

How Kirby manages her mental health

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0:00:01 Nicole: I am Nicole Antoinette and this is Real Talk Radio, a podcast filled with the honest conversations about everything. Today's episode is part of our new series called "But how though", where I ask people that exact question, how? How do you get out of debt? How do you change careers? How do you stop comparing yourself to people on the internet? How do you have more fulfilling sex, build stronger friendships, decide whether or not to have kids? Each episode of this series explores a different question like that with a different featured guest. Someone who is also bravely joining me to share the ups and downs of how they've managed to close the gap between what they say they want and what they actually do.

0:00:42 Nicole: Speaking of the how, let's talk for a second about how this show gets made, because behind the scenes, our podcast does things pretty differently in a few ways. First, we are 100% listener-funded with no ads or sponsors, and also all of our guests get paid and higher rates are always paid to our guests of color, as well as our queer and trans guests and others with traditionally marginalized identities. The funding to create the show and pay all the guests comes entirely from our patreon community, which operates on a shame-free sliding scale that allows each community member to support from within their own means. Tons of fun stuff happens over in that community. I host live workshops, share exclusive bonus episodes and lots more. And no matter where on the sliding scale your monthly pledge falls, you still get access to all of the same events and bonuses.

0:01:33 Nicole: So if you love this show, and if you wanna make a real time vote with your dollars to help keep it going, all while meeting the wonderful like-minded people who are already in our community, spoiler alert, they're the best, you can come and join us over at patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. That's patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. We'd love to have you. And now on to the show.

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0:02:00 Nicole: Alright, friends, let's do this. I'm joined today by Kirby, who's here to talk about the day-to-day of how she manages her mental health. I honestly have to say that I've learned more actionable, useful, realistic things about this topic from Kirby than literally anyone else in my life, sometimes even my own therapists. So I'm just gonna put that out there, I'm very grateful that this conversation is happening. So thank you, Kirby. I'm so glad you're here.

0:02:25 Kirby: I am so, so happy to be speaking with you Nicole. I think that, similarly, I've learned just so much from you, be it stuff about hiking or just reflecting on the impact that you wanna have. So I'm really happy to talk with you today.

0:02:39 Nicole: To get us started, I would love for you to do a quick intro. Who you are, what you do what you love. Basically, what are a few things that we should know about Kirby?

0:02:50 Kirby: Well, I guess for starters, I live in the Bay Area. I relocated here from Chicago

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about three years ago now. And I have to say, most of my days really are made beautiful by spending time outside, whether that's just taking walks around my community or having the privilege to go to the ocean for a few hours. So I think that's pretty central to who I am right now. And this year, I'm spending a lot of time outside when I can when the skies are not smoky and raining ash. I'm doing a lot of resting and really just sitting inward while all of this continues to pass. I'm 28 years old, I work in diversity in tech, and that's been very interesting this year as well, so also feeding into that need to rest. So that's where I'm at right now.

0:03:44 Nicole: Yeah, do you feel like resting has been something that you've had to learn or was that something that came easily to you?

0:03:52 Kirby: So I think specifically through the lens of my mental health, resting emerged as something newer, because I didn't really understand how it fit in the context of your nervousness and regulation. So I think for many, many years, I identified as this person who was just constantly pushing forward towards another goal, be that my undergraduate graduation or my grad school graduation, or moving across the country, or doing this big hike, or getting this job. And I never really gave myself permission to just be present, and I think a lot of that has to do with, in more recent years, getting a diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder and understanding that my nervous system was just super [chuckle], super activated at most days of my life, so I think now that I've gotten that language. I've learned to really be aware of when I need to rest, and this is definitely then a year for rest as made clear by macro level things happening and things in my personal life. So I'm just kind of here to accept it.

0:05:05 Nicole: What made you wanna be so open about your mental health and general health as well on Instagram? Obviously, that's how I know you most of all, right, and then obviously from your earlier appearance on the podcast, but I'm always curious when someone's willing to be really transparent about stuff, if there's an inciting... Not incident, that makes it sound like a dramatic plot of what was the inciting incident that you decided to talk about this [laughter], but I'm just interested in the background of that.

0:05:32 Kirby: You know, there kind of was though. I think that I wasn't really an Instagram user in a very regular sense when I first got on the app, maybe in around 2013, 2014. I think that's when I started getting my first smartphone and I would take those really moody filtered pictures of my food or my apartment, and then has this picture of Portillo's Italian beef on my grid from the very early days and the next day, I'm in the ICU, because I got diagnosed with type 1 diabetes and it just completely came out of nowhere. Ironically, at that point, during my undergraduate program for public health, I had been learning about the signs of diabetes and type 1 diabetes, but I completely just didn't even digest it at all because at that point in my life was really... I guess taking in all of the cultural feedback that I got about diabetes, I was like, I'm not fat, I'm healthy, I don't have to worry about this, I'm actually actively kind of apathetic to people who quote unquote do this to themselves.

0:06:42 Kirby: And then I wound up in the ICU and the nurses as they were taking me to my room told me that it was type 1 diabetes, and I just was in complete shock. I was like, "I'm healthy. I don't

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know, this doesn't make any sense," and it kind of completely rocked my world, and then subsequent years absolutely shaped how I perceived health and what we owe people for health, and I think that after that point, I just had this kind of dramatic shift in my everyday life. I just started documenting it on my Instagram, whether that was my little meal sheets, I would say I'm kinda scared to eat until I go meet my dietitian for the first time, because up until that point where I got admitted to the hospital and got my diagnosis, Food was making me so sick and I had no idea why. And it just became this very natural process where I would say, "I am having a hard time today, or my fingers look disgusting because I've been pricking them," and my body was actively changing in a very physical way, and I was just kind of capturing my life through that lens. And I guess that was kind of the biggest shift in my openness online.

0:07:57 Kirby: And then a few years later, I guess, that I just thought about all of the healing I was doing with my autoimmune conditions, I got a Hashimoto's diagnosis not too long after the type 1, and I thought about all of this work I was doing to heal in that respect, I was changing my diet, I was setting very baby step boundaries in my life of like, "Oh you guys, I can't go do this without doing these things first, right?" I kinda needed my friends to buy into the idea of letting me know what I could expect when I arrived when we were out drinking or something, because I was like, someone would need to know how to help me if something happened. And I think a couple of years later, something just clicked with my mental health and I just started sharing in that respect too, because it was just this whole new healing process for me of putting the dots together, and I don't think it ever really stops.

