

EPISODE 1585

[00:00:00]

FT: So Money episode 1585, exploring the ADHD brain with Nicole Symcox, licensed psychotherapist.

***NS:** Some of the most brilliant entrepreneurs have ADHD for this reason because the resiliency that has to be created in order to exist, you know, like to have to fail every day and then get yourself back up and be like, 'It's going to be a new day. I'm going to try something different.' You know, these are all positive things about ADHD, I think."*

[INTRO]

[00:00:55]

FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. Today's episode holds a special place in my heart, as a parent navigating the unique challenges of raising a child with ADHD. My husband and I have searched far and wide for insights and understanding and practical strategies to support not just our son but also others facing similar journeys. In this episode, I'm honored to sit down with someone who has helped us tremendously, Nicole Symcox. She is a licensed psychotherapist and mental health educator. Nicole herself has ADHD, and she's designed courses and programs that provide practical tools and strategies to help ADHD brains of all ages thrive.

I've been listening to her new audio program, Parenting ADHD Brains, which I will link in our show notes. Nicole is going to explain some of the nuances of ADHD and also practical tips for fostering a supportive environment at home, at school. So whether you're a parent, an educator, or someone interested in learning more about ADHD, you'll want to stick with this show. By the way, Nicole is offering my listeners, that's you, 25% off her course price. Use the code So Money 25 for 25% off. That link is in our show notes. Here's Nicole Symcox.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:02:15]

FT: Nicole Symcox, welcome back to So Money. I can't wait to dive into your expertise, which is ADHD. Now, you've been on the show before as a highly sought-after licensed psychotherapist. You help clients deal with trauma and in many cases helping them get back on a road towards a healthier financial relationship, financial life because we know trauma impacts our finances. But today, I want to focus on ADHD, which is close to home for us and you and a lot of your clientele. So, first, tell us a little bit about how your work has emerged into the ADHD space and what you're discovering.

[00:02:56]

NS: I find that I just – I have a passion for ADHD because I think it has been so underrepresented, and I think we're also just discovering so much about it. It's just amazing to watch people like skyrocket their success, and this is true for children and adults, when they get their ADHD symptoms managed. Because underneath all of that ADHD stuff is a brilliant person that has a lot to offer the world. So I love seeing more of the authentic self show up because we're managing the mental health issues.

[00:03:33]

FT: Just a table set for a little bit, I think we throw around a lot of these mental health terms, and I think we should. Just take a minute and have you talk a little bit about what is ADHD. How do the symptoms usually present in children and then maybe even later as adults? I know even for boys and girls and men and women it is different. But, generally, how do you diagnose ADHD?

[00:03:57]

NS: Yes. So ADHD has three subtypes. There's inattentive, there's hyperactive, and there's combined. So, I mean, it really takes a mental health professional to diagnose which one you are. But very generally speaking, we definitely see girls get underdiagnosed because they do tend to have inattentive. So ADHD inattentive tends to really struggle with focusing, but they

don't have a lot of the impulse control issues. You don't see as many of the big behaviors that get the attention like ADHD does hyperactivity.

So it's really interesting because we see these girls that really need support and help. Instead, they tend to get criticized or like, "You're daydreaming," or, "You're not focusing." Or like, "What are you doing?" It tends to be a lot of criticism. So I know there's a lot coming out in the mental health world around trying to bring awareness to the different types of ADHD, which also goes into, I think, a bigger issue. People who have ADHD are neurodiverse. A neurodiverse brain, it's a way that they think and see the world. I think when you start to understand, especially with children, like how are they seeing the world, how are they processing information, you can really get on their level and support them.

This is true for adults because ADHD, you don't grow out of it. You're neurodiverse. It continues throughout the span of a lifetime. So I think that's why I have so much passion for helping kids because when we set up kids for success, they turn into adults that are equipped for success. So a lot of what you'll hear me saying, why I'm saying inattentive or hyperactive, for younger kids, hyperactive tends to be the big behaviors that get attention, right? But in adults, it can be more impulsive. Like you can be spending a lot when you shouldn't be or you're booking a trip when you're like – just because you want the dopamine high. So there's just a lot of different factors that go into it.

