wanted to adorn myself, I wanted to mark myself up in all of these ways and actually I had been getting my mom was supportive of all of the ear piercing, so I pushed that to the max. I had pretty much every cartilage that I could have and then probably, if I'm being honest, before I even turned 18, I fashioned

myself a little fake enough ID that I started to get more significant piercings, like my belly button, like my tongue.

And sharing that to say I have a very vivid memory of at this point I was piercing myself in ways that I thought would be hidden from my mother. I even got a small tattoo on the inside of my ankle thinking I could hide that with my socks. And long story short, after I had just gotten my tongue pierce one of my many piercings, I was sitting at dinner and having dinner with my mom, which was a family frequent occurrence. And she looks over at me. And happens to catch the glistening of my new tongue piercing and gives me, which is very true to her form, the dirtiest of looks and moving forward, of course I kept the piercing and that was just a point of negotiation with me and my mom where she was very much not a fan of those.

But the way I do see it and view it is for me that was coming from this desire to be authentic, to walk through the discomfort of that judgment of my mom, which I did hide hold in very high self esteem to get many more piercings than just that tongue. I had my eyebrow pierced at one time when I was more comfortable wearing it much more visibly. I have all these different inside parts, cartilage of my ear, which I still have and many other things.

Katie: Well, you may be the only guest, at least that I know of, that I share that with. And I think it will be a perfect springboard, actually, because I do want to, by the end of the episode, talk about how we can show up as parents in ways that will help our kids have a healthier foundation. But I think realizing, like, I'm piercing my own belly button in the parking lot of a tractor supply with a horse needle, I was like, let's figure out better patterns so my kids don't have to follow that road.

But to start broad before we get into the parenting side of this and how we can show up and give our kids a solid foundation, I'm a big believer that it's also what we model is even more important. And we're getting to speak to a lot of moms today. I think moms have tremendous power to heal culture, to heal ourselves, to be that model for our children. And your new book, I love it, goes so deep on this, and I want to just get into a few parts of that today, maybe starting broad with, why are so many people feeling stuck? Where does that come from?

Dr. Nicole: Yeah. And this was something that I saw, actually, very early on in the private practice that I used to have in Philadelphia, where no matter how consistent I was working with clients, no matter how committed they were to the work, no matter how insightful they were in those treatment rooms, what I would hear week after week is how it didn't matter. The symptoms were still there. Those patterns were still there. We were unable to create new habits or break old habits that weren't serving us from a very disempowered place, because I felt that same way in my own personal life. No matter what I tried, I felt disconnected from those around me. I felt a lifelong experience of anxiety, which is what it was for me. So seeking to understand, well, why is it? Why am I tasked with being this helper in the room, giving people these tools? Yet these tools don't seem to work. No matter what I do, no matter what the client does.

And what I became aware of is how incredibly powerful the subconscious part of our mind is, where all of those habits and patterns that were created. And to speak to your audience very directly, those of us who are shaping those early environments, those childhood experiences where all of those habits begin, are so incredibly impactful for the future because we carry them with us. And probably language that maybe some of your listeners might have heard of for now. I'm hearing a lot of people speak of the autopilot. Right. That's what most of us are living in. We're not conscious in those moments where we need to be actualizing those new plans of action or doing those new things to break those old habits. And because we're driven by that subconscious, we feel an assumed sense of safety in that subconscious. Before we know it, we are stuck because it's familiar, because it feels safer to our mind and body and because ultimately change is incredibly difficult for our whole system. And which is why I really began to shift my work into then understanding the whole experience of humans.

Katie: Yeah. And I think that's part of what's resonated so deeply for me with your work is that you are giving people the tools for that at home and to start to understand that it feels like awareness is the first key of that. And then there's still obviously the work to do behind that. And I've seen various stats of just how much the subconscious mind is actually in control, like what percentage of that and whatever the agreed upon percentage is, it's a lot higher than a lot of people probably realize.

And when you talk about safety, I think that was a really big key for me to understand as well. And in some of my own inner work, I've realized some of these patterns, some of these emotions that I had, resisting them was not going to work. Like, I kept trying to fight them. That was not an effective strategy. I actually ended up in several different types of therapy thanking them, like recognizing them, feeling them to their fullest and thanking them because they did keep me safe. They were there for a reason.

But I think often people can feel shame or judgment of themselves around those emotions rather than allowing them to exist. And maybe some of the discomfort actually comes from that versus the experience or the emotion itself. And you mentioned the word habits, and I love that. Actually, I had a whole short episode recently on habits and I love to get your take on a lot of this, basically starting with like, why do we keep repeating these habits once we know they don't serve us, why do we still keep repeating them?

Dr. Nicole: Yeah. And so we repeat them because, again, we have a sense of felt safety in that, which is predictable. And you're really speaking very wisely, Katie, when you're kind of acknowledging how important it is to first learn how to be conscious or witness these habits. Because to speak to your point when they're outside of our awareness, when we're operating within those habitual cycles, because there is a part of that deeper awareness that feels safest doing that. The byproduct of that for most of us is we identify with them, we become our habits. We imagine that we're acting in whatever way it is that we're acting because that's who we are as a person. And for some of us we end up feeling very shameful if we get stuck in dysfunctional habit loops within ourself, harming ourselves or within our relationships, creating harm or chaos in our relationships and especially applying this to children as well.

So that first step of becoming conscious to what these habits are for a lot of us can be so incredibly healing it can begin to relieve that shame that we've identified those as being. So going back to your question in terms of why do we repeat things that are dysfunctional, that do harm ourselves or create harm to the loved ones around us? And again, because we're driven always by our nervous system and this is where the safety piece comes in to really be very black and white about life. We're always assessing and interpreting the world around us to ensure that we're safe enough to continue to sustain our physiological life, to continue to live right. And that might sound very extreme but again, everything in terms of our nervous system is driven to keep us surviving, to keep us evolving.