0:08:50 Kirby: I think I have new realizations almost daily that I love just articulating openly because that was not something I grew up encouraged to do, and especially as a black woman. I think that it's pretty radical to just be completely transparent about my expectations, my boundaries, my goals, the things I struggle with, because I think the strong black woman narrative has been so detrimental to so many black women in my life that I just wanted to shatter that as soon as I could, and I'm happy that I've done it by the time, I've been in my mid to late 20s.

0:09:27 Nicole: Yeah, I hear that desire for potentially pattern breaking, right? Whether it's in your family, you said this wasn't something that was really talked about that much, or just things that you've seen modeled, I do think that it can be really empowering to decide actually, just because this is the blueprint that I was given, that doesn't mean that that's the blueprint I'm gonna follow.

0:09:44 Kirby: It's 100% a decision, it's a macro level decision that you just voice. You can say, "Actually, I don't think this has to hold true from me anymore," and then it's this really granular deciding that happens all day, every day, you wake up and you decide what you want to do to show up for yourself. And some days it's easier, some days it's harder. I was actually, this morning when I woke up, I thought of you a few hours before we hopped on this call, because I just woke up really wanting pancakes, and I knew in the back of my head that I was running really low on oat flour, specifically ground oat flour. And I went into the kitchen knowing I needed this ingredient to make the pancakes, and I knew that it wasn't really... The quantity I had wasn't enough for the recipe, but then I saw this bag of rolled oats and I thought I could just put this in the food processor, and I can just keep the momentum forward, right? I don't have to get tripped up on not having this thing and I

told you before we started recording that I had just finished this plate of pancakes and it was so good.

0:10:47 Kirby: And for me, that was such a huge milestone. I think when I talk about just the daily granular activities and really just the recognizing each step of the way, I think if it had been even three years ago, if I had woken up and something didn't go my way, something didn't go quote unquote right for me, I would just fall apart. I would just like, "I shouldn't even bother getting out of bed, I'm just gonna kind of sulk for a few hours," and it's just so... Each day, I feel just so deeply grateful for the progress that I've made, and all of those little decisions that stack up because they do make a huge difference at least in my experience.

0:11:31 Nicole: Yeah, no, I agree, and I am glad. I'm always really appreciative when you share those, like you said, the granular things, whether it's online or wherever else. And that's what I'm excited to dig into. The first thing that I would love to ask you about, and this is something... I don't know if this is like your term or something that I am just only familiar with through you, a misconception that I had when I first started seeing therapists and seeking counseling and help in that way, was this idea of, if I start therapy, then I'm just in therapy forever. And I don't know if that was... I don't even know really where that belief came from, but that was definitely something that I thought of like, then I'm just a person who's in therapy forever, and I had a lot of feelings or judgments or stigma and stuff around that, which I guess that could be a whole other topic, like stigma, about wellness, right?

0:12:19 Kirby: Right. Right.

0:12:20 Nicole: But I remember... I wanna say it was maybe sometime last year, and you were talking openly about thinking of your mental health therapy in terms of care episodes, and I would love for you to talk about that because that perspective switch has been hugely helpful for me.

0:12:39 Kirby: Well, first of all, I just wanna say that I love hearing that there's been kind of a shift in thinking for you and whether or not that was influenced by me, just in general, I'm glad that it's added benefit to your day-to-day kind of living with a navigating life as a human with mental health because we all have it. I think when I talk about the care episodes, that was something that was newer for me. It's not something I really was exposed to until my last three years, which happens to coincide with my move to California, I think. If I reflect on my trajectory with therapy, I've maybe seen between five and six different providers and they've all got different styles. I think that's something that maybe not enough of us are given information about when we are seeking a therapist.

0:13:32 Kirby: We're kind of... I think I can speak for myself in saying that when I first started therapy, I just assumed therapy was this space where you just talked at someone and they were an objective source and they would kind of nod along, and they were there to advise you or tell you not to do things or tell you to do things, and I've absolutely had that be the case. My first therapist was through my undergraduate counseling center, and she was a student. She was doing her hours to get her certification to actually practice, and as a learner that was very much the style that she was

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aligning herself with, and then a few years later, I ended up seeing someone who specialized in somatic experiencing, and that was my first kind of introduction to the nervous system which I'll talk about later, but that was a whole other lens.

0:14:21 Kirby: And then in grad school when I was at a real low, I saw yet another provider and she was very much just the kind of talk therapists and I would go... She was at the end of my street when I was in Chicago, and I would go to her office and I would just kind of talk. And I think maybe it was two months in, and I just looked at her and I was like, "I don't really have anything else to talk about? You kind of know everything about where I've been in, kind of the things I'm struggling with now. I don't really feel like I'm getting anything out of this," and I kind of ended that care with her.

0:14:57 Kirby: And fast forward a few years, I moved out to California and I was working as a researcher at Kaiser Permanente insurance, and there's a whole discourse about Kaiser's psychiatry and mental health program. There are gaps that many of the members expressed, but I started my care there with an individual therapist as well as doing an anxiety management class, and that was the first therapist who said, you know, she... She sat me down and she had me do an intake assessment and she was like, "You are very activated right now, you've got a lot of symptoms, your anxiety's in the severe range, so I would classify this as you having an episode. You've got this episode of anxiety that's deviating from where I think your baseline might be." And from that point, every time I saw her, I would do this assessment to kind of track where those symptoms were trending.

0:15:56 Kirby: And as on the side, as somebody with type 1 diabetes, I use a lot of technology to track the symptoms of my diabetes and it therefore influences how I manage it, so I can see how my blood sugars are trending when I use continuous glucose monitors. In the same way, I can see where my anxiety symptoms are trending when I'm doing these assessments with my providers and that kind of structure that I worked on with her and that I worked on with my current therapist is that whenever you're in these periods where you're really activated and you've got a lot of symptoms, we're gonna intensify your care, we're gonna see you weekly or bi-weekly as you need.