[00:05:59]

FT: I want to get into your new program, Mental Health Remix, which I have been a student of for some weeks now. I have to say it's so good. I have a son with ADHD. He's nine years old. He was diagnosed when he was around five and a half, six. Actually, we're getting him retested this year as he's getting older, and we want to figure out like how to best meet him where he's at in school. I have to say like it's so hard. Can I just say? It's so hard for him, for us. Part of me – my heartbreaks and also I get frustrated and also I feel helpless. He is going to therapy, which is great and helpful, in addition to having a medication.

But a lot of the work starts at home, as you know. I think one of the things that I wish we would talk more about with the ADHD diagnosis, especially, I guess, with boys generally is that there's

so much emotional regulation that has to happen. It's a lot of big feelings. So when he's happy, he's explosively happy. When he's sad, it's a meltdown, and it could be hours, and it could even turn into rage. It is really emotionally taxing for him, for us, for his sister, too, who's watching this. I think she's also internalizing this in her own way, observing this.

I think one of the things we're already noticing his sibling do, is she's like overcompensating. He gets so much attention from us around his behavior that I think she tries to really like walk on eggshells around us and make sure that like her stuff is organized, and she's being cooperative, and she's helping, which I love. But I also don't want her to do it because she feels like she has to compensate. So I'm just giving you a little behind the scenes of like what happens in our day-to-day. I'm probably speaking imperfectly, and I just always have to remind myself that he sees the world differently, and we have to meet him where he's at.

All this to say that your course has really given us the right context for this, as well as I've been literally implementing some of the stuff that you suggest, the things like how to set your kid up for success, how to speak the words to you so that you're really speaking to their brains in the way that they like to learn and thrive. So let's get into it. Let's get into Mental Health Remix and why, first of all, you felt like this was important. What is your hope for Mental Health Remix?

[00:08:40]

NS: My hope is that there is so much clinical evidence for supporting kids when parents can meet them where they are and understand where they're coming from. I think you actually spoke very eloquently about your situation because I think it really describes the struggle that a lot of parents have with their kids. You have the sibling that overcompensates and the highs and the lows, the emotional dysregulation.

But when parents learn not just about ADHD but like how to talk to your child who has ADHD, so we don't get into the big power struggles, or we don't get into the big meltdowns, right? Because we know with kids with ADHD, like transitions are really hard. Any kind of new information is really hard. If they're enjoying what they're doing, asking them to stop is almost impossible, right? So I created the course because I really wanted the top 12 basically, the top 12 situations that parents encounter with their ADHD child to be managed because then the family functions

better. I think that's just some of my passion is I want to see people be successful. When families are successful, we create healthy people, and healthy people create change in the world. It's just a ripple effect, right?

[00:10:04]

FT: Can you give us some examples? For example, I guess a common thing that happens in our house. Like when you said new information, that was so triggering for me because, yes, for Evan, it's really – it can be very triggering to learn something new about school that he has to do or what we're going to do this weekend. Maybe he had his mind fixed on doing one thing, but then we're like introducing something else. He gets really worked up. Like yesterday, he left his lunchbox at school. The anxiety around that was really a lot, to the point where he didn't go to bed last night till 10 o'clock, and that's late. He just kept you know thinking about, “Where could it be? How could I do this? I feel so stupid. Oh, my gosh.” Like, “Are you mad at me?”

We're like, “Actually, we know. We're not going to get mad at you, but we want you to like go tomorrow and look for it and try to find it. This isn't the end of the world, but let's trace our steps,” and trying to be really calm with him. But we're a lot of times like trying to calm down. I think what I love about your course is that you teach us how to preemptively work with our kids so that it doesn't escalate. The next time your kid – like if you have some news to deliver to your kid that might be out of their expectation, what do you do?