So when we talk about that which is predictable even if there are some negative outcomes, it's predictable. It feels controlled, it no longer feels like a threat because it's no longer unknown. And chances are I've navigated it, I've adapted using again some beautiful wisdom you just shared. There are things now that I do that might have a negative byproduct with them but again, they were an adaptation that allowed me to find some semblance of safety in that earliest environment. So that's always going to be preferred because not only is what happens next predictable I feel a little bit of competence over it. I feel like I can manage it.

Of course, though, what becomes more complicated is those other byproducts. And to speak to your point, once we become conscious, we need to then begin to I always will break change into two steps becoming conscious of the habits and patterns or the choices that we are making, often outside of our subconscious awareness that are keeping us stuck so that we can take that next step. Which is begin to make new choices, begin to actually create change in those moments, begin to act differently, begin to regulate ourselves differently. And none of that is possible until we again first see those habits that are driving our reactions. We can't create those new ways to create safety within ourselves.

Katie: I love that I think that reframe is so important. And you talked about the identity piece and I see this with my background being more in the physical side of health. People will like identify with a disease or they'll say like I am sick or I have this disease and it becomes part of who they are which makes it really hard to let go of. And I recently had a guest, Dr. Cassie Huckabee, who reframed this from the physical side really well. She was like, people get in this mindset where they think their body is kind of like out to get them and they're fighting their body. She's like, if our bodies wanted to kill us, they could do it instantly. Our bodies are always there trying to do what's best for us to survive.

And I feel like that's the same thing with what you're talking about with the nervous system. Like it is there to keep us alive, to keep us surviving in this world. But also there's so much talk about in today's modern world, we have to learn how to adapt because there's so many inputs that our nervous system can get dysregulated and we have stress coming from all these different places. And so going on the nervous system side, what are some of the ways? I know you have so many good ones in the book, but some ways that we can start to repattern the nervous system and to start to change those responses you mentioned becoming conscious is the first one and then making new choices, but maybe let's go through some ways that we can help the nervous system.

Dr. Nicole: Yeah, so when we're speaking about the nervous system, we have to locate that entity, if you will. And this might seem really simplistic to a lot of listeners in our body. And the reason why I'm emphasizing this so intentionally right now is the large majority of us pay most attention not to our bodies, to our mind. We're lost in thought. We're rehashing things that happen in the morning, we're worrying about things that are going to happen tomorrow, or we're just somewhere else. We're kind of on our, as I often call it, on our spaceship. We're not actually grounded with our awareness in our physical body.

So when I talk about that conscious awareness, it's not of the thoughts in our mind, it's not of the external environment around us. It's learning how to pay conscious attention to how our body is responding to that environment around us, because that's where we have such incredibly valuable information. Then we can get clarity on whether or not our body is in one of those stress responses, whether it is interpreting a threat in our current environment and sending them those messages that I'm not safe to my mind. And for a lot of us, this is the reason why no amount of affirmations, no amount of white knuckling it.

And for me, I had this experience with anxiety. No amount of telling myself not to worry about something or to relax or to chill, as I very much was always seeking. All I really want ever in life is to be peaceful and calm and to have what I call freedom choice in any moment. In reality, in those moments, my body never felt safe in that peace and in that calm. So again, when I was referencing working Holistically, that means really beginning to pay attention to those endless signals that my body is sending to my mind that my mind then outside of my own even awareness is using to interpret my environment.

So if my body and my muscles and my breath in particular, those are great places to begin to pay attention. And my heart rate is another one. If my body is indicating stress, then that's the messages that are going to color my interpretations of what's happening, no matter how peaceful or calm the moment may be. If my body is telling my mind it isn't, my thoughts are going to race, I'm going to feel on edge. I might start to react then in those age old ways, those habitual ways that I do when I'm on edge, stressed, angry, or whatever it may be. So when we talk about building body consciousness, as I call it, and I dedicate actually the whole first section of the workbook into beginning to not only awaken your consciousness muscle, but actually learn how to attune to your body. And we will talk about those three areas in particular.

What are my muscles doing? Are they tense, indicating that they're ready for action, that I'm ready for that threat at hand? Or are they relaxed with energy available, but not necessarily springing into action? Right, when they're tense, typically, I can note that, okay, my body is geared up and ready for threat. My heart rate is another great place to attune to. Is my heart rate quickened, really shallow in my breath, like a lot of us get when we're nervous, when we're on edge, when we've been startled. That's all an indicator again, that our body has initiated a stress response so we can begin to pay attention as opposed to am I breathing calmly, deeply from my belly? Very few of us are breathing in that very grounded, non activated way.

So we can begin to pay attention to our heart rate, to our breath, the quickening of our heart rate, the calming of our heart rate, the quickening of our breath, similarly the calming of our breath and the tensioning of our muscles and the relaxation of those. And again, depending on what either end of the spectrum you're

noticing, those sensations will give you that information in terms of how is your nervous system now? That's the awareness. Now I'm stepping into really quickly that next choice we can make. Once we have that awareness now, we can intentionally begin to shift those physiological systems. We can learn how to calm our heart rate. We can learn how to calm our breathing. We can learn how to either activate our muscles or release calm, rest and relax our muscles, ultimately then shifting our body stress response.

Katie: Yeah, that was a breakthrough thing for me personally to realize. I remember reading the book *The Body Keeps the Score* and really understanding maybe for the first time that connection, like you hear of the mind body connection, but really understanding it at that physical level was, for me, probably that first awareness where I actually then started to become conscious of it. And I think that the other thing that really helped me realize was I used to think I needed to fix my mind and my emotions, and then my body would also get better. And I realized the body is also an amazing tool, like you're saying, for helping the mind and helping the emotions process as well. And I love that you take the holistic approach of that because there's been such a movement toward holistic medicine and functional medicine in the physical health world. And I love that you are ushering in that change and that connection in the mental health and in the emotional world as well.