0:16:36 Kirby: There are a lot of assignments that we work on together. So in the sessions themselves, we talk about what's top of mind for me, and then we kind of talk about how to cope, because another thing that that provider at the time had kind of revealed to me is that, "You're 26 years old and you don't actually have many coping strategies for yourself that are not kind of contingent on external factors like a friend to listen to you, so let's work on that," and that's kind of integrated into a lot of that episodic care and you do all of the work and you kind of return to your baseline and you kind of track that over the length of the time that you're working together. And when I am in that kind of baseline zone, that's when I kind of take the foot off of the gas, and I say, "I'm doing okay. I've got my coping strategies, I'm feeling pretty firm in myself, if something comes up again, I can reach out to you," and it's always this kind of open door that you... It's understood that you can come back and you can reach for care, but there is an active reaching involved. So I think that's what the most different aspect of it was for me.

0:17:52 Nicole: Yeah, I really appreciate that example. I wound up going back into therapy and finding a new therapist really on this summer, also for some acute anxiety symptoms that I was experiencing and some other things, and we worked together on a weekly basis for three months, and it was incredibly useful, and there was a really clear sense for me. It's not like I set out for it to be three months, but that just happened to be towards the end of the three months that the symptoms had lessened, I had gained some new, like you said, coping strategies, and I didn't feel like I was in a place that I needed that level of care anymore, and this perspective switch of thinking about it as episodic was really helpful to basically empower me to speak up and say, "I think that I'm... This is complete for me right now." Like basically, "Thank you. This worked." And same thing, we left the door open. She said she was gonna, "Hey, I'll make a note to check in with you in four to six weeks just to see if you need a session or something like that," but having it be potentially a longer term relationship, but without guaranteed frequency or a necessitated frequency, that really changed everything for me to be able to think, "Okay, this is a tool that I can access when I'm in need of it." But it's not something that I necessarily have to do all the time, that was really helpful.

0:19:11 Kirby: And it just frees up so much bandwidth when you're not constantly like, "Oh, I have to do this thing every week." It just becomes a part of your routine. And I do just wanna call out my current therapist specifically with a huge shout out. I think when things really started escalating with COVID around late March, which was about two weeks before I was due to have a wedding in California with all of our family flying out here, I just found myself in this severe acute kind of crisis mode, and she worked with me for about the two or three months before I started feeling better and I was really feeling better. And then everything started happening with George Floyd and all of these viral murders and assaults on black people in the media, and my therapist, who was a white woman, reached out to me out of nowhere in June. And she was just like, "Hi, I'm just checking in because I wanna make sure that you feel supported right now. And I wanna let you know that my calendar is completely open if you need to grab time, because there's a lot happening right now. And I think that it's helpful to have a space to talk, so I just wanna let you know that my calendar is open."

0:20:25 Kirby: And that's that open door understanding of, hypothetically, you could do this by yourself, but you also don't have to, and I think in doing this work for the long run, I think you become better at deciphering what is work that you have the tools to do by yourself, and when are periods where you just need to be held a little. And I think that's been something I've really been recognizing in the season of COVID and unrest and wild fires, all of it.

0:20:55 Nicole: Yeah, and that phrasing even that you just used, when do you need to be held a little, I also think that's an important nuance distinction that, of course, therapy of different kinds can be a tool that we rely on in crisis, but it doesn't have to be a crisis in order for it to be beneficial or for it to feel supportive. I think one of the ways that I have gotten in the way of managing my own mental health or just my own care in general, is this sort of all or nothing, things have to be rock bottom bad in order for me to ask for a certain type of help or do x, y or z. And starting to have more of a middle ground approach of I don't have to be circling the drain, so to speak, in order to give myself more care or enact some of these strategies.

0:21:39 Kirby: And I love you pointing that out because that's something I've personally really kind of tried to just scream from the mountain tops to the people in my life. I think in my early 20s and in my late teens when I really struggled a lot, there was just a lot of dysfunction in my home, and I was navigating familial estrangement in certain seasons of life, and navigating life of chronic illness. And all of this grief that I was just kind of managing in my early 20s, I think a lot of people could look at that and say, "Oh well, of course, of course, you'd benefit from therapy because you have all of this trauma unfolding because you are in this grief cycle." And I've really tried to push back on any kind of language that people meet me with that sounds like that and say... What I assume, though, I can see the ways where therapy has made me a better employee, a better partner, a better friend, and just all of the dimensions that you need to really have a strong sense of communication and boundary setting and an ability to speak to your core values. I think in those respects, therapy has absolutely been a tool that I reach for when I'm not in crisis. And I really look forward to the day where more people use it in that respect, as well as when they need it, obviously, but it can be preventative in all the best ways.

0:23:14 Nicole: Yeah, I mean, and obviously, we can't talk about any kind of healthcare without acknowledging access and pricing. I know pricing and lack of insurance is a huge reason why people aren't able to get the help that they want or need, which I would love for that to not be true someday, but what you're saying is being able to... I don't know, if things don't have to be so bad, if this is a resource that you have access to, things don't have to be cataclysmic in order for you to use it.

0:23:45 Kirby: Absolutely not, and I think my journey specifically has been an interesting one, when you talk about access. When I was diagnosed with my type 1 diabetes in 2014 and was admitted to the ICU, I didn't have health insurance. And the hospital bill was astronomical, and it's because of the Affordable Care Act that I was able to retroactively be added to a family member's insurance and not be drowning in medical debt on top of student loan debt, and I absolutely found myself in positions where I was just really struggling. Ever since I was 17, I remember telling my parents, like I really think I need to talk to the guidance counselor, I don't feel good. And there was some discouragement that happened there, but when I was moved out and could go see someone on my own, and it did have to be through my university counseling center, and it did have to be in these spaces where people are still learning themselves and there were absolutely times where I was turned away when... I think when I was in grad school, specifically, I went to my university counseling center and I kind of just gave the cliff notes of the last five to seven years of my life, and the therapist was just like, "Well, we really kind of try to help students who are having a hard time with final exams and the stresses of school, and it sounds like what you're dealing with is just a lot more than we can handle, so I'm gonna help you... "

0:25:13 Kirby: She took my insurance card and we called a bunch of different providers together, and I felt kind of like I was brushed off at that time, but even just her taking the time to call with me, because I think she knew I couldn't do it myself, that's a level of access. So it's definitely different. Looking back then and now, I have employer-sponsored health insurance and my mental health services are completely free through my employer, but there have definitely been gaps, I'll just say that, throughout the journey.