[00:11:29]

NS: I think there's a relational approach, and I think you said so many great things. One thing to I think note is that ADHD tends to ride with anxiety. Like the two tend to join forces and go together. So it transitions. New information can be really hard because ADHD kids are managing, and this is true for adults, too. A lot of what I'm talking about with kids actually kind of crosses over to adults, but they get really – they're not – they get really set on like what's going to make them happy or how they're going to succeed and what that's going to look like.

So when that gets taken away abruptly, they're like, “Oh, my God. I'm not prepared. What the heck?” Then it's a full meltdown, right? But they don't have the words to say that, so it becomes

a whole thing and the meaning that they're making behind the lunchbox or whatever the thing is, right? That teacher's going to be mad at them because they're always in trouble. They don't want to be in trouble again. I mean, there's just like a lot of things I think that can go in it.

But I love what you said because anxiety can run with it. I think our impulse is like, "Let's just be calm and let's think this through." If you say that to an ADHD kid, they're going to explode, right? They're going to be like calm. Now, you're not paying attention to what I'm saying. So now, I'm going to get double mad because you're not listening to me. That's how that translates, right? So a lot of times, when you just like stop and pause and just start with the basics, which is empathy, so let's say plans change or something. It's like, "Wow, you're really disappointed that we can't go to the park. That is really, really disappointing. I hear you. I hear how important that was to you."

That's just kind of like the starting point of trying to de-escalate, right? It's not saying that's going to work like magic because I know parents have this expectation. If you say a script, it's going to work immediately. But with kids, it's always a relational approach. It's always like a starting point of like what does this mean to you. How can we work through this? Because they have a hard time. They have a hard time working through it.

[00:13:43]

FT: They do.

[00:13:45]

NS: Their brains kind of gridlock, and they get stuck, and they're like, "No, my whole life's happiness was based on going to the park today, and now you're taking that away from me. I don't know how to – I can't cope." They just lose it. I think that's hard on families because then you've got your neurotypical kids who can transition with ease. They're like, "Okay, we won't go for an hour." But for an ADHD kid, it's not even just the transition. Now, we have delayed gratification, and that's difficult, right? Like, "Now, you're telling me I have to wait to have something I enjoy. I don't think so. I'm not capable of that," right?

I'm just kind of narrating very generally, like some of what's behind some of these explosions because I think these kids get labeled as bad. Actually – what's that?

[00:14:30]

FT: Nicole, these were the kids growing up whose desks would be placed outside in the hallway. These were the kids who were always in the principal's office. These were the kids who were C students, but they were really smart outside of the classroom. It was like they weren't great on tests, but they were great in conversation. Or they were just super-duper creative, but that wasn't maybe valued. It was like, “No, you got to do well on the chemistry test and get straight As.”

I'm grateful in some ways how far the culture has come and how far schools have come in recognizing this and supporting kids. But as I'm hearing you talk, the kids that go unattended to and unsupported, then their adulthood, my goodness, it's got to be so, so difficult to try to navigate life, specifically your finances and your deadlines and work and all that, without the support that you need.

[00:15:29]

NS: Oh, absolutely. I mean, so there's a ton of research behind, and I know this will make some people cringe as soon as I say it. But just hear me out, right? That positive parenting is sometimes the better way to go. Now, that doesn't mean that you're saying, “You're doing a great job,” when you just tore a room apart. Like that's unacceptable and that's not okay. We hold hard lines. But what it does mean is that these kids crave recognition, like acknowledgment that they're doing something right. Because they're doing so much wrong that they have such a big negativity, and that usually follows into adulthood if they haven't gotten a handle on how their brain works, right? So they a lot of times have failure complexes or like nervous or like, “How am I coming across?” Things like that because they were taught you have to be this way.

Now, I will say I do agree with you. I think there's a big movement towards understanding that ADHD kids are brilliant. ADHD adults are brilliant. They just need the right environments and the right strategies to allow that brilliance to shine. So things like dual focus, right? Like a lot of

people don't know about that. But a lot of times, like to get something done or to get a deadline, you need to be focusing on two things. But instead, we a lot of times put these ADH kids in quiet rooms, and we're like, "You can't come out until you're done with your homework." It's like it's just not going to happen. They're just not going to be able to do that.