And let's talk about maybe where these patterns come from. It seems like often in those moments, there's like an inner child thing happening where I've become aware of that sometimes, where I'm like, oh, I feel triggered by this thing happening with my child. I feel right now like I'm eight years old and I'm now an eight year old arguing with an eight year old. But it seems like the more of this work I do, the more I realize so much goes back to what seemed like, at the time, insignificant moments in childhood. I had great parents. They were not abusive at all, but there were still these moments in childhood that really left a lasting impact. And I feel like I sometimes get emotionally stuck at those ages. But you can explain this much better than I can. Let's talk about the inner child part in childhood.

Dr. Nicole: I mean, we are, Katie, learning everything. We are quite literally a sponge. It's taking in the world around us. And we're learning from everything, from how to care for our how to be in a physical body, how to care for that physical body in terms of just general self care habits. And we're learning how to navigate our interpersonal worlds. I mean, again, maybe listeners have heard statements like, we're wired to connect, we're interpersonal beings. We need relationships, or some variation of that. And the reality of it is, as humans, we are physiologically in need of another human being. We need to be in relationships as a human infant. For all the parents listening out there, mothers in particular, your infants can't quite live literally on their own. You need someone to care for you.

So we are wired to be in connection with other humans from everything from survival to the ability to thrive and create. And that's how we survived as a species and evolved as a species. So in these relationships, then, not only are we being taught how to navigate our human bodies, we're being taught how to navigate ourselves in relationship. And now we're going into what the second section or the middle section of the workbook is, which is the mental emotional world. We're learning all about emotions in childhood. We're learning all about how to navigate our emotions in childhood within our relationships in particular. And that is one of the areas that we become most habitual, so to speak, to your awareness.

And I know in myself, I do have a little child inside of me because not being equipped to deal with stress and other emotions in childhood, we are that sponge. We do need that apparent figure of whatever variety that it is to help our nervous systems physiologically regulate and to also help us behaviorally then figure out what to do when we're feeling all of the different ways that we're feeling. And now here is where the reality of no fault of our caregivers own. We are all raised, if we really want to be simplistic about it, by other humans who were just as impacted by their past environments, by their earliest relationships, by the access to resources that they had or didn't have and even by the shifts in parenting.

I mean, there was a time in our history where we truly believed that children were more akin to house plants, where literally just keeping them alive, sustaining their life is all that was necessary. And now we understand cultures change. We understand that emotions are part of our human experience and children do have emotional needs. So again, of no fault of our caregivers own. The large majority of us in childhood weren't raised in a safe environment with other caregivers who knew how to regulate their own emotions, who knew how to safely and groundedly experience the whole range variety of emotions that we experience when we're human and remain conscious and intentional about how we react and what happens. More often than not, then we end up feeling overwhelmed or we end up being told that certain emotions are inappropriate, shameful, not to be expressed, not because that's the reality, because our parents and that early environment weren't able to safely contain and or teach us how to navigate those emotions.

So now because we become so habitual, we adapt it. We learned, okay, well, if I am told consistently enough not to show these emotions, I begin to suppress those emotions. If I witness other humans exploding outward when they're having an emotional reaction, whatever it might be, chances are before long I might begin to explode outward of a very common experience that I had in my own family. If we notice a shutdown when certain people, my mom, very particularly when she had emotional experiences, especially around anger, she would disconnect give the silent treatment. Before long, I began to do that same thing.

So now we age. Our numbers in aging go up. Some of us even leave those geographical locations of those early environments. Yet, to speak to your point, we have those habits wired literally in our neurobiology. So now we're in our own relationships, we're in our own families, we're raising our own children. And what's happening is we are literally brought back in time to that seven, eight, nine year-old exploding outward, or icing not speaking when we're upset, not of any indication of the person who upset us, but because we ourselves are uncomfortable navigating that particular emotion.

So even just bringing this beautifully full circle, when we talk about parenting, this isn't just about the directives to give to your child, right? The things to state or how to teach them to do differently. Like you beautifully said yourself when we began this conversation, it's about embodying those new choices in action, showing that regulation in action, staying safely connected to our children even when we're having an uncomfortable emotion. And that means making these new choices about how to navigate our own emotions first before then we can extend that safe container outward to our own children.

Katie: Yeah, and I definitely want to go deeper on the parenting side in a minute, but I think the other important part of that that I want to delve into first is to your point, we can speak to our children and teach them that way, but I feel like what we model for them is infinitely more effective. And so, really, at the end of the day, us learning how to do this ourselves is going to be the most important thing we can do for our children. And when I started doing sort of this inner work, I realized the scariest question I think I ever asked myself was, like, who am I, actually? And it's maybe the hardest one I've ever tried to answer. And I feel like there's maybe an epidemic of this happening. I love that your book really meets this head on, but why do so many people seem to not actually know themselves?

Dr. Nicole: We don't know ourselves because we're not necessarily making choices from that self, that self, that pure state of energy and awareness. And you'll see this in children. They say what they want, they say what they're thinking, they say how they feel. They just are in that pure state of being. Though, again, before long, because we're very adaptive, we're absorbing information around us. We begin to modify. We begin to suppress those emotions that didn't have space or weren't safe to express. We begin to show a little. For me, just even going back to the example we started with, with all the piercings, it became very clear to me that appearance was a priority in my household, with my mom and my sister in particular. We were always worried about our bodies, how we looked, what other people thought of how we looked. Again, a lot of this is impacted by cultural messaging that we're getting.

So before long, I mean, I was able to very readily know internally that my mom didn't like certain expressions of myself. So we can begin to even stop expressing those desires because we got that messaging, whether it's directly where we're told what to do or what not to do, and all of the reasons why we should or shouldn't, or again, because it's modeled right. We see our parents always worrying about what other people are doing. We see our parents always judging their own bodies or not judging their own emotions, shaming themselves for how they feel. And now, before long, what we're doing is we're adapting ourselves. And so many of us become these adaptations. We become wear this mask for so long that that is who we think we are. Yet there is this deeper part of us that isn't that there's a wholeness of our being that we all began as in childhood, that we haven't connected to.

