



Episode #208

Nicole Tetreault PhD on Decoding Trauma & Social Isolation in Differently Wired Kids in the Time of COVID-19

May 12, 2020

Debbie: Hey, Nicole, welcome to the podcast.

Nicole: Hi, Debbie.

Debbie: This is gonna be fun. I feel like this is a long time coming because we met...was it a year ago when we met at Bridges Academy? It seems like forever ago...

Nicole: Close to it, close to it, although it seems like we've known each other all our lives.

Debbie: Yes, I would agree with that 100%. But you're doing so much fascinating work and you've been super busy writing a book. So thank you for making time for us for this conversation today. And for those listeners who aren't familiar with your work, I've already read your topline, professional bio, but I always like to have guests introduce themselves and tell us a little bit about their why for the work that they do.

Nicole: Yeah, so my background is training in neuroscience and in particular, I studied in grad school, neurodevelopment in neurodegenerative disorders, specifically studying autism. And after I left grad school, I really kind of found this place where I wanted to translate science and make neuroscience really useful for people in their everyday lives. And in the process, what I found out was my son was in about third grade and he was identified gifted, and all of a sudden the world of gifted and twice exceptionality really came into focus in my life and I recentered my work really to understand what it is to be neurodiverse, what it is to be twice exceptional and kind of understand it from a brain and body perspective to give us kind of more accurate and positive language around really being able to advocate for it.

Debbie: And so tell me about the kind of things that you're working on right now. Because again, I feel you and I went back and forth on topics and there were so many directions that we could have gone in, but where is your sweet spot in terms of the professional work you're doing at this moment?

Nicole: Well, my professional work really I feel centers on trying to really understand brain and body living and being a neurodiverse person, all the way from kind of understanding how a nervous system can be different, allowing for different emotionality and really focusing on the asynchrony that we see in this population, you know, as a whole, in really trying to understand the brain science, the physiology behind why we see these asynchronous and to really open up through interviews and storytelling of people of their experiences, and weaving the science through to kind of lend space for a greater understanding.

Debbie: Yeah, so, so fascinating to me. And as we're recording this, I don't even know where we are at this point in the COVID-19 pandemic. You know, I would love to say we're almost at the end of it, but probably not. So we wanted to kind of spin this conversation to really, you know, certainly it will have broader applications.

But within this time, there's a lot going on for our differently wired kids. And it's been really interesting and I'd be curious to hear what you're hearing in the community. I'm hearing all kinds of things about you know, some kids who actually seem to be really enjoying this time, right? Being at home and feeling, on the surface or maybe externally, they seem to be less stressed or less anxious. And then there are so many parents I'm hearing from who are having the complete opposite reaction in their kids. And so I'm wondering what you're seeing, what you're noticing, maybe in your own family or with other people that you're in connection with, what kind of things we might be seeing going on with our atypical kids?