This is why it's so important to understand how this brain works because they are underneath all of these symptoms. They are some of, and this is true for adults, too, some of the most intelligent, empathetic, funny, kind, creative, problem-solving. I'm going to highlight that one because a lot of times we're like – we think that they can't problem solve. But they are adapting to a world that wasn't necessarily created to them on a regular basis. So I think there was some research or article come up that some of the most brilliant entrepreneurs have ADHD for this reason because the resiliency that has to be created in order to exist, like to have to fail every day and then get yourself back up and be like, "It's going to be a new day. I'm going to try something different." These are all positive things about ADHD, I think.

[00:17:40]

FT: Yes. I once described it to my son as having a superpower. I was like, "Don't tell anyone about this, but it's kind of a superpower." Yes, I'm hearing you. I'm hearing a lot of attributes that my son possesses. He's a great kid, and we're rooting for him. One of the challenges as a family with any child that has special needs is the cost, right? So I will be very honest that we actually left the private school system, which was a savings because they were not able to and not willing to support our son in the ways that he needed to be supported in the classroom with the existing resources that they had, the existing budgets that they had, the existing tuition dollars we were giving them. They wanted more money and more money and more money, to the point where they were like, "You need to hire another teacher for his kindergarten classroom so that she can be exclusively working with him."

It was so frustrating. So not a slam on all private schools, but I think this is a generalization we can make that interestingly enough, the public schools because it's state-mandated, that they have to show up for your kids. If they don't, then you must advocate and, hopefully, you will get what you need. I don't think it's a perfect – it's not a perfect solution, just like go to a public school. But in our case, we moved and also sought out the particular school district we have

because of all the great things we were hearing from parents and families about the way that the school district was showing up for neurodivergent kids but also kids with autism and kids with any sort of special needs in school.

So on the one hand, we saved money. But it was also a move that was required. In addition to that, thanks for health insurance, we get his prescription subsidized, and he goes to therapy, which is not insured. I'm wondering, like managing expectations for families around the financial costs of raising a kid with ADHD and wanting to provide all of the resources for that child, it's not inexpensive.

[00:19:49]

NS: No. It's not inexpensive. I think this is a category where it's quality over status. So like the status might be sending them to this amazing private school. But if that private school isn't geared to the way a neurodiverse brain learns, then they're going to fail, and that's a waste of money and time. So I would encourage people that it's more about the right fit and the right help. This is true for therapists. This is true for coaches. This is true for schools. I think if you're an adult, it's true for a company you're working for or just understanding like what environment do you need to succeed. For ADHD, that's usually an internal environment, meaning your internal world, right? The mental health part where you know how to manage yourself and understand yourself but also the external world, so you're rigged for success because there is an absolute way to rig you for success across the board.

[00:20:45]

FT: But also why I also am recommending your program because it is an accessible, affordable audio. I love it. I love that it's audio because I can listen to it on my walks. I can listen to it in the car and I have actually on like one and a half speed because I just can't get the information fast enough. This is like – it's so timely for me. I'm so in it right now and why I appreciate your program. Again, Mental Health Remix is the name. We're going to put the link in the show notes, and you have a special offer for So Money listeners. So make sure everybody listened to the end of this episode and also check out the show notes for the link and the special offer.

Now, you, Nicole, also have ADHD. You have a successful thriving practice. You are like financially independent. What have been some of the obstacles that you have managed and worked through with respect to ADHD and as it pertains to your financial life and your career life?