So I had this very awakening moment somewhere in my mid 20s where let alone answering the question, who am I? I was really struggling to answer the question in terms of how what I wanted to do with my time, how I wanted to navigate my life, how I like to spend, you know, moments. I couldn't even locate myself in those decisions because for so long, I wasn't factoring. I was always worrying about what someone else wanted or needed of me. I might have an instinctual thought or feeling, but I would suppress it out of concern that I might upset someone with sharing with my truth. Just like in childhood, where if I presented my physical appearance in some way, I did get messaging that that was upsetting or it wasn't desired by those around me.

So before long, I understandably couldn't answer those deeper questions because I was looking outside of myself to navigate my daily life. And I think a lot of us, again, when we don't have that container in childhood, that safe place to begin to explore, to just be who we are and try on for size all of these different ways of being until we kind of land on us, that authentic self, we continue to operate in these habitual ways. And then we do wake up in our 20s and our 30s and our 40s, our 50s. Some of us, even in my membership, we have

people well up in years that are coming to this awareness. I don't really know who I am because I haven't had the space and the safety to actually connect with who I am or to express who I am in the world.

Katie: Yeah. And I will link to a few of you, you do such great threads on Instagram where you talk about this pattern. If this happened in your childhood, here are some of the ways maybe it's showing up in your adult life. And you give examples that several of them have stopped me in my tracks. And I'm like, Whoa.

And they really do help you have that awareness about it. With my own kids, I realized. Ever since they were born, I've told them every day, I love you unconditionally. There's nothing you can ever do that will diminish that, and there's nothing you can ever do to earn that. And I always made a point of saying that to them. But then maybe about five years ago, I realized, oh, that only is going to resonate with them if I model that and also how I love myself. And that kind of started me on this journey of like, I have to do this work on the inside, not just for me, but for them as well.

And like you, I think I had that sort of caretaking pattern where certain emotions weren't safe, and so I learned not to have them. And I only felt safe when I was taking care of everyone around me and making sure everyone else was happy. And like you, I realized as an adult, I have absolutely no idea who I am or what I want. And asking those questions was scary and led to actually quite a bit of upheaval in my life and continues to, but in a beautiful direction. So even in the turmoil of some of those lessons, there has been a lot of beauty and growth as well. And I'd love to go a little deeper on how we can start to actually connect more to that authentic self. Because to your point, I think so many of us get all the way into adulthood not having ever experienced that, and then we'll shift gears and talk about how we can help our kids do the same.

Dr. Nicole: So beginning the journey and I very intentionally imagining most people that pick up the workbook, How to Meet Yourself, where the self that I'm, of course, referencing in the title is that authentic self. I imagine most people are picking up this workbook for that particular journey. Okay, well, give me the tools to meet who I am. And you heard me reference kind of the different sections already, beginning with even this concept of consciousness in the habit itself and then diving into all of the different behavioral habits, mainly around the nervous system and how we're caring for our nervous system, continuing that foundational build to then exploring this mental world which does include our inner child and our ego and all of these early woundings that cause these adaptations, these moments of reactivity.

And then very strategically and intentionally, you'll enter into section three or four, I think it is technically in the workbook, which is how to Meet Your Authentic Self. So the reason why I'm again laboring this point is there aren't a set of tools where you could just go and take steps one, two, three, and rediscover your authentic self at this moment for a large majority of us, at least until we begin that journey. Because if our body is dysregulated, if our nervous system is continuing to tell our mind that we're in survival mode, we're not going to have the time, space, or safety or intentional awareness to be able to attune to our authentic wants and needs because they might be in contradiction to what we need to do for our survival in that moment.

We're definitely not going to be able to drop in and begin to explore what we're interested in, what our purpose and our passion, all of these that are aspects of our authentic self. Because just quite literally, our priority is in survival, and those things aren't a priority in those moments. So when we talk about meeting our authentic self, it truly is a journey of embodying first that connection to our physical vessel, then that stabilization of that dysregulation in our nervous system so that we can be more grounded in our present moments, not reliving our past, right? Not going back in time when we're upset to that seven-year-old learning how to navigate our emotions so that we can stay grounded in each moment and feel safe enough then to begin to drop in and explore what I want, what I desire in this moment, what I'm interested in in this moment, what I'm passionate about, what I'm curious about.

All of that only becomes possible when we're grounded in that safety, not when we're reacting to the past, not when we're overwhelmed by our emotions, which is the state that I know for me, I lived in at all times, always feeling unsafe. And you said something really beautiful too, in terms of your commitment to your children, which is teaching them that they don't have to earn your love because this is one of the major foundational areas that kept me feeling unsafe. The messaging in my childhood, the moments of connection that I was able to receive in that childhood, not of no ill intention of my mother, who was completely shut down because of her own childhood, were moments where I was performing, where I was achieving academically, where I was achieving athletically. So there's a habitual pattern in me and most of my relationships similar to caring for other people, which is this idea that I do need to be doing something to receive that love, just like I received in childhood, right?

So already, automatically, my authentic self doesn't feel safe just being. So I shift into some version of action. So that's just one example of that adaptation that takes us away from those authentic moments. Because what happens in the moments where I just have a different desire, a different interest, or I just don't want to do anything? For instance, there's a very childlike part of me that's left feeling unworthy in those moments, not enough in those moments. As if in some level, it's not okay for me to just be in the embodiment of whatever that inner authentic desire is again. Which is why this workbook begins as a journey to get us able to give us the possibility of, I should say, creating that space where we feel safe enough then to drop in and to begin to ask ourselves, which is then the safety we can create for our children. The space to explore all aspects of themselves, their desires, their longings, their interests? Because all of that is part of the wholeness of their being.

