

Behavior analysis and neurodivergence

Guest: Nicole Shallow

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.

[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Hello and welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, cohost of the Sleep Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Nicole Shallow, a self described lover of all things sleep and how to use the science of behavior change to take back our nights and enjoy our lives.

Nicole is a board certified behavior analyst who specializes in the field of sleep. Her work started supporting neurodivergent children and has extended into helping others sleep better through events like this one, her blog, and social media.

Nicole Shallow, thank you so much for being with us today.

Nicole Shallow

It's an honor to be here.

Meagen Gibson

So Nicole, I would love it if you could tell us a little bit about your professional history because you come to your interest in sleep and behavior analysis through a path that's different from many of the people we feature here at the sleep conference.

Nicole Shallow

Yeah. I think my interest in sleep was always there, but I didn't know that I could actually support that piece. I never knew that it was something to be supported. However, it really kicked off in grad school. And I remember to this day, it's like a flashbulb memory.

We were in class and my professor said, hey, there's no behavior analysts doing sleep. We've got toileting, we've got feeding, we've got specialists in other areas, but no one's actually doing sleep. And there's so much research in our field that shows we can support these children, and adults and teens, to actually sleep better through behavior analysis.

And I was like, okay. Challenge accepted. How I Met Your Mother would repeat probably at that time.

But really diving into that, I did my final grad project on that. So a whole semester researching and then presenting the project to my classmates and to other people who were willing to listen and then

continue doing research around that just on my own and getting mentorship from a PhD in, at the time they were in the UK, but they're originally from the states.

[00:02:07]

And I just dove into it. It's almost like a hyper focus for me. As soon as I realize we can have good sleep and there's so many things that we do in our days that interrupt this, I knew I just had to continue and share the knowledge.

Because the prevalence rates of sleep issues, especially for neurodivergent children, but also just the general public, have increased tremendously in the last 40 plus years.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And what an awesome thing for your professor, I think you said, to put together and for you to see the opportunity there for an underserved not only population of people, but also support their families, things like that. These are people that need support in an area that wasn't traditionally being served. So bravo to both of you.

Nicole Shallow

Yeah, and I think just touching on my personal journey because I think that's what stands out for me. My passion comes from that, knowing how hard it was for my mother to teach us how to fall asleep. I have a twin sister, so it's double trouble on that one.

When we were little, they only had one method at the time. It was the cry it out method. It was very much used in the early 90s. And it just hurt my mom's heart to do that. And so knowing that, and there's no judgment for anyone who chooses that, but knowing that there are alternatives for parents.

If we can do slow change, we can make adjustments so that this process doesn't have to be hard both on the child or on the parent, as well as I think I never really truly learned how to engage in that behavior of falling asleep properly. Because in childhood I had troubles, and then in my preteen years anxiety started to rise up and I'd end up sleeping on my sister's floor.

I think I slept on my sister's floor for multiple years and it was like I really wanted independence on my own but still needed that person. I had so many rituals that I felt like I needed, but now I've learned you can let go of those rituals. They aren't needed for sleep. And sleep is a natural biological process. It's just a matter of what behaviors we engage in during the day and how to support the sleep coming at night.

Meagen Gibson

I love that you shared your personal story too, because what a unique reflection to be a twin, to be parented as a twin, to have sleep expertise, to reflect on your own sleep struggles. That's a unique window that a lot of people don't get.

We're all individuals. Even if you're a twin, you're an individual. But most people don't have someone so close to their likeness and genetic makeup to compare to and to say, we're both raised in the same household, we have different idiosyncrasies, but how can we get better sleep and things like that. So I love that reflection.

[00:04:58] Nicole Shallow

Thank you.

Meagen Gibson

And you said a couple of things too, that I wanted to come back to, but you were sharing so much now I've forgotten. So we're going to move on. I'm sure it'll come back to me.

And then after school, how was your entrance into sleep practice and behavioral analysis in your professional life?

Nicole Shallow

Yeah, so I had current clients at the time and I had quite a few that were struggling to sleep. And we had never really thought about, I never really thought about, hey, I can help change for this family.