Nicole: Yeah, well, so I think that there's, you know, a couple of things to think about, um, if you have a differently wired kid, that really tends to be self-directed, internal, very introspective, and kind of more of an introvert. This experience you know, you know, when I was talking to a couple people the other day they said, you know, my kid's introverted so they're having the time of their life, and really they're not kind of going in, or on the surface, appearing in that stress state. Where you could have other kids that, like you're saying, are on the spectrum, really that higher level of emotionality, where you know, even getting them in their normal routines can even be that much more challenging. For example, like my son, he's a pretty outgoing kind of kid. He runs on a cross country team. But for him going outside is just not happening. And you know, me, I walk every day, but paying attention to basically each of our nervous systems responses. And I think that's what's really the most important thing is that each of us has our own nervous system response to information like this and we're going to kind of cycle through it. You know, we know people fall in the categories when they experience stress, going into fight, flight, freeze and flop. And all four of those actually look very different and manifest very different in the body. When you have a fighter and a flighter, those are people who are going to maybe perhaps even have more circling ruminating thoughts. And we do know, for example, in higher IQ individuals that they tend to ruminate more often. And so if you kind of already have that anxiety in overdrive, you can get those repeated thoughts and get a lot of the repeated behaviors where they need to release that storage of energy that they're experiencing. So exercise is one way to kind of help get that out. Another thing is, you know, when you have your freezers and your floppers, those are going to be people who really are gonna flop over and you know, not be capable to do much. And their kind of nervous system is inundated and they get this surge of neuro chemicals which kind of just exhausts their entire body. And so we know that in these different kinds of modes, even your kid who may be you know, in that sympathetic overdrive seeming very active may all of a sudden flop over and have a tantrum right away, because their system just needs that release of the cry; it needs that release of the tears. And so the other thing that I really want to point out is when we already are talking about our differently wired kids, we have to remember too that in general, their nervous systems tend to be primed at a higher setting, you know, where their nervous system in general to lights and artificial things tends to, you know, get activated and cause stress. So even your kid who's at home, and maybe they're not in the classroom setting, and they're not directly dealing with fluorescent lights, that even that can be reducing their stress states. And so there's a lot of different pieces to notice, to

really understand where the origin of that overdrive in the stress response would be happening.

Debbie: Yeah, it does seem, you know, as you're talking, I just like imagining all of us out here listening and just feeling like we need to just get so curious about what's happening with our child because it also may change from moment to moment and from day to day. I mean, you and I were talking before I hit record, just for us personally, that we are going through our own kind of ups and downs. And I think it's really tricky to stay attuned to our kids' experience right now because you know, it may look different than what we expect. And it may change so drastically from day to day.

Nicole: Yeah, and I think the point is, it could change from minute to minute. You know, sometimes we can even get a new piece of information about COVID-19 that can send our mind in this. Oh my gosh, you know, like, a week ago, we got in California that, okay, May 15, businesses still need to remain closed. And for me, I said, Okay. Other people said, Oh, God, when is this over? And it could send you in this gloom and doom and a kind of a grief. You know, we're talking a lot about anxiety, but there's a lot of grief and loss that people are experiencing at this time, too. And that can really manifest in more symptoms of situational depression. You know, where a lot of things are canceled...high school graduations are, and you know things that people were looking forward to. And so one thing that I think that's really important to pay attention to, you know, because I do teach meditation and mindfulness is that what we know is when we can at least identify what our narrative around our experience, like I'm fearful, and you can just experience, Okay, I'm in fear right now. And acknowledging that and naming it and then identifying what's behind that emotion. What's the narrative? What are you afraid of? I'm afraid of my family members, my community members, the whole world, you know, encountering this challenging all the loss that we're experiencing collectively, you know, and help these kids as well as ourselves better identify what the moment to moment experiences and really have compassion for it. You know, have compassion that when somebody says, I need 15 minutes of quiet time, you know, I think the other thing that we're kind of forgetting about is that so much we're in very close quarters with our housemates and our family members. And so some of us who are introverts tend to have more alone time and there is no talking. And so there's this bizarre kind of yin and yang that you're going between feeling socially isolated, but also feeling like there's no alone time. And even having awareness of that experience, you know, and all the uncertainty that's up ahead.

Debbie: It's so complicated, and I love that you use the word grieving. I feel like I just read an article in the last day or two about that topic that actually what we're feeling is grief right now. And I think it's important to acknowledge that and you mentioned situational depression. And that is something that I think about too. And I'm just wondering before we move on, because there's so many other things I know we want to touch upon, but even situational depression, I don't know anything about that. Is that the kind of thing that when things resume to some semblance of normalcy, that depression ends or does situational depression tend to need some sort of formal intervention?