0:25:43 Nicole: Yeah, absolutely, I also the last thing about this that I wanna say, something that I started thinking about maybe five years or so ago was the benefit of finding a, let's say a therapist or a practitioner of any kind when you're well, because it's almost this cruel catch-22 that when you need help the most, especially if we're talking about a mental health way, let's say you're really depressed, that is when it's even more overwhelming to think about trying to research therapist and find someone and does your insurance... Do they take your insurance? All the different things, or even just picking up the phone and calling someone new and making an appointment, there's so many obstacles there that when you're not doing well, I feel like for me at least, there are been periods of time where those were completely insurmountable. And this idea of almost like proactively, could I do some of this leg work at a time where I'm feeling well, so that that person is there, right? So that the tool is in the tool box and it's easier to then use.

0:26:39 Kirby: Yeah, and I think that's where I really agree with it being a preventative kind of approach to your care. 'Cause I can agree completely. Just looking back, I think if I were to articulate anything I regret about my life that I've lived so far, and about my 20s, it's just that I wish I didn't have to suffer so much, I think, in so many different aspects related to my health, for many years, I just dealt with such intense cycles of depression, and so much of it was wound up in not having a proper medical diagnosis for Hashimoto's disease, which if it's not managed, that's one of the primary symptoms that can really make it challenging to take care of yourself. So I hate that there were periods of my life where I just... The days just passed and I could barely get out of bed and not get the help that I need, and again, with that little pancake story I told at the top of this, it's just... It can be pretty wild sometimes to look back on those periods and to really take stock of where I am now and just feel incredibly grateful for the access that I do have. I don't take that for granted.

0:28:00 Nicole: So you've talked about the benefits of getting the right diagnosis and the treatment plan that goes with that, and even like you said before, using data, making it less nebulous, right? Like you said, taking those assessments and all of that and being able to use that as empowerment, one technique that I know you also use is relapse prevention. Like a relapse prevention plan. Will you tell me about that?

0:28:20 Kirby: Yeah, it's another concept that I hadn't really been exposed to prior to working with my current therapist, but when she kind of shared it with me, it made so much sense when you think about just the scope of illnesses that people can experience with their mental health, and the relapse prevention plan is really designed to anticipate periods where you will not be feeling good, where you will have acute kind of activated symptoms that will disrupt your life. So in structuring that plan, it really looks like, what does it look like when you don't feel well, are you not showering regularly, is your space a bit disorganized and messy, are you missing deadlines for work, all of those things you kind of write out as being kind of indicators that you might be shifting to a season where you're feeling really kind of...

0:29:21 Kirby: I say personally, when I'm communicating with my partner, with my therapist, I just say, I don't feel too good, I am feeling a little sick, and then in that plan, you can kind of package in

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what we've kind of talked about as being glimmers and triggers, so things that trigger you, what is triggering you to activate you to get to that point? Is it people, is it like a co-worker who's overstepping a boundary at work, and they keep dumping projects on you at the last minute and you're feeling just completely overwhelmed? And you're noticing, I'm not eating in the morning, I'm not showering because I'm going straight to my laptop, I'm feeling so stressed that I'm not cleaning my space. Is that one trigger for you? Is that things that your friends say, is it comments that they make that make you feel like you're not being seen, is that making you withdraw from people?

0:30:17 Kirby: It's just kind of this related web of things that are influencing you downstream, and then you kind of go to this place where you can look at your glimmer, so what are the things that soothe your nervous system, what are the scents that you really enjoy? What are the sensations that make you feel really held? It's kind of visiting all five of your senses, and my therapist and I have built out a coping kit for myself, so it includes all of these things that I use to really address the physical body when I'm feeling just completely overwhelmed, and that's kind of what he used to get you to a place where you can begin the work. So you're de-escalating a lot of the symptoms that you might be feeling by using hand oils. I use lotion because something that I've struggled with in the past is self-harm, so I would scratch my hands up pretty badly, and my therapist was able to speak to that and say when you're doing that, that's actually like a way for you... You're searching for some soothing and how soothing would it be to use a nice lotion and just rub that kind of vigorously into your hands.

0:31:31 Kirby: And that's what I do to kind of get myself back into my body and then I kind of zoom out and see, "Oh, over the past week, this thing was happening at work, and then there was this thing," and then from there, I'm able to set boundaries, and I think it's important for me to know here that. This is also a really great space and plan to use in tandem with medication, I think... I just wanna say very quickly, I'm very pro-medication, while I've not personally been on any medication for my generalized anxiety disorder, I cannot encourage people enough to seek out that resource. If your baseline is elevated. If your baseline is such that you struggle to do daily tasks and you cannot get yourself to soothe beyond getting that coping kit out, that's, I think, a great opportunity to work with your provider to get that additional resource. When I'm using my coping kit, I am able to get back to my baseline and the only reason why I know that is because I track it with my provider and I can see my progress over time, but it's just a really great way to practice self-awareness and boundary setting and self-compassion, right? I think that's the biggest thing is self-acceptance is saying, "This is going to happen again. It's not an if, it's a when.

0:32:47 Kirby: So why don't I prepare for it, instead of beating myself up?" Because I think I wasted so much time just getting angry at myself for being anxious or for being incapacitated at times, and now I kinda just embrace the waves and I know that it will pass.

0:33:06 Nicole: Well, there's so much good stuff in there. I appreciate what you said about medication, I couldn't agree more, putting lots of underscores and exclamation points like near that, I think that it's so often, there can be this narrative that struggling with your mental health is like a will power issue. If you just try harder, if you just do this, you can get it and it's just actually not... This is a very... Both and... And if that's something that is useful for folks, yes, you and I are both

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like, "Go, go, do it, do it." I also appreciate this sort of break down, what you said about triggers being the things that are activating the nervous system, and then glimmers, which is a word that people might be unfamiliar with, and essentially the way you're describing it is that those are maybe the opposite of triggers or like the antidote to triggers, which...

0:33:51 Kirby: Right.