Katie: Yeah, and I think in that sense it's a unique thing for those of us who have kids because we have these great teachers in our lives who are going through these phases. And so maybe if we had a pattern in childhood it helps us to have awareness of that when we start to see our interactions with our own kids. And I think the safety part is huge. I love that you honed in on the not having to earn it part because, like you, that was the message I didn't get enough in childhood. I knew my parents would always love me, but I got definitely more outwardly expressions of love when I did something that was an achievement which was beneficial in areas of business for a long time because I was super driven because my self worth was tied to that. But then when I became aware of that, I didn't want to create that pattern in my children or at least I wanted them to know

that they were always loved without ever having to earn it. And like I said, it was one thing to say that, but realizing I had to actually live that in order for that to really resonate was a bigger step.

I've heard it said that kids will adapt because they do depend on us for care. They will adapt and cut off their own needs to maintain that connection with a parent because it is absolutely vital for their survival. And so I'd love to talk about how we can create that place of safety for our kids and help them as they go through the various phases of childhood to hopefully have a solid emotional foundation where they do feel safe expressing their emotions. I've heard it said also that, you know, kids who are well behaved in public but sometimes have meltdowns at home that can actually be a sign of good parenting because they feel safe enough to have their emotions at home. And I think that I'd love to go deeper on that. How can we help our children feel safe in having their emotions and learn not to judge their emotion but still also know that there's a difference between an emotion and an action? And just because they're having an emotion doesn't mean they can have an action like hitting their sibling or whatever it may be.

Dr. Nicole: I love how, Katie, you're bringing up this idea of the positivity, for lack of a better word, even though I don't really like those kind of designators but of how it being a good sign, if you will, when emotions happen, whether that's in the home or within certain relationships or what have you. And the reason why I'm grabbing that is because I think a lot of us aren't of that belief. We feel like that our goal is to not have emotions, to be emotion free or to be so controlled in our emotions and not show anything that we're feeling to the external world. And again, the reality of it is emotions are what color our life. They're what animate our being. They're what being human is about.

So when we talk about creating that safe container for our children so that they can feel safe in their own emotional expression, again, I'm going to go back to this continued theme of modeling that for our children. Which means that on the simplistic, on the most simple level, we have to be safe in our own bodies. Even just taking us on the journey through the workbook, we have to be, I should say connect it first before we can be safe in our body. We can be connected to our body, not lost in thought, not always looking to yesterday or tomorrow, not somewhere else on our spaceship because our body feels so unsafe. We have to learn how to attune to our bodies so that we can discover how unsafe our body actually is in terms of that tension, that heart rate, everything we talked about earlier. So that then we can be more grounded and present in our bodies. So that then we can learn and teach and model how to make room and space for those emotional expressions, how to begin to let out and express a little more sadness, a little more anger and actually model for our children how to have emotions in a grounded, responsive way. Because when we don't do that, all of our nervous systems are operating outside of our awareness.

Like we were talking about earlier. We're always driven to feel safe, to always assess the environment around us to see if it's safe or if it's threatening. We're always doing that outside of our own awareness. And one of the major pieces of information that we're picking up on is the energetic state of the other humans around us is whether or not they're responding or reacting to something stressful in the environment. I mean, a really compsilly example is many of us have probably been on an airplane and there might be some turbulence and typically the first thing we do is we look around to see if anyone else worries that this plane is going to go down. And if everyone else around us looks more or less calm, if we're sensing that there's not anything of

alert, we might calm just because we're seeing and sensing the calmness around us. Obviously it's going to go much different if we're looking around and people are screaming, yelling and they're in an amplified or activated state, we're probably going to feel much less calm. And that's a really simple silly example but that's what's happening all of the time with our nervous systems.

So even if you're telling your child that it's safe, safe, tell me whatever is going on. I'm open, I'm here, and your nervous system is activated because you don't feel safe, because you're nervous about what your child is going to say, because you're having a reaction to what you're hearing about your child's bad day. Because it's maybe bringing you back to that same similar bad day on the playground when you were a child. Whatever it is, you might be saying one thing and your nervous system is sending out a completely different message to your child. Your nervous system is telling your child that this actually isn't a safe moment, that you don't feel kind of grounded in what you're hearing and receiving and they might not likely then share that with you.

So again, going into them, what we do as parents, we need to attune to ourselves. We need to navigate how safe our body actually feels. We need to be honest with ourselves in terms of our ability to tolerate or regulate our emotions. And I'll again be the first to say that there are still so many moments where I regress into those childlike behaviors, right? I'm 40 years old now and it doesn't go away. So there is no shame in those moments. But that honesty will then allow us to begin to make new choices, to learn maybe how to step away if we do need a moment to regulate, to do some deep belly breathing, to ground our attention and bring our self back into our body. So that when we do go and approach our child, assuming of course that they're safe in those moments, safely contained, we're in a much more grounded, safe state, not only in words, but in action. Our body feels safer for them.

So again, this is why I continue to reiterate how important these choices are, this embodiment of safety because so many well intentioned parents are saying the right things, but because again, their own trauma, their lack of stress resources or ability to tolerate and cope with these stressful moments, their body is saying something different.

Katie: Yeah, I'm so glad you brought that up. And what I think helped me realize this initially was when I was holding my newborns and they felt safe because I was holding them. And maybe other parents have had this experience as well where it's like you're holding them and it's like parasympathetic just washes over your body. And now your nervous system feels calm and safe because you've helped your baby feel calm and safe. And you can kind of almost feel like I likened it to almost like if you sing a note and someone else sings the same note and you resonate that's happening with your nervous systems.

And I realized that feeling of safety. If I can just show up for my kids when I can in that calmness that's 80% of the way toward helping them and it tends to I think even the tantrums are the big expressions of emotion. They're able to process them more quickly if I'm not giving them that escalation back, which of course is a journey and I'm by no means even remotely perfect at it. But I feel like if I like to your point can just be more honest and more present as a journey. That does help them so much. It very noticeably helps them.