And so working together with a colleague at the time, we took on these cases, we're like, hey, do you want to give this a shot? We have an idea of how to support you with sleep. And we were able to do it over and over again. And we're like, hey, there's something here.

There is a thought that kids with autism or different neurodivergent needs don't sleep. And this is just something that we have to live with, or look at medication and other things to just get them to sleep.

However, it was all about just changing their environment to suit their body and what their nervous systems needed to help get them to that place of feeling sleepy and then learning, I go into bed, I fall asleep, then I get sleep. Because once you can get that chain, it keeps going because sleep is the reinforcer.

And we'll dive into all of that, the behavior change science, but sleep is so powerful to maintain certain routines. And that's why sometimes we do get stuck in these weird ritualistic habits because we're just wanting sleep, and then a lot of people do a lot of things just to get sleep.

Meagen Gibson

I'm glad you brought that up because that was actually the thing I wanted to come back to that you had mentioned earlier, was sleep routines. And we know that when children are really young, at least neurotypical children, I'll say, they say sleep routines are really important and get into something soothing and calming, et cetera.

But then moving into adulthood, many of us who struggle with our sleep develop routines and behaviors and rituals that we get so attached to, that if they're disrupted or if we have a change of scenery or geography or something gets in the way of that routine, then it's actually causing a problem not to be able to perform the routine or ritual, right?

Nicole Shallow

Yes. And so it becomes controlling. And I think that's where a lot of sleep problems really start. And I have been in that controlling cycle and I'd say I slip back depending on certain events that are happening in my life.

[00:07:38]

So looking at that, and it's the awareness piece and I hope that today that's what we can provide, it's like the awareness of our own habits and our own behavior patterns and how to flip it so that you still get your needs met.

Because at that point, once you're starting to engage in behaviors to control sleep, sleep is probably less likely to come. So it is just learning about our body, how to set ourselves up, how to notice why we're doing things and why we're stuck in this loop and how we can flip it and just break it, change it softly. It doesn't have to be super hard all the time.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, I love that you said that and you said the word control several times. And I think that's really the point we're going to try to make today, right, is to set yourself up to support sleep happening, but not to control that sleep is going to happen, right?

Nicole Shallow

Unfortunately, for all of us, I'm very anxious too, and I like control. It's comforting, but control, yeah, it is not conducive to sleeping. We just need to teach our bodies subconsciously how to get to sleep.

Meagen Gibson

And we hear the word resiliency a lot. But the thing that people forget about resiliency is that it comes from an atmosphere of support, right. So we can learn to be more resilient around, and flexible around, sleep and how we get it and when it comes and what leads to it.

But that has to happen in a supportive environment in which our needs are being met and we're getting the nutritional support and the behavioral support and all the things that we need to set us up for success.

Nicole Shallow

Definitely.

Meagen Gibson

So I want to get into some of that. All right, so let's just start at the beginning of the day. How are daylight and movement related to sleep in your practice?

Nicole Shallow

Yes. So, they are huge behavior change modalities that we want to look at. And some of them are actually easy. Daylight, I start with that, and that's usually my first suggestion with anyone because it is the easiest thing that we can do, for most people.

Getting out in the morning is really important. So the sunlight actually anchors our body clock and our body clock is what we need to get all the rhythms going across our body and different systems and everything. So daylight, if you can get it into your eyes, that's the key.

[00:10:06]

So going outside, no sunglasses, no blue light blocking glasses in the morning, hopefully within 30 minutes of waking up, if it's just sitting on your patio or sitting near a window that has a lot of daylight coming in. That's really important to get things going.

And then daylight throughout the day. I'd say since we've been in lockdown and most people are online and working from home, we are more sedentary. We are more inside. For example, I'm in a den right now.

There are no windows in here, but I have to make a conscious effort to get up, go out to the patio, take the dog out, to engage in those behaviors, because otherwise I will feel a little bit off later in the day.

And then movement, movement is really important. Again, the same thing, we're not getting enough light, we're not getting enough movement. A lot of us are sedentary and sitting at desks. And I've worked with clients where they're like, I was sleeping so well when I was working out, like landscaping or doing my job outside.