0:33:51 Nicole: Which are... Or you know the soothing. Yeah, and you gave a couple of examples of each, but I would love for you to just tell us what is in your coping kit.

0:34:00 Kirby: Oh yeah, so mine is full of things. I have a lot of books, so I have a lot of fiction books is what I've been sinking into this in this year for escapism, so I have those... Like I said, I have kind of hand motions that are really good, or just keeping my hands occupied when I'm feeling that really intense wave of stress, I have some essential oil, so that is the same scent as the hand lotion. I have a candle, I have incense. I do keep my headphones in there, I have something that I think is really cool that I worked out with my provider is a coping playlist. I think I have a playlist on my Spotify called coping kit, and it's a lot of music that builds, right, it's just a lot of... It opens with some kind of instrumental Bonobo, just like music that you don't really have to think about or take in any lyrics, there's some Yo La Tengo, it's some very just mellow music and then it builds and builds, and I think at the end of it, I ended up putting some Jamila Woods and some Chance The Rapper and some Kendrick Lamar.

0:35:07 Kirby: That's just this really celebratory, you made it over the hump kind of music and it's just this beautiful flow that I created... That I would listen to it on Bart when I was going into San Francisco to work because I was just so over-stimulated by my environment or maybe I had a stressful meeting, so the music is a big thing for me, and then like water colors and a journal. I love just painting silly things that there's... For no other reason, I'm not trying to sell anything. I'm not trying to gain a following by posting anything that I make online, I just like to create things, and I think I can talk more about core values, creativity is one of them for me, and how those have also shaped my mental health management, but yeah, it's right next to my bedside, I wake up to it every day.

0:35:57 Nicole: I love that. I feel like that would be such a lovely prompt for anyone listening, would be to start to create their own coping kit.

0:36:06 Kirby: And you can keep one in your home, you can make a travel one, so I've brought them on airplane rides before, I know we're not... Most of us aren't doing that right now, but I had one for trips, I had one at my desk at work, and my partner is just amazing, I know for... I think it was the last Christmas, he bought me like a little journal, little mug with tea, so that I could have that from my desk at work in my little coping kit, so you can keep them anywhere.

0:36:30 Nicole: Yeah, I also find that sometimes, I mean, I am someone who tends into the all or nothing thinking... That's one of the cognitive distortions that I continue to work on in therapy. And it's just noticing it when it comes up, and as I'm hearing you talk about these things, whether it's a

play list or essential oils or hand lotion, it's like catching myself thinking, Oh, that wouldn't be enough. I have this really all or nothing thing, if it has to be a huge fix or a huge intervention or... And I really get myself into trouble that way by... I undervalue the smaller things that if done with intention really do shift my mood or a perspective, or get me out of my head and into my body, and that embodiment can be really grounding for me and that is an antidote to some of my spiraling thoughts and anxiety and it's an important reminder, I think what you're saying is an important reminder for me that the small things, as you said, medication is also great, maybe more high-touch forms of care are also necessary, but it doesn't have to be all or nothing, that these smaller things can be helpful, particularly in a prevention way, if I'm doing these things more regularly, I find that I'm less likely to have those more frequent up-ticks and symptoms.

0:37:48 Kirby: And you know what's cool is that you still have those upticks, you still have those symptoms, but the rebound is quicker, at least that's been my experience. So I can actively see, when I first established care with this provider in September of last year, I'd have this huge spike and I'd then shift down just a bit, and then I'd shift down just a little bit, then I'd plateau and I'd stay really in that kind of severe... That kind of moderate zone for a couple of weeks, and then I'd get back to my baseline, which hovers around the mild zone. But now I see, when I have that activation, I'd go up and then I'm right back down to the mild zone, and it's just... The periods are less intense and they're less frequent, as I said, they still happen, there's an expectation that they will happen, but they don't eclipse everything else, and I love that point that you make about intention. It's not only intention, it's consistency, it's this promise that you make to yourself every single day, even the smallest things of just trying, grasping for some sort of routine that makes you feel secure and held and that allows you to recognize that you're actually safe because your nervous system is doing exactly what it's supposed to do.

0:39:02 Kirby: Flight or fight has kept us alive as a species and it's doing its job. It's where we remain in that kind of flight of fight phase where we're just constantly activated that we can do real harm to our physical selves. So I think that's a really important thing to speak to, is just the, "Will this small stuff really add up?" I think it does, it has for me, and it's just completely enhanced my quality of life.

0:39:32 Nicole: I also think some of the benefits, and again, all we can do to speak about our own experiences... Some of the benefits for me in engaging in these types of smaller, sense-based care, like more embodiment care, I think it's changed my self-esteem... It's almost helped me re-write the story that I'm someone who doesn't deserve this kind of care or who doesn't have that many needs, or it's better to not have needs, there's a lot that's wrapped up in that, and by doing these sort of preventative things or these small things or these things that feel really pleasurable or soothing, doing them on a more regular basis reinforces whether subliminally or not, that I'm someone who's worth that kind of care and that alone, I feel like can raise my baseline and also my resilience and how I respond to triggers. And maybe that's just my own personal make-up of symptoms and triggers and stuff, but I've noticed it's even... I feel like I'm struggling to articulate it a little bit because it doesn't seem like as much of a linear thing, like, "I did this and then this thing happened as a result..." it wasn't necessarily like, "I took the bath with my favorite bath bubbles and then all of a sudden, the next day, I'm such and such a person." It's... Like you said, it's the cumulative

effect, over time, has really shifted my belief in being someone that is worthy of care, which then makes me more likely to reach out for help.

0:40:53 Kirby: Absolutely and I... We're not computers, we're not machines, we're complicated and unpredictable at times, but we're predictable enough. So I love that you speak to your thought patterns because I share the all or nothing thinking, and for me... Again, going back to the pancake story, that used to be me. I would say, if I don't have this thing, then I'm just gonna give up on this day, and I'm not deserving of a day that's full of joy and time spent with loved ones and... I just... I think I saw a graphic on Instagram a couple of days ago where I... Literally, I just got sick of my own bullshit. I'm like, I'm sick of throwing away full weekends, full Saturdays just like... Effectively watching myself from a bird's-eye view, just crawl back into the bed and feel sorry for myself in many aspects of the kinds of situations I was in. It was never... On a regular basis, it was never just like the earth-shattering grief that I knew back when I was with my family or things like that, it was like, I ran out of an ingredient and I couldn't make this thing I wanted and now I'm just gonna spiral...