Nicole: Well, I think that situational depression really happens as an experience that happens, something that's outside of yourself. And so, this pandemic is something that's outside of our control, standard depression, and those feelings, you know, tend to begin with internal experiences. So situational depression is brought on by an experience that's happening that's circumstantial, that's out of somebody's control. And the idea is that when that situation changes, the feelings of depression will lift. Although you know depression is depression, and if your child or any person is experiencing it, by all means get support in any possible way, whether that's through cognitive therapies, whether it's through, you know, talk therapy, reaching out to family members and friends. James Webb was one of my mentors in this gifted community. And, you know, I wrote an article about depression and he called me up. He said, Nikki, I'm worried about you, you wrote this article. Sometimes when you write about stuff you're working on, you know, you're dealing with it, I want to check in and make sure you're okay. That I said, thanks for calling. I said, Yeah, it was in response to a grieving process. And I said, so what's the difference? If you know somebody were to talk to you clinically versus talking to you as a friend, he said the deal is, his therapists are friends. And you know, that's the biggest thing is if you feel anybody in your family is experiencing that, helping them, identify and talk with them and find people that they trust and feel safe with to express what they're going through. That's really the biggest step.

Debbie: Thank you for that. I want to touch upon this idea of trauma as well. I've been thinking about this a lot. Again, I'm probably reading too many things and listening to too many podcasts at the moment about what's happening from all angles. I'm so curious about the impact of this. And I've read things about this being the defining moment for our generation, but certainly that this is going to change kids and I wonder if you could speak to about the relationship between trauma and what our kids are experiencing. I don't even really know how to define trauma, but maybe you could talk us through that.

Nicole: Yeah. So really, you know, when we talk about trauma, trauma is really in response to an experience that our body takes on, where we feel that our safety is threatened. And when we take on trauma, it really activates circuitry in our brain that's related to the stress and anxiety circuitry, where it changes where an individual is unable to really respond to their environment in a timely manner. And so a lot of what I talked about earlier when individuals experiencing trauma, you know, they can either seem hyper vigilant, you know, they can really have strong behaviors, have a lot of reactivity hyperactivity, or you could have trauma where somebody becomes kind of dissociated. And they're kind of withdrawn from their environment. And I think with a pandemic, when you think about this, we know, in our particular lifetime, we haven't dealt with anything like this, but it is closest when you think about trauma, of dealing with war, right? Where there are going to be scars that need to be healed over time. And I think that the thing about trauma is you don't know per se when an individual is experiencing it, how it's going to manifest over time. And I think that there are so many unknowns about this pandemic that we're really in that we don't know how it's going to shift. You know, the mind and body reaction and how when a pandemic

and event can happen like this, you can also have a shift, a shift where people move into a higher awareness. And they kind of move into a way and awakening where they can kind of rise to challenge and recognize that they can move through this. And so I think, you know, the effects of trauma, we can't totally pinpoint how long it's going to last or or what exactly, it's going to shift, you know, in the psyche long term.

Debbie: And what you were talking about earlier is that it's important that we pay attention to and identify what our narrative is, is that, you know, I would think that that's important to do kind of all along as a way to, as much as possible, help our kids process and make sense of what's happening as it's happening. Is that work of helping them identify the narrative, does that help potentially with that process?

Nicole: Yeah, well, I think there's a couple of things. So when an individual's feeling trauma, you know, it's really their safety is threatened. And when you can help a child and even yourself kind of ground into your experience and recognize and identify, okay, what part of this experience do I feel is unsafe for me, and you can shift your narrative that okay, well, if I stay inside today, and I follow shelter in place, I follow, you know, social distancing, that in itself, you know, can rewire you to a place of safety. And when it comes down to trauma, we know that, for example, that when children experience adversity, you know, really adverse trauma in their childhood throughout their lifetime, you know, they can have challenges later in life where it can affect, you know, their confidence, it can affect their ability to think soundly. And we know that, for example, when the brain is in sort of a trauma circuitry that your higher order thinking is offline. So being able to shift that narrative is just shut down. So allowing your child and kind of redirecting their mind into safety and being able to identify with their experience that's, that's the key point where this can transition into a place of challenge but a place of information and, and redirection rather than a place of challenge and pain.