And then now they're just sitting at home watching TV. Or if they're going camping, they sleep so well when they camp. But then at home I'm like, okay, the difference there is you're moving probably a lot more and you're getting so much more light. Some bodies need more than others, so figuring out what works for you. And then that's the morning, but daylight is also important in the evening.

Meagen Gibson

For lack of daylight, right?

Nicole Shallow

Yeah, exactly. As it dims. So our bodies are still on that, we're still in the sun cycle. And so we have access to light 24/7. We know if you go to Vegas, they light those places up like it's daylight. You don't even know what day is night and night is day there.

Same thing goes for our homes. We can turn on the lights really bright, but trying to move your day with that light. So in the morning, turn on all the lights, your brightest lights possible, no dimmers. Throw them on, open the blinds.

And then as the day progresses, dimming those lights, especially in the summer, dimming those lights in the evening, closing the blinds, bringing the lights down, and avoiding too much screen time if you can in the evening. Just because, again, all that light is detected through our eyes, and blue light is the one that comes from outside as well as our screens, which causes suppression and melatonin.

Melatonin is our kickstarter to the sleep cycle. I think that's a very popular word now, everyone knows what melatonin is. Here you can get it over the counter, but our body actually naturally produces it. We just do a lot of behaviors that interfere with the natural production of that.

Meagen Gibson

And I think a lot of people misunderstand melatonin because of the marketing. It's so easily available. It comes in gummies, like, oh, this must be something that's going to help me sleep.

[00:13:16]

Just the same way that acetaminophen would help with my pain. It's like, oh, this will help me sleep, but actually your body is going to make it all on its own if you have a couple of behavior modifications that will signal to your body and your brain to produce that hormone and induce sleep at night.

Nicole Shallow

Exactly. The best thing you can do is just dim those lights. And I have done, through social media, we did a no screens challenge and one woman said, I thought I had Insomnia, but it was just my phone. Wow. Sometimes it can be as simple as putting that phone down because phones can also increase excitability in the brain.

It doesn't cause that calming effect. And then also just the light exposure and engaging in other alternatives other than screens. But if you are using screens, that's okay, just pop the blue light glasses on or make sure night shift mode is on. And just noticing how your body is responding to the use of the blue light in the evening.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, and I love those because they're easy changes to make gradually over time, right, like making sure night shift is on your phone. You don't have to stop all electronics right away. You can try really gradual changes.

I just recently, because I'm doing a sleep conference so every single day people tell me what I'm doing wrong, so I just recently changed back to a Kindle reader off of my phone. That's step one. Distance from my phone to my bed. Next week we'll try step two, which is reading an actual book.

Nicole Shallow

Yeah and I think it's also self kindness around, again, we go back to that controlling piece. And I know for myself, if I'm like, you can't have your phone and then all of a sudden, one night, it's Friday, it's Saturday, it's like a different night, and you got stuff going on, your phone is on later.

Don't be hard on yourself when those things happen. It's just if it's a habit or if it's a coping skill, sometimes people use scrolling as a coping skill to avoid...

Meagen Gibson

Everything.

Nicole Shallow

And reading is a great alternative to scrolling. You can engage in the same sort of actions, it's not as exciting and it's not as immediate. So finding alternatives to those things.

And then also, I know my partner, he's fine. He'll use his phone right up until bedtime and he falls asleep, no problem. But I don't push him to do it. I can still do it myself as my own choice. And it's up to them if they want to try.

[00:15:59] Meagen Gibson

Exactly. I have a running theory that keeps getting confirmed over and over again. But there's always two kinds of people. The people that fall asleep with no problem. They could drink a coffee straight before bed, and then the people that have more trouble and they get into partnerships with each other, they find each other.

Nicole Shallow

Like those people who can just fall asleep on an airplane. That is like my dream.

Meagen Gibson

I could never. You could give me enough sleep medication for a rhino and I cannot sleep on a plane. That's neither here nor there.