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And I would say also it seems like if we can approach our kids with curiosity of who their authentic selves are rather than a projection of who we're trying to make them, it seems like they feel safer in expressing who they actually are. And the irony there is if we do the same thing maybe for ourselves of showing up with just curiosity instead of judgment, that seems like a big step into finding out who we authentically are as well.

Dr. Nicole: Yeah, I mean curiosity. I also want to go back to these moments of explosion, of regression and first and foremost honor how that's going to be a natural part of what happens. We don't immediately know how to deal with our emotions if we never actually gone through the daily actions of dealing with our emotions. So just like I was sharing and again I see this most frequently in my interpersonal relationships, I do have those

moments of reactivity. I do have those moments of shutdown or any version in between of those more developmentally immature ways of dealing with my emotions. I regress, I go back in time.

So sharing that to say that that is going to be part of this journey of change. There's going to be moments where you are screaming and yelling and you catch yourself mid scream and yell or somewhere after the fact and you feel shameful or you do shut down with your children in the room or visible or in a moment with them that shutdown might happen. So I want to extend the grace and compassion and first kind of squash any expectations that you listen to a podcast like this, you know what to do differently and suddenly you begin to do differently because again that bringing it full circle. We don't want to we don't want to change. There's a felt familiarity and safety in those old habits even if it's not locked to those old habits.

The most valuable thing I think that we can give our children in those moments is acknowledging it are those moments of repair where we now teach and model personal responsibility, where we acknowledge that you know what, it wasn't okay to scream and yell at you. I'm upset. My upset is for me to deal with and yelling at another person or throwing something, whatever it is that we do in those explosive moments or those shut down moments, we can acknowledge that that is of no fault of our children's own, right? And that wasn't appropriate. And there are other ways to deal with our emotions.

And again, a lot of us, I think we don't have those conversations because we feel shameful. We feel like we have to put up this front or that our children aren't aware. Children are so aware of what's going on and they are going to personalize they are going to make a meaning that they did something wrong in those moments unless you give them language to interpret it otherwise. So I could actually say there's so much value in the moments where we do fall back into those old habits because what we're teaching is personal responsibility and we're teaching repair, we're teaching conflict. That happens. And those moments that we'll always need to have, whether it's with our children, our family members later in life, our children's romantic partners, where we do need to come back to that table, talk about what happened, acknowledge the roles and the ways that we reacted that we might want to do differently next time.

So I just wanted to highlight that because I think, again, we set up this expectation that we should be able to have this new awareness, integrate it, and suddenly be different. And that's just not how it works. We're always going to go back to those old explosive moments and they can actually be so valuable teaching moments, modeling moments for our children of what to do once we say or do or act in a way that is hurtful. And in those moments to go back to now curiosity, we can feel less shameful about ourselves, right? We can begin to explore other ways for us to just focusing on the emotional piece of this for a minute, other ways to deal with emotions.

Because I think something that commonly happens is parents really naturally assume the similarity in their children, right? They might look the same. You might see certain aspects of their way of being very early on in life. And now you're like, oh, they're just like me. So now, before we're paused and we curiously ask, well, how do you experience this? What are you thinking in this moment? What are your ideas about this? What are you feeling in this moment? How does it feel when you do this, when you're having that feeling, does that feel

better or worse? And again, I'm just giving some very simplistic examples of those curiosity prompts questions we could begin to ask. Instead of doing that, though, what we often do really naturally is we fill it in, oh, well, if I feel this way, you must feel this way. And if this makes me feel better, that must make you feel better, right? We kind of blur that boundary of difference. And to speak to your point, likely that's been done to us and we're doing that in our own relationship.

So if we can begin to see those moments where we don't give ourselves space to get curious about our natural differences, about what makes me uniquely me and what makes you uniquely you, then we're probably going to struggle in those moments creating that space for our children but that's what we want to do. That's how we truly become interdependent which is we have that space for difference, we have the space to be uniquely authentically who we are. And then when we join together and we don't have to lose aspects of our authenticity suppress parts of ourselves, be someone else. Now when we join together in relationship like we're wired to do, we become even stronger. We become even more collaborative. We become a whole system that's again, I'm going to say the most cliché thing that's stronger than the sum of its parts. But that's what happens when we're able to be uniquely us, when we have the space and safety.

And for a lot of us again, that begins with creating the space, the groundedness and that curiosity, that exploration where some of us might be waking up as parents in our later decades and not yet know who we are. We don't have to shame that that's a result of our habits and patterns. It's not because of something inherently wrong with us and now that we're conscious of that we can create that new space, those new limits, that new way to regulate our nervous system again bringing this whole circle so that we can then get curious about who it is that we really are. So that we can then model that and create that same space in all of our relationships with children, with other peers, with our romantic partners or with whomever.

Katie: Yeah, I think that's such an important thing and I think I've experienced that as well with my kids is in those moments where we might lose our temper or things don't go how we think they're going to go in our head when we are regulated. The repair after that actually I think makes a stronger relationship in the long term like you're saying and also in adult relationships that is also the case. It's obviously not that they're always going to go perfectly but it's how we then repair and build after can actually strengthen them versus break them down.

And it seems like the big first step of this. The recurring theme is obviously learning to create that safety and connection within ourselves first. And that, I would think you make a very solid case in the book for it being the most important gift we can give to our kids as well, is to do that process for ourselves and definitely cannot recommend your book highly enough. For all of you guys listening start there because there's so much more than we can cover in an hour and it walks you through and really hold your hand as you start to go on that journey which I think is amazing.