Debbie: Right. And, you know, I just recently interviewed Tina Paine Bryson for the show about her book *The Power of Showing Up*. But we spent actually quite a bit of time also talking about holding space for our kids as they process you know what they're experiencing right now. And so as you're talking about this, it seems like that is part of this is being empathetic, listening without judgment and trying to just be curious and helping them get curious about what's happening for them and what their experience is.

Nicole: Yes. And I was just in a class with Tara Brach yesterday, and I loved this piece of information she shared and she said, What it is, is you go to your edge, and you go to that edge of what that experience is and then you soften, and then you soften. And I think when you can say this is challenging, you know, I can't go outside. I miss my friends. I really do. And then you can soften and have compassion for it. That's where that true transformation happens with that mind body suffering piece of it.

Debbie: That's beautiful. You just mentioned friendships. Let's talk about our differently wired kids and what's happening socially. So these are kids who may already be struggling making social connections. They may feel isolated already. We're feeling that way. And now we're in this strange world of social distancing and not getting to be with people in person and how strange that feels. Can you talk about what that you know might be doing to our kids who were already feeling isolated.

Nicole: Yeah. So I mean, what we do know that happens in the brain in particular, when people do feel socially isolated, they experience pain in their brain just as you would physical pain and activates the same area, dorsal our prefrontal cortex, and when a kid is experiencing that they are suffering. And so what's really key for kids who are feeling that social isolation is helping them work with ways that they can connect with these different platforms of Skype and Zoom and getting on chats. Even, you know, collectively playing video games. You know, I was really kind of anti video games before this with my son being a scientist and, you know, worried about addiction. And, you know, it's one way that he talks to his friends is that they collectively play Animal Crossings together. And in the first two weeks, he wasn't as social on the online platforms. And one night, we let him call his friends, and I hadn't heard him laugh that way in weeks. And it was a really huge awakening that even if, you know, you have kids that are younger, you know, four and five, you know, try to coordinate with parents to have video calls, you know, with one another in our neighborhood locally. For all the kids around, we put teddy bears in our windows to give them a game. And so it's definitely for these kids that are feeling that I'm helping them find avenues where they can get that connection, I think is really important. And I do advocate, you know, connecting with other parents, you know, I mean, you have with these Tilt Parenting groups, you know, even getting the Tilt parent groups and getting kid groups together, where they could just wave to each other and and i think it releases a little bit that loneliness.

Debbie: Yeah, I'm just hearing you say that you haven't heard your son laugh like that. I mean, that really gets me. That's just something I'm really thinking a lot about here is, you know, have an only child and feels so bad for this fifteen year old kid who's like, Oh my gosh, you two again? every night at dinner. And I was so grateful that last week, two afternoons he spent hours co playing a game with a friend out in Seattle and they just had a blast. I was like, I'll feed you dinner in your room. I'll do whatever... you just keep going. You just have it this time because you need it. And it injected a little lightness into our world for those days. That's awesome. So you know, I know that you do so much and you know you're a meditation teacher and you know that you have a lot of strategies and tools to help people with their nervous system responses, and you just shared some great ideas about how to help with this sense of social isolation. What would you say are some of the most critical things that we could be doing right now to take care of ourselves, our mental well being and help our kids with their well being as at this time?