I do want to touch on neurodivergence in this part of our discussion because I know that there's a lot of, I mean neurodivergence is a very large spectrum of things that all have different traits with them. And some of them come with more of a nocturnal clock or can have more struggles, just more wakefulness in the evening hours, sometimes.

So I'd love if you could talk from that level of expertise and how do we support somebody in that situation?

Nicole Shallow

Right. And so depending on the individual and what they're experiencing, so I can give an example. ADHD, for example, I would say regulation is a tough one depending on how they present, and understanding how to shift. Even the skill of ending a task and shifting to another one can actually be tricky as well.

So sometimes learning how to support those shifts, if it's like, do we need to put in timers? Do we need to put in reminders to help move that along? As well as identifying what is regulating. So someone with ADHD, something that might not be regulating for a neurotypical, could be super regulating for them.

So it is almost like a little experiment. It's trying different things, noticing how my body responds, and then moving towards those that are helpful. I'd say most brains in general, things like scrolling and social media, even talking with friends, video games.

For some brains those can be even more reactive and it can be hard to come down from them. And you might feel like you're calm and then you end the video game and then you lie down and the brain is like, you're basically replaying everything that you did because you just can't relax.

So that would be looking at, like how do I time it? Because if it's something that you enjoy, it's not something that you should just get rid of forever. It's timing it and giving yourself that space to unwind.

[00:18:38]

For autistic children and adults, looking at how their bodies again need to regulate, sometimes they are less sensitive to the subtle environmental cues so they do need that really clear, like the lights are down, the screens are off, and now there's a routine that is really calming and regulating for that individual.

But it takes time and understanding the person and how they respond and what sensory sensitivities they might have, and how to reduce the likelihood of a cortisol spike or a stress response. Because there can be those things that pop up as well.

Meagen Gibson

I love that you name those because really what we're talking about is arousal, right? So even when you were talking about ADHD, and I have two neurodivergent kids and one of them really struggles with a change in task, right? Unless it's his idea, of course.

And so those shifts, I have to be really mindful of arousal and have to know what his calming factors are, so that if there's no way around this change or the shift in what we're doing next being arousing, then how am I to going then help him regulate himself, and help me regulate him? So that we're not getting into bed just totally up and irritated and aroused.

Nicole Shallow

The last thing you want to do is fight, get into a fight at night time because now, you know, the arousal level for everybody is just here and it's going to take a long time for everyone to come down. So having a routine, and routines are really helpful, again, routines without super tight control of them. So it's just like something that we move through.

For me, my routine would look like watch a show, end the show, go wash my face, brush teeth, go into bed, journal maybe a little bit and read a book. That's generally what we do. And so if you go through the same motions, it will teach your body that sleep is coming and you'll start to get comfortable with that.

When you first start though, sleep might not come right away and that's okay. That routine is not meant to control and get sleep going right away. But the more it's paired with that same behavior of falling asleep, getting to bed, and even resting, that's just a good start.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. All right, great. So let's move on to nutrition a little bit and talk about foods, drinks, general, what kinds of things are going to assist and support your ability to sleep?

Nicole Shallow

Yes. So for food, I always recommend, if you are unsure of your diet or if you just don't know where to go, I would say talk to a nutritionist, talk to your naturopath, talk to someone who specializes in that.

However, just some basic rule of thumb for me is having consistent meals throughout the day. So again, neurodivergent people have trouble with consistent meals, especially if you're engaged in a

task, you might forget to eat. So having a set schedule with breaks scheduled into your day so that you will eat, kind of like when we were in school.

[00:22:03] Meagen Gibson

Totally. I want somebody to tell me it's time to go to the cafeteria and for someone to give me food.

Nicole Shallow

Yeah, exactly. Because the whole task of even making your own food, right, is daunting at the same time. So it's breaking that down. But first thing is wake up when you wake up, have breakfast and then get your meals on how what works for your body that day and keep that consistent.

And then the foods you do want to avoid, and this is, I think, a general rule too, it's like high glycemic index foods, especially some people can be more sensitive to those sugar spikes. So looking at balancing that out, of course, more fruits and veggies.