[00:21:52]

NS: Focus. Focus is tricky. I'm 40, so like – and I call that out just because when we were kids, like ADHD, like we talked about, wasn't really – it was not really diagnosed, like wasn't really understood. So I know that there's a lot of adults that are coming into this 30 and 40 range that like, “Oh, my gosh. I have it,” and it's showing up in different in different ways. But what I've learned about myself, which I think is true for other business owners, too, is, for me, it's focus. Like when I'm focused and I am like nailed in, I can do great things. When I am not focused, I am scattered, right? I have a difficulty like managing tasks. Spreadsheets are my nightmare. They make no sense to me and things like that. But I can show up and talk to you or I can show up in a different way and do the same thing.

So I think I want to empower like business owners and people that are struggling with this that you can absolutely be successful. You just kind of have to learn like what is your thing that helps you focus. So, for me, it's being in a coffee shop. I think I wrote my master's pieces in **[inaudible 00:23:06]** because I needed to be around the energy. I needed to be around a little bit of chaos, and that really helped me focus. So it's just little hacks like that as you figure out like how your brain works. Yes. Does that kind of answer your question?

[00:23:25]

FT: Yes. I love that hack. So it sounds like everyone's different, but there is a common trend, pattern where your brain really thrives on that duality of like, “I have to get this task done.” But maybe there's a television in the background that's on, or you're in a coffee shop, or you have music on in the background. My kids, and I don't think this is an ADHD thing, but I think it's just because we all love to be calmed down. I put – kind of like it annoys my kids in the beginning. But I think I'm like forcing it on them, and they actually are learning to love it, is jazz music.

In the program, I'm like, "Hey, Siri. Please start playing jazz," and she will. They're like, "Oh, Mom. Not again with the jazz." But you know what? For an hour, I don't hear a voice, except for trumpet on the Siri. My kids are coloring, or they're playing Legos, or they're playing peacefully together. I don't think that's a coincidence.

[00:24:21]

NS: No, no. It's all – yes. You've rigged the environment, right? Like you have –

[00:24:27]

FT: Rigged the environment. Yes.

[00:24:28]

NS: Yes. That is a key component for adults and children. When they're in their right environment, they can lock in, and they can get – I think they can get more done in an hour than someone could get done in eight. It is amazing the things I hear from parents and just noticing this about myself. It's like it's all these antics of like, "I don't want to. I don't want to," talking about like kids. I mean, adults, I think we do this in our head like, "I don't want to. I don't want to." Then you're like, "Oh, my gosh. I have to." Then you lock into this focus, and you just get so, so, so much done.

That's why I love that you call your – tell your son he has a superpower because that is one of the superpowers of ADHD, and that's kind of known across the board. They're very capable of amazing things if the environment's right, if the internal environment's right. Both things kind of have to play together.

[00:25:20]

FT: Yes. I have been really like focused on trying to help my son figure out what are his "things", like what are his passions, what are the things that he could get completely lost and immersed in for hours because he's so into it. We have so far discovered that it's drawing and art and

putting things together. He loves tactile like Legos, all that ever since he was a kid. He's not really into sports and team things. I think that – I don't know where that – I mean, that's probably just genetics. My husband and I are not into that. But he signed up for a running program. So I think he would really – because he's a fast kid. He eats fast. He talks fast. He runs fast. His brain moves fast. I think all of that is connected.

[00:26:15]

NS: Oh, 100%. A lot of the books written for children to explain ADHD, and they're like, “You have a race car brain. Your processing speed is fast.” There is some research coming out about ADHD, it's not a lack of focus. It's that they have too much, and they don't know how to like harness and put it in the right places. This is true across the board with kids and adults. So, again, that's why I wanted to create a course. That's why I wanted to create a membership community, like people that get each other's brains and being able to succeed because – I don't know. The ADHD brain is really amazing. I find so much joy in working.

[00:26:57]

FT: I was joking with a parent the other day, half joking because I kind of think it's a real phenomenon, is that I'm meeting – I wouldn't say, obviously, most kids have ADHD. But a lot of people do and a lot of kids are neurodivergent. I'm just like when will the school system kind of reorient, right? Where someone like my daughter is kind of an outlier, who's not ADHD, who's neuro – what's the opposite of neurodivergent?

[00:27:24]

NS: Neurotypic. She's neurotypical. Yes.