Nicole: Yeah. So, you know, you talked about earlier how this experience that we're in is traumatic, and you know, one of the really key things to get you out of that

responsive and reactive brain is to identify resources. And a resource is really just a very simple, healthy thing that gives you security and safety. You know, whether your kid is a kid that loves to read, helping them, you know, get books online, if obviously, we're not going to libraries, but there's a lot of online platforms where you can get books on. You know, if your kid really needs to connect with friends, one exercise I recommend is just to sit down as a family collectively and write down what are 10 things that allow you that security and safety. You know, like, for me, it's taking a walk or a bath, in being able to know what your kids are, because then you can offer it as a resource when they are struggling. You could say, why don't you put that weighted blanket on, you know, and just lay down and put relaxing music on if that's one way to calm them. Identifying resources is a really powerful tool. And I also think that, you know, meditation is really tricky in the sense that guided meditation is really what I put forward and that's really using mindfulness types of practices where it's really kind of re centering and getting in that breath. And now if you have a kid who's highly active, you kind of let them walk around and do a breathing exercise, just walking, you know, but really three deep breaths allows you to recenter your nervous system. And I think also really, you know, one major thing is just having compassion and holding space for these influx of emotions and narratives and fears that may arise, you know, and really providing comfort and ease to it, you know, also recognizing physically when we're experiencing physical pain, that those physical pain is a signal. So where can you introduce comfort and ease into your body in your daily life where it doesn't go into pain, and inflammation.

Debbie: Those are great strategies. And I also just want to have listeners check out your website. You did a fantastic blog pretty early on in this pandemic called Cultivating a Calm Amidst a Storm. And it also has a lot of wonderful things to just think about just to create more calm in your life. So I'll share that in the show notes pages listeners, definitely go have a look at that. And I want to hear before we say goodbye about your forthcoming book. But before you share that, is there anything else and we kind of jumped all over the place, but I feel like there's so many wonderful takeaways, is there anything that we didn't touch upon that you would want to make sure listeners hear before we say goodbye?

Nicole: One final thing is to just really go back in the space that we're dealing with, like a whole new world normal, you know, and having a differently wired kid, you're already used to that and you're equipped. And you have so many skills and resources and creative thinking that this is something that as a culture and a society and as a world, we will and are going to get through, you know, through accurate science and all the work the community is doing and, and we will get through this. It's a transient moment, and it's challenging, but we will become stronger and better from this.

Debbie: That's wonderful. Thank you for that very comforting to hear, especially from a neuroscientist because you know, anything you say I'm totally on board with. And so I know that you are working on a new book, it's called Insight Into a Bright Mind. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

- Nicole: Yeah, um, so Insight Into a Bright Mind is really kind of personal stories and interviews with the neuroscience behind really creative and divergent thinking, and it really aims to change our life language around what you so accurately did in your book with Differently Wired. It's sort of a partner in the sense to really be able to advocate and have positive language and kind of new light of what it is to be neuro diverse. And to really open up our eyes is a culture of the power in beauty of what it is to be twice exceptional or even just gifted. And so that's kind of really the main thing.
- Debbie: So exciting. And I hope that you will come back on the show when that book comes out so we can have a conversation about it. I'm really excited about it.
- Nicole: Thank you. Thank you. Well, I love your book. It's one of my go to so thank you.
- Debbie: Awesome. Thank you. And before we say goodbye, can you just let listeners know where the best places are to engage with you on your website or any social media places you like to hang out on?
- Nicole: Yeah, my website is nicoletetreault.com and on Instagram and Twitter I'm @awesomeneuro so I like to share really good articles and offerings for gifted folks that are in the community. And I also have a nonprofit Beyond the Cell that aims to teach meditation, neuroscience and expressive writing to incarcerated and post-incarcerated women. So if that's one of your passion projects as well, we welcome you to that site as well.
- Debbie: You do so many good things in the world. Thank you so much for all of this today. I think this is going to be just a really useful and comforting conversation for our listeners. And I just really appreciate it and having the chance to connect with you today. Thank you.
- Nicole: Thank you for the opportunity. It's always a pleasure.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Dr. Nicole Tetreault's website](#)
- [Beyond the Cell](#)
- [Nicole's author site on Gifted Unlimited Publishing](#)
- [Cultivating Calm Amidst a Storm \(blog post\)](#)
- [Tara Brach](#)
- [Bridges Academy](#)