Are there any other outward tools that come to mind because we've talked about how so many of our own patterns as adults come from our inner child and we're repatterning things that happened in our childhood. So as parents, I think often, like, how awesome would it be if I could help my kids not have to sort of repattern if I

could give them great patterns from the beginning. And of course, not that it will always happen perfectly, but are there things we can do in moments of calm that are good languaging or movement or patterns that we can give them and or in those flare ups when they're having big emotions? Are there ways that we can show up that help them build out a strong emotional foundation?

Dr. Nicole: Yeah, I think to be most impactful in those moments of flare up. I believe the journey to that begins in consistent choices that we can build in and model for our children in terms of their daily habits. And I'm sure by this point in the conversation, listeners probably won't be surprised that what I'm going to be referencing here are nervous system wellness. Things that we can model and teach for our children. Daily habits that we can create that might not be present in our lives right now that will help their nervous systems access that grounded, flexible place where they can deal with more and more stress of their day without losing it, without flying off the handle, without shutting down, with having that stress resilience.

And things that come to mind are nutritional habits. What is it that you're eating? What is it that you're feeding your children, making sure that to the best of your access, of course, you're giving them whole foods. You're making sure that their nervous system, which is part of the physiological body, is getting the raw materials or the nutrients that it needs. And something that I witnessed very early on in my development in my childhood was outside of dinner. There was a lot of lacking in terms of the nutritional content of the food I was eating, from very sugary type items throughout the day to things that just didn't have the calories that my nervous system needed to function. So nutritional changes are a great way to begin to, for ourselves, include a model for our children, ways to eat so that their body can get the nutrients it needs.

Sleep is another very important foundational area that I think most of us humans don't get much of. We can watch our own sleep habits, making sure that we're getting into bed at a time that will allow us the number of hours that we need for our body to fall into that rested state. And if we're not committing to an earlier bedtime so that we can do that, modeling that for our children. Again, another area that in my childhood, I didn't have a bedtime. I was allowed to go to bed whenever it was that we all went to bed, which was usually quite late somewhere after the 11:00 p.m. news and the late show that happened after that. And then I was required to be up at what, 6am for school the next day, not getting again those sleep hours that I need. So making sure that nutrition, making sure that sleep is happening, those are daily commitments that we can make for our children, model for our children.

Because what we're doing in those moments is helping their nervous system have those rested moments, helping their nervous system have the nutrients that it needs so that then they can tolerate more and more stress. So that then those explosive moments begin to happen less frequently because their nervous system is healthier, it's more flexible and it's more able to deal with the stress or the emotional experience of life.

Katie: I love that. And I know that there's so much more in the book than we can go into, like I said here. So definitely encourage you guys to get that and go on the journey yourself. I also want to just briefly touch on your own journey in this because for people who may not already be familiar with your work, I know a lot of people will be. You were kind of more in the traditional therapy world before and then you kind of went on

your own journey that led to this journey that you're now hoping so many other people on. So if you don't mind sharing a little bit of the details of your personal journey, I would love to hear that story.

Dr. Nicole: Yeah. So I, was traditionally training. There was actually a moment in time where I thought I was going to be a psychoanalyst. Which for those of you who have ever heard of Freud and the Couch, when we talk about talk therapy, that's it to an extreme with this idea that you come, you lay in a room, you free associate or essentially you just talk about what's going on in your life with this idea that over time you can gain awareness. We've kind of revisited that word and ultimately relieve your suffering or create change.

And as I was sharing hearing moment week after week, time and time again, seeing in my life all of these moments where we're stuck, I really began to see the importance of first and foremost understanding why we're stuck, which I think we've already revisited. And then that second step of that change, I can become aware, I can become conscious very much. The traditional model of psychotherapy is based in that increasing self awareness, right? Learning the information. Yet what I was continuing to have a hard time doing and seeing in my clients and in my own personal life was building that bridge of utilizing that information, integrating it to actually create change. So seeing that similar stuckness in myself and beginning to understand the body, the role of the body, the role of the nervous system. The fact that even these things that we believed were so connected to our genetics so early on in life are actually changeable based on our lifestyle decisions really opened up a door for me.

So I began then in my own life, just like we've been talking about, to integrate these daily changes, like slowly over time, building these different foundations, first of consciousness, because one of the first things I realized was I was nowhere present when I would tune in to where my attention was. Like we were talking about putting it on your body, notice your nervous system. My mind was, I was so shut down. I was such in a state of shutdown from all of that stress that I had accumulated throughout life, from none of the resources to deal with it, from all of those lifestyle habits. I mean, at a point I spent a decade of my life in New York City with the noises, with the lack of sleep, with the stress around me not able to deal with it. I completely shut down. My consciousness went into a state of dissociation, as it's called, or my spaceship that I referenced earlier.

So I spent a lot of time building that foundational conscious reconnection to my body, building using those daily tools of nutrition, of sleep, of movement, of stretching. I noticed all of the tension that my muscles had been holding for decades. And again, I'm laboring this point because a lot of us are shut down in our consciousness state. We do need to create and stay committed. And it takes time to make those daily choices so that my body can feel safer and safer for me to be able even to explore the different emotions, right? For me to even understand what's happening with my inner child. Some of us, like myself, are so shut down because we've been so overwhelmed for such a long time, that listening to a podcast like this is great. These tools are great, though. Time and commitment and the daily practice of maybe just committing to one small daily promise in one of these areas, maybe just tuning into how conscious or unconscious you are throughout the day, will be the greatest foundation you can build.

And again, this is where I'm speaking to because I think a lot of us, we set up these unrealistic expectations. We hear a podcast like this. I mean, we've already talked about a whole handful of tools, whether or not you even decide to buy the workbook or not. There's a lot to get started on now. And a lot of us set ourselves up to fail because our subconscious won't like any version of newness like we talked about in the beginning. And we set ourselves up to fail when we now decide we're going to do five new things that Dr. Nicole said starting tomorrow. That's just too completely overwhelming for likely an already overwhelmed system.