And there's lots of materials online. I even have a blog, I think, from a naturopath who gave some suggestions. But looking at maybe more protein based foods, low glycemic index foods that aren't going to sugar spike.

Because if you have a sugar spike before bed, and I don't know if anyone's experienced this who's watching, but the other night I had a piece of cake, pretty late in the evening, woke up in the middle of the night like, oh, we're awake.

Meagen Gibson

Do some mental math on all the things I said and did today. Yeah.

Nicole Shallow

Because your body can, it will come down from it and then it just makes you more alert in the night. Yeah. So food with that and then some examples of different snacks might be nut butters in the evening. I sometimes have a little smoothie with berries because it's low, with spinach or something.

But whatever works for you. Just notice how your body responds depending on what you're eating. Sometimes what can happen, and this can be a suggestion, although I think naturopaths don't necessarily recommend it, but if you have a high sugar food, you actually do feel sleepy after because you have a bit of a crash, but that might impact the quality of sleep that you're getting overnight.

So, short term might be helpful. Long term, overnight, not as helpful. So just monitoring that. And then what was the next question, I forgot?

Meagen Gibson

Oh, well, I'll stall a little bit while we think about it.

Nicole Shallow

Okay. Good.

[00:24:20] Meagen Gibson

Yeah I was just going to say that one of my neurospicy kids..

Nicole Shallow

Neurospicy, love it.

Meagen Gibson

Because I adore this kid and everything about him and see how all of the characteristics that make him unique are going to serve him really well in life. I just have to approach it differently than I would to anybody else.

But he's a high glycemic food chaser, right? If it's a high sugar carb, he's going to want it. So in trying not to demonize high sugar, all foods are good in our house, right? We're not trying to demonize anybody's food choices.

But I have started a little bit of an experiment with him and said, okay, so if you want a banana, because he makes pretty good food choices, I'm like, okay, you want a banana right before bed, because I know what he's after, he just wants a hit of sugar.

I'm like, okay, try it tonight. Let's see how you sleep. Tomorrow night, if you sleep terribly tonight, then tomorrow night, let's try a handful of any kind of nut you want. Do you want almonds? Do you want cashews? Do you want this? Do you want that? Like one handful of, and he has a small hand, he's a small person, one handful of nuts before you eat the banana.

Or mixing protein choices, fat choices, things like that, that are going to help lower his glycemic spike with that food. And he's noticed, now he takes accountability and he's like, mum I'm going to go grab a banana, but don't worry, I'm going to eat a cashew first or something.

Nicole Shallow

Yeah. I think for most people, experiment with yourself and notice how you feel. Because again, it's not about control. Okay, now I have to eat these foods that Nicole has told me. It's like, these are options. And again, it's all about the timing of the food.

So if you love sugary foods, go ahead and have them in the morning, right? Like, if you're going to have them, have them in the morning when your system is revved up and ready to go to digest and move through. But in the evening, our digestive system and everything starts to shut down. So the processing piece is a lot slower.

So it's just timing it and experimenting. And I love that sandwiching the two, so first have the fatty thing and then have maybe a bit of this. And you can even shave it down. Like, let's say you're eating a whole banana. You might just be like, okay, I'm going to have half a banana. I'm going to have a quarter of a banana.

And then eventually you're realizing, oh, I don't actually need the banana. It's more of a habit that I'm in, and it's comforting for me. So again, it's noticing that piece and why we need the banana.

[00:26:54] Meagen Gibson

Speaking of comforting foods and rituals, I'm a coffee drinker.

Nicole Shallow

Yes.

Meagen Gibson

And the majority of it is, it's an experience ritual. Right. And I've played with like, what is the hot liquid in the cup? And do I really need the coffee or do I really need the ritual?

And I have found for myself, I need the ritual. So I'm able to substitute the coffee and the caffeine a lot of the time. But for some people, that morning picks me up, I mean I think of shift workers and people who are really somebody that has to be at work at 05:00 A.M. or something, I get it.