[00:27:26]

FT: Neurotypical. I wonder, what are the missed opportunities for schools to reorient? Public schools I'm talking. I mean, I know there's a lot of private options that do this. But public schools that are like, “Hey, we need to like reexamine. It's not about teaching to the middle, right? It's

about recognizing that, first of all, all kids are different. All kids learn differently. Yes, they have supplementary programs and IEPs, independent education plans, which our son has. But I don't know. I just feel like it's still a very antiquated system.

[00:28:00]

NS: Yes. I think it is still. But to your point earlier, I think the public schools are actually catching up faster than the private. That's not a knock on private schools by any means. Private schools can be super great. But I heard what you said earlier about legally they have to. So if you have a 504 or an IEP, they are legally mandated to follow through on those things. So I think that is what is probably going to create some of the change because they have to follow those.

I have lots of friends that are teachers. I love therapists, teachers, coaches. We all hang out together, right? But they're noticing that their classrooms. I mean, they are getting more and more 504s, IEPs than they've ever had before. I think it's just we're getting better at diagnosing these things and communicating what they are. So I'm hopeful that that will create some of the change because a lot of what works for a neurodiverse brain, like learning for a neurodiverse brain, would also be beneficial for a neurotypical brain. Like neurodiverse brains want to interact with the world. They want to play. They want to interact. Why is that a bad thing for a neurotypical kid? That's a good thing.

[00:29:11]

FT: Exactly. Let's not let them miss out on the fun.

[00:29:15]

NS: Right. So it's kind of like let's help these kids that learn differently while supporting the ones that do. Now, the push back I can already hear is, well, some of these kids have really big behaviors, and that's a whole separate podcast, right? So we're acknowledging that there's behavioral things. But, yes, it's just a learning difference. The neurodiverse brain is just fascinating. I absolutely love it. It's fascinating.

I'm so glad the course has been helpful for you because that was the point. Because the more you understand how your child – I'm sure it's helped your relationship with him as well, which is –

[00:29:49]

FT: Oh, yes. I feel like on the one hand, as he's getting older and more sort of self-aware and just his brain is developing, that anxiety component is increasing, I think. I mean, as adults, we have so much anxiety, more than. It just kind of grows as you grow. So we're working on that. But I think the meltdowns and the reasoning has been so much more of a two-way street. I think like we're communicating better. I don't think it's a coincidence that I started listening to your course. I started to really like pick up on some of these little things, these little tweaks, these like things you can immediately apply, like these ways of framing announcements or ways of talking him to a place of rationale, as opposed to emotional explosive meltdowns.

So people listening, if you have someone in your family who has ADHD, and you're familiar with any of these situations, ready, mornings, hot mess express, tantrums, emotional outbursts. Maybe you have been just overwhelmed and exhausted from all the reminders for your child to complete the same daily tasks. This is me. You frequently walk on eggshells, not knowing what will trigger your child.

Nicole, that's another episode. Like the PTSD, as a family member that comes from like after working through a big blow-up with my son, it's so exhausting for both of us that I want to do whatever I can to prevent that from happening again. I will catch myself. Just I feel the fear and the anticipation of like, "Oh, my gosh. How is he going to react to this?" Is this going to like derail our whole afternoon? Is this going to turn into a whole more emotionally draining episode? Yes.

So, Nicole's program, Mental Health Remix, is full of gems and insights from one of the most trusted experts I know. Nicole Symcox, thank you so much for coming on the show. Thank you for creating this program. I hope more programs in your future, this sort of ADHD for entrepreneur brains. There's so many groups of professionals, I think, that you can help, and I look forward to supporting you along the way.

[00:32:13]

NS: Thank you so much, Farnoosh.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:32:17]

FT: Thanks so much to Nicole Symcox for joining us. Again, if you'd like to check out her program, Parenting ADHD Brains, the link is in our show notes. She's offering us a special 25% off discount. Use the code So Money 25 at checkout. See you back here on Wednesday, and I hope your day is So Money.

[END]