So for me, it was the same. Learning how to stay committed to that daily consciousness practice until I learned how to feel my body. Then staying committed to all of those different practices, learning how to allow my nervous system to be more calm and grounded. Then began to translate to my real life, to those moments where I was having that reactivity, beginning to get a little more grounding on creating the change. And all of it is where I still am on my journey. I mean, like I was sharing, there's still very many moments where I regress. I go back into those childlike stories, those childlike reactions, more often than not in my relationships. And similarly to the suggestion I gave all of you, staying grounded in grace and compassion, understanding where they came from and staying committed to continuing to create that space for those new choices.

Katie: I love it. And I think I'll also tie in that tip for kids as well, especially if they're are having a big emotional moment. I learned that actually in therapy was being asked like where are you feeling that in your body? And like you at first I was like, what are you talking about? I'm not feeling it in my body. What are you talking about? And I was like when I started to understand that, like you said, it's a habit, it's a practice. But I was like, oh, this is the thing I bet kids are more in tune with than I am. And so when they would be having big emotions, I would ask them, where are you feeling this in your body right now? What does it feel like? Can you describe it to me? What color or is it?

And I found that it also helps take them out of the intensity of the emotional experience and tune back into their body, which also outwardly helps kind of calm the mood in the house. But I thought that was a really cool way to start to help them have that awareness and maybe start to do it for themselves. And I've now back to the modeling point. I've seen my youngest, when her sister was upset go where are you feeling that in your body? And she would say to her, she'd be really mad and ask. Is that true? Does that feel true? And they start to do it themselves, which I love.

But I also love your work because to your point, so much of this, like we talked about in the beginning, is in the subconscious. And while I think traditional therapy is awesome, it often doesn't get to that subconscious part. And even if it does, it doesn't necessarily, like you said, create that change overnight like we hope it will. Whereas these daily habits help us over time to build the new patterns that actually let us access those subconscious things that we're just doing habitually. And I say on this podcast so often we are each our own primary health care provider and the responsibility lies with us. And I think you are the perfect teacher for also realizing we are each our own primary mental health care provider. And while hopefully, if we need it, we can find good partners in that journey, at the end of the day, we're the ones doing the daily activities and patterns and habits that lead to our mental health. And so that actually gives us tremendous ability and responsibility to actually start to make those small changes.

I also really love that you keep bringing it back to, it does take time. This is not going to be an overnight paradigm shift that you never have to work on again. It's a journey for a reason. But I also love that you now have this workbook which even for people who maybe don't have access to good forms of therapy or in their area, it's just something we can all do at home that's accessible to everyone. I know you also have an amazing community online that people can so I'll put links to all of those things in the show notes for you guys listening while you're on the go. But a couple last questions I love to ask for the end of interviews. The first being other than your own. If there's a book or a number of books that have profoundly influenced your life and if so, what they are and why.

Dr. Nicole: I think one of the most profound influences and again, I met this book when I was in that really low disempowered place was *The Biology of Belief* by Dr. Bruce Lipton, who for me really introduced to the concept of epigenetics, that reality that I referenced earlier, that we have genetic components, there's DNA. We are impacted kind of on a more intrinsic level. And then there's all of the environmental choices and the lifestyle choices. So for me, coming from that traditional system who very much felt like there were certain aspects of me, my anxiety included, that were just inborn, they were genetic. I saw similar in my family around me. Why would I believe otherwise? And then I couldn't even create the possibility or opportunity for change.

So reading that book was really groundbreaking because I am a scientist at heart. There is a desire in me always to see the data, to see it, understand it physiologically, which is often why I do share the underlying physiology and why we just spent this entire conversation kind of grounding all of these concepts on the nervous system in particular, because I do think that's realistic. It's part of our human experience. Though, for me, that was such an incredibly important shift was that there are other choices that we can make and that I can begin to make to create the possibility to feel different, to be different, to think different. For me, he was such a gift in being the messenger through that particular book.

Katie: I love it. I will link to that in the show notes as well, if you guys want to check it out. And lastly, any parting advice for the listeners today that could build on something we've already talked about or be entirely unrelated?

Dr. Nicole: I think I like to end with acknowledging everyone that tunes in with, yourself included, Katie, for putting out all this information, for having these conversations, and for everyone who chose to hit play on this particular episode here today. I like to always celebrate those choices that we're making because I know, again, first hand experience, everything we've been talking about. Change is difficult. New ideas are challenging to our familiar. So putting yourself in front of or putting what for some of you might be new concepts in your ears, is something to be celebrated.

And I also want to acknowledge how, while your life is, more often than not, probably at this point, an accumulation of your habits, I do want to throw out, acknowledge, suggest, or maybe affirm the possibility that many of you might already have been planted hearing this conversation that, that's not who you are,

right? Our habits don't make us or kind of aren't intrinsically connected to anything about who we are inside that they are likely adaptations from your earliest environments, your earliest experiences. So saying that to say that change can happen, change is incredibly, incredibly possible. And change begins quite often. As you listen to new information, you become conscious of where your start point is not shaming yourself. Just like you beautifully said a couple of minutes ago, just seeing things as they are that allows you to create the possibility for a future that's a bit different than the past.

Katie: I love it. I think that's a perfect place to wrap up for today. But it has been such an honor to finally get to chat with you on this podcast. I'm so grateful for the work that you're doing in the world. For you guys listening, I highly encourage you to check out all of her work online as well as the workbook really amazing resources. But Dr. Nicole, thank you so much for being here today.

Dr. Nicole: Thank you so much for having me, Katie.

Katie: And thanks, as always, to all of you for listening and sharing your most valuable resources, your time, your energy and your attention with us today. We're both so grateful that you did, and I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of The Wellness Mama Podcast.

If you're enjoying these interviews, would you please take two minutes to leave a rating or review on iTunes for me? Doing this helps more people to find the podcast, which means even more moms and families could benefit from the information. I really appreciate your time, and thanks as always for listening.