0:42:02 Kirby: I think to your point that the confidence and the kind of recognition that you're worthy, it absolutely evolves from doing this work. And I think something that I thought about and shared the other day was that on my best days, I love myself, and on my worst days I accept myself, but at this phase of my life, I no longer have the capacity to actively hate myself. I deserve to be clean, I deserve to eat meals that will support my management of my diabetes and will make me feel joyful and connected to the people that I'm sharing food with, I deserve sunshine, I deserve all of these things that make me feel good. And I think that can be a radical concept for people, including myself, it took me a long time to get there.

0:43:00 Nicole: Yeah, and I would add to that, for me, it's also been... And I'm still working on this, but I deserve thriving and not just survival.

0:43:08 Kirby: Absolutely... And it's... It's a constant practice. And I think... Something I've been talking about with my therapist in recent weeks is really that kind of locus of control work... Especially in this year where everything that's external to us can feel just so out of our control, I think it's really zooming back in... And kind of doing that kind of soul search-y work of, "What are my values, what makes me feel like I deserve joy, what makes me feel like I can thrive when there are wildfires that obscure the sun for weeks and the air quality is poor, and I can't leave my home for weeks or days at a time." "What can I hold onto when we've got all of this scary messaging entering our lives all day, seemingly every day..." With this virus, I can't do all of these things that were so normal to my routine, quote, unquote. What can you search for in that value space, in that kind of locus of control space to really encourage yourself and remind yourself that you do deserve to thrive and at the very least survive this because we will survive this even when it doesn't feel like it.

0:44:29 Nicole: Something that I struggle with, and I'm interested to hear your opinion. I feel like I've seen over and over again that some aspects of routine have been really helpful for me in terms of my mental health management and knowing what are the things that if I do them, most days or

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more often than not, are really gonna help me maintain a stronger baseline, and I also find that I am someone who has quite rebellious tendencies, and it's almost like that phenomenon of watching yourself do something that's not in the best interests of your own care [chuckle] and so I'm interested in the role that routine has for you... And if that's a tension that you also experience?

0:45:09 Kirby: Yeah, I would say, when I first started doing this active work, the work that went beyond just talk therapy of you are accountable for the steps that you take towards your health, and this is an active practice, I would get almost too rigid. I would say, I have to do this thing every single day, and if I haven't started my day at this point, I'm clearly depressed, and I would just create this story that didn't really have to be told, and I think a lot of that was just this false sense of control of like, if I can move all of these pieces in this really premeditated way, then I'll be happy and... Life just doesn't work like that. There's just too much that is outside of our control, and what do you do if you tell yourself that you are taking care of your body and your mental health with a walk every morning, but the sun doesn't rise and the AQI is like 400 that day. Does that mean that you're no longer healthy? No, it means that there's an opportunity to kind of sit with A, your needs on that day and B, I think your values.

0:46:18 Kirby: So I mentioned that a bit earlier. But, for me, doing this core value mapping was also really a huge shift in what I understood to be me. I think I identified so strongly with, I know when we spoke last time, I was really into zero waste, and I'd eaten vegan for a few years, and I was just like, "This gives me a sense of purpose. I feel like I'm combating all of these awful things I see in the news, and this gives me feeling of agency..." And then I wasn't those things anymore, and I wasn't really sure what that meant with respect to the impact that I had... And I did this activity with my therapist where I did value mapping and I just looked at this huge list of just words, and I just picked out the ones that stood out to me and they were curiosity, connection, gratitude, creativity. And when I think about a routine, I just start there. What makes me feel creative? Maybe I wake up one day... I went on a walk the other week and I took a bunch of photos of these plants on my walk, these asters, these biscuit roots, and I just felt like coming home and painting them. And for me, that could easily turn...

0:47:34 Kirby: I think for past me, that could have easily turned into this really rigid, "You must paint every day to be creative and happy." And now I'm in this space where I really value connection, and for me, that really manifests as connection to nature. I love being outside, I love taking pictures and identifying plants and spending time at the beach, but... Like the past few months, the air is toxic and there's wild fire smoke everywhere, can I connect to my new kitten, can I connect to my partner, can I connect to characters in a book, and I keep them very broad, and I kind of just let the routine flow from there instead of being this really punitive, like shame cycle-y thing, which I think just does the complete opposite for your mental health and... There are some things, like I've done yoga every day since March, 'cause it's just felt like this really helpful tool to get present in my body. And when I say I've done it every day, I say it... There are days where I've done it for five minutes, there are days where I've done it for an hour, but I don't hold myself to any sort of just like, "From 8 to 9, I practice yoga..." It's just like, "This is a thing that I do that makes me feel connected to myself." Again, going back to that value, so it feels... It feels good.

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0:48:55 Nicole: Yeah, it's like you're speaking of the benefits of a more gentle structure. It's... Again, it's like finding the middle ground between the all or nothing. Because I too have been very rigid with this type of stuff in the past, and any time that I've set up a paradigm for myself where it's like, "I can only feel good or I can only be Well, if X, Y, Z, 1263 million things happen." Right?

0:49:19 Kirby: Yeah, yeah...

0:49:19 Nicole: Then it's like I'm setting myself up for failure. I'm setting myself up to feel worse. And so the reminder that it's not like, okay, we just like shrug and throw up our hands and don't take care of ourselves at all because it's ultimately uncontrollable or whatever, and it's not necessarily that it has to be this super super rigid thing or nothing, because you're right, we're humans, we're messy, we're not robots, we're not little computers, things come up, and the more that... It's like, it's the both and, it's being able to say, "Hey, these are my values, these are behaviors or things that are soothing to me, this makes me feel more like me..." And even... For me, it's... A lot of it is journaling, like being able to write this out and get this stuff out and see that and use that itself as a roadmap of, "Okay, how might I do one thing on this list today?" or something like that.

0:50:07 Kirby: Yeah, it leaves space for grace, right? 'cause you're going to get sick, you are going to have a bad period, you're going to get a call from a friend and they're gonna say they'd love to meet up with you for a distance picnic somewhere, and it's going to thwart the plans that you had in place. So I think... And going back to those therapy tools, just simply the radical acceptance of things as they are and just stepping into an observer role, which I think, again, yoga has been a huge tool for me of just observing, "What does this feel like for me?" Not judging it, I don't have to name this and say it's bad or good, I just notice that my shoulder is tight and I'm gonna write that in my journal and that... Rest on that day that it happened. And it just... We can just also accept things and meet ourselves where we are and communicate those needs to the people in our lives through boundary setting, through expectation setting, so that we have an easier time because not everything has to be an uphill struggle.

0:51:14 Nicole: Yeah, it's like, "Am I trying to actually meet my real human needs or am I trying to earn some kind of gold star on the self care checklist that, spoiler alert, doesn't exist."

0:51:25 Kirby: Or like an idealized version of yourself. I think I've talked about this through the lens of thrifting specifically. I think it's funny that in the past, I've gone... I love to thrift most of my clothes, and in the past, I've gone and bought things for an idealized version of myself that doesn't exist. There's this version of me who wears this powerful vibrant blazer on the streets of the city on my way to work, and she spends about \$80 on this cool blazer. But then there's the actual me who just loves to wear just a plain cardigan, and it's just a neutral color and it's just pretty cozy. And it's not as structured and uncomfortable, and I stopped shopping for that idealized version of myself and I think that extends to my mental health practices. I stopped creating this fantasy life that was just on the horizon of the me who started every day... You know, I think the funniest thing is that when I started working in tech, it just became so goddamn cheesy for me to hear how many people tell you that they start their morning at 4:00 AM meditating for two hours, and then they drink their green juice and... It's this very performative space where...

0:52:45 Kirby: It's kind of this performance of health. And it's like, "Okay, well, I could do those things and hold myself to that standard where I get poor sleep because I'm trying to wake up at 4:00 AM or I could simply accept that I love to sleep in until 8:00 and I benefit from doing a 25-minute practice of yoga every day, and that can just be the me that I am." I don't have to try to do that performance that everyone else is doing right now 'cause it's not authentic to me and it doesn't align with my values actually.

0:53:16 Nicole: I feel very seen by this reminder of actual me versus idealized me. I think it extends to self care stuff too, that maybe I wish that what was soothing for me was such and such thing that looked good on Instagram, but actually, I wanna get under my electric blanket and read trashy rom-coms... So or like books. So it's like... [chuckle]..

0:53:34 Kirby: Yeah and I love... I love the concept of unsexy self care, right? And I photograph mine a lot. Of like, unsexy self care, I just did laundry for the first time in two weeks, or... I frame it as, "This is for your future, Kirby." Of like... Just these like mundane, unsexy, boring things that bring me a ton of stability and security and comfort that aren't the green juice at 4:00 AM. That... Like you were saying, they don't photograph well, but they make you feel good. I think those are important too.

0:54:04 Nicole: Yeah, that idea of, "What future me would be really grateful for..." I know that I've shared this on the podcast before, but I think a lot about trying to make decisions that would make my past self proud and my future self-grateful, and it's not always possible, but I think about that framing a lot.

0:54:20 Kirby: Yeah.

0:54:22 Nicole: So, I guess tangential to what you explicitly share about your mental health management on Instagram, I'm always grateful when you also share specific examples of the boundaries that you're putting in place for yourself, really to prioritize that care. Whether that's communication boundaries with family or anything else, and I would love for you to share some specific examples of what boundary setting looks like for you in this regard. I know that boundaries might be different at work versus family and friends, that type of thing, so you can take it in whatever direction you want, but I feel like this is sort of the tie it all together bow, that it's... Everything you've talked about so far, it's so much of the self-knowledge and noticing and understanding what works for you and asking for help and prioritizing care and all of these different things, and then we need boundaries to protect the time and energy and potentially money that are going into that care.

0:55:11 Kirby: Yeah, so I think a boundary that I have really worked on this year and this season is just... Well, I wanna take a step back and say, sometimes when we talk about boundaries and behaviors of others it can feel very much like, "This is this thing that other people are doing to me and that I'm preventing them from having access to me." And it's actually a two-way relationship, there's something we are doing, we are allowing people access to us, we are engaging in behaviors

that kind of facilitate this ease with which people can access us. And I think there... In setting a boundary, I think there's equal work in taking a step back, in... And observing ways that you can really be accountable to yourself and that you can really, again, be a little prevent... Preventative where possible... Obviously, it's not always possible, but where possible. Where you can really kind of restructure the way that you engage with people. And I think for me, one thing that was revealed to me through therapy this year was that... And it's something I've known in the past, is that I really step into a nurturer role. When I was growing up...

0:56:24 Kirby: I grew up pretty quickly after a certain point, and I really was regarded in my family unit, my family structure as somebody who was solving problems, and I became very good at solving problems for other people, and I think that's why I went into public health. I initially started studying psychology and I switched to public health because I just wanted to make things better for people and solve things for people, and it's not until recently that I recognized that there are some things that cannot be solved by a single person, and I think one boundary that was just like, it feels in hindsight, so simple, but I never thought about it at the time, was just disabling my DMs on Instagram because not everyone needs access to you, and I think with my job, I work in DEI, this has been such an intense year, and it is my paid work, and again, that's why I'm so protective of my time offline, I'm not here to do work for free, but I say no a lot at work, I set a lot of conversations around boundaries and what my team will and will not do, and it has made my experience at this job, especially my experience at this job as a person with an anxiety disorder just so much more manageable and easier to navigate.

0:57:46 Kirby: So again, I think at the top of our conversation, I mentioned, you don't have to be in a crisis, you would be amazed at how far boundary work and values work and all of this work can get you in your career, in your education, in your partnerships. If you have the language to do that.

0:58:12 Nicole: Yeah, I feel like one of the threads that's coming out in this conversation that I didn't expect, but I guess I shouldn't be surprised by is sort of pushing back against this all or nothing mentality, because even hearing you talk about Instagram, I feel like it would be easy to think "I'm feeling bad going on this app, so therefore I'm not gonna use it" as opposed to "I'm gonna turn off my DMs and see if that fixes it." That there's something really human in the, I don't know, the willingness to experiment with stuff and to find some of those... Maybe a 5% change is good enough, maybe it doesn't have to be this huge thing, and like you said at work, maybe it doesn't have to be something really big, but it's saying no to certain types of projects or... I mean, I guess I don't really know how that plays out for you in your work environment, but if you... I guess if you could share if you feel comfortable, any specific examples like you gave about the DMs of a boundary, whether that's at work, in your partnership, with friends or family, I think that specifics, because boundaries is one of those high level topics that we talk about, and I think we understand and maybe we do, but then we also don't, like any specific boundaries you can share that you have found to be helpful, I think would be great.

0:59:24 Kirby: One thing that I find can be stressful in my position or somebody, I'm like a data analyst for the diversity space and the specific organ, my company. And people would ask me for data, like within an hour, like ping me, having no relationship with me, "Hey, I need this by 12, I

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have this meeting with this important person," there is like usually a name drop, "I need this now," and I kind of worked with my managers who I have to say are just phenomenal, there are two people that have just really advocated for me since I got there. We kind of spoke as a team, I let them know what my experience was with that kind of lack of respect for my time and my boundaries in my bandwidth, and we kind of worked together to communicate with our partners and our stakeholder groups to say, "Listen, we don't do same-day request, this is actually what goes into this process, if you want to get this data, these are the steps that you need to take," and it's been made extremely clear that if people are waiting until the very last minute to do something that they knew about weeks in advance, that we're not the place to stop, and I think that has made...

1:00:41 Kirby: Again, my job is made so much more... So much easier by doing that, and I think that it's... When you set those kinds of boundaries at work, you make less space for kind of these low value-add, low visibility projects that don't really stand to grow you as a professional or give you visibility, and then you in turn have so much more bandwidth and space for those high visibility projects, so that you can get more recognition for your work, and that is absolutely critical for women and for black women to put your name on everything, to get visibility for everything, and then go get your payment for that work, don't let people waste your time or distract you with low value-add projects. No is a complete sentence.

1:01:29 Nicole: Yeah, and that you don't have to just kind of like chase and play catch up with other people's failure to manage their time well.

1:01:39 Kirby: It's all about people-pleasing. Right? We don't like saying no to people. We don't like feeling like we're letting people down, but I have to say, when I started saying no at work, I got so many more spot bonuses, I had my manager putting me up for promotion, just complete night and day, so I cannot stress that work enough when you're actually kind of building your professional brand and working with people, 'cause it does matter.

1:02:05 Nicole: Yeah, I appreciate what you just said about the good things that have come out of saying no for you, because I think that it's really easy to tell ourselves the story of, if I say no to my partner, or to my mom, or to my boss, or this type of stuff, I think that there's a narrative of like then, such and such bad thing is gonna happen. Or then I'm not gonna get promoted, or then I'm not gonna... And of course, it's not universal that people are gonna respect and appreciate, our boundary, it's is not universal that they're gonna be happy about our, No, I certainly, I'm not gonna say that that's the case, but I do wonder how much of that sort of like... I don't know, like doom projection that we do in our minds is real, 'cause I think that oftentimes we can create the worst case scenario of what happens if we enforce any of these boundaries or have boundaries, or like you said, just use your voice and say, "Hey, I'm not looking for these kind of recommendations," it doesn't even have to be this really harsh thing, I think sometimes there's this belief with boundaries that it's really, really rigid and it can be, but just being able to say like, "I'm posting this because X, Y, or Z, I'm not looking for input or advice or any of that type of stuff," sometimes it really just is simple, it doesn't have to be such a big deal.

1:03:19 Kirby: It doesn't have to be hard, and I think when it goes to work, pair your no with a yes.

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"No, we don't do this, these are our offerings... With this type of lead time, this is what we can produce for you, here is an example of how that output would look and make that the thing that you're offering, you don't have to stress yourself out and make yourself sick trying to say yes to things that don't need to be said yes to you when there are many other things that you can actually do. So it's a balancing act always, and I totally agree with the sillier things, with the smaller things, with the less kind of formal and professional things. Yeah, it can really be easy, and I think you point out pretty. And it's great that you point out that is a form of the thinking trap of just the fortune-telling of a negative forecasting, that doesn't... If you can recognize that it doesn't have to be the case.

1:04:19 Nicole: Yeah, we've already covered so much stuff, is there anything that hasn't come up in this conversation yet that you wanted to mention?

1:04:27 Kirby: No, I would just stress to really practice that kind of radical acceptance and really do you try to leave a lot of space for grace for yourself, especially now more than ever, I think we're all trying our best and recognizing... I think I read somewhere that instead of writing a to-do list, you could write a list of things that you did to feel good that day and take stock in that instead of getting anxious about everything that was not accomplished. I think this will be a huge season as we're winding down this year to really just practice acceptance and not beat ourselves up because we have no idea what's coming in the next month, and it's really a day at a time thing.

1:05:16 Nicole: Yeah, I think that's beautiful. What is the best place for people to find you and say hi online? I know that you said you do not... That you're not gonna share your Instagram, which I love and totally respect, but is there a way that you would want people to say hi?

1:05:30 Kirby: I think for right now, in this season of life, I love... I have gotten DMs from a couple of people who've listened to your podcast or you've put them in touch with me, I love that. There were a couple of people that I connected with, and I think that's kind of my boundary with social media is if we engage and we've got a mutual point of contact and there's a message, and it's just not this expectation that there's access, I'm so happy to engage with people in that respect, but I do think that similarly to you, I'm finding Instagram to be an increasingly kind of stressful space, especially as we go into election season in the next couple of weeks, so... Yeah, I think that's probably the only space where I'm online right now, I think I'm trying to reduce that kind of online time as much as possible right now.

1:06:21 Nicole: Yeah, I love that. Well, thank you so much for coming back on the show and for everything that you shared.

1:06:25 Kirby: Of course. Yeah, I love chatting with you Nicole, thank you for having me.

1:06:34 Nicole: And that's our show for today. Our music is by Adam Day, who also handles our sound editing. Thanks, Adam, you're the best. And huge Thanks as well to every single member of our patreon community for making this honest conversation, this entire podcast, and so much of my other work, like my twice weekly personal essay newsletter called Good Question possible. Your

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