If that's not your circadian rhythm to pop up out of bed at 05:00 A.M. rosy and motivated to do your day, I get why you get the large coffee before you go to work, but how does that kind of stuff impact your ability to sleep later?

Nicole Shallow

Yeah. So coffee, or even caffeine in general.

Meagen Gibson

Right.

Nicole Shallow

The way that you have caffeine, again, looking at how your body responds, I had to cut coffee because I would feel anxious, but I know it's probably just my heart rate going up. So I'd get the symptoms of anxiety. One mistake was I had a cup of coffee before a big test, and then that was when I realized, we cannot have that anymore.

But looking at how your body responds, some people aren't as sensitive to caffeine. And different forms of caffeine, tea versus coffee, green tea, all that sort of thing, coke. But looking at the timing, how long does it take for your body to process it?

So caffeine on average has about a half life of 5 to 6 hours. So even after 5 to 6 hours, you still have half of the caffeine. So it's still burning off right, it's not quite out of your system yet. And what can happen is caffeine, it really interferes with one system that will help with sleep.

And it's called adenosine, which is a neurotransmitter that builds up in our system. And caffeine blocks the receptors. So you drink the coffee, you don't feel the tired pressure anymore, so it just reinforces that cycle.

And now when you feel tired again, you're going to drink the coffee. You don't feel that tiredness, uncomfortable anymore, and then it just perpetuates.

[00:29:09]

So, how to break the habit? Coffee is great. I know some people have referred to it as joy juice.

Meagen Gibson

I haven't heard that one, but I will adopt it now.

Nicole Shallow

Yeah, but it is like, why am I having it? Is it a ritual? Do I really need it? And shift workers, they sometimes will have it right before their evening shifts. My husband as well, he does need a cup of coffee because they're going to be up for 12 hours.

But looking at how early you can maybe cut it off, and allow your body to process it. If you're feeling sleepy after it wears off, what can you do to help push through that feeling of the sleep pressure. And some things to do are to go outside so that daylight, it reminds your body we're awake, we need to still be up.

And then also movement, getting out for a walk, maybe even outside and doing a little bit of that just to give yourself an alternative so that you're not seeking the coffee or the caffeine at like 02:00 P.M., 04:00 P.M., now we're at 06:00 P.M. after dinner. Or 07:00 P.M. coffee, just like nightcaps and things like that.

A lot of people say it doesn't impact their sleep. So the ones who say it doesn't impact their sleep, it does, but at a level that they aren't consciously aware of.

Meagen Gibson

It's more like heart rate variability and recovery and high quality rest.

Nicole Shallow

Yeah, you don't get into that really deep restorative sleep. So you still feel tired in the morning and then you go for the coffee, reach for the coffee again. And now it's a perpetual cycle.

So, again, awareness of why you're using it. Use it if you want. Just timing it and figuring out what timing works for you. If you are feeling groggy in the morning, maybe it is cutting it down to some decaf because there's still caffeine in decaf coffee, and seeing if that helps too.

Meagen Gibson

Great.

Nicole Shallow

Yeah. Another drink I did want to add though, I think this one gets missed sometimes is alcohol.

[00:31:16] Meagen Gibson

Yes.

Nicole Shallow

Because that one is a common coping strategy to regulate in the evening.

Meagen Gibson

Right. So if we've had a cup of coffee or three cups of coffee and then we're feeling wired, have a glass of wine or a beer or something, or a cocktail to bring us back down. But there's some consequences to that as well, right?

Nicole Shallow

Yes. And again, it's all about how our bodies process it. And it can be a subconscious thing. Like you're not necessarily aware of how it's impacting your sleep, but you still don't wake up feeling great.

Alcohol actually cuts out your REM sleep and it impacts the quality of the deep sleep again. And REM sleep is so important for emotional regulation and all of that. And so if we're drinking to calm, I think, again, it's figuring out, why am I having the wine? Or why am I having this drink right now?

Do I need it? When can I time it better? Should I maybe have happy hour drinking? If you feel like that's something you want to do, but if it's a habit every day and your sleep is feeling not great, I would encourage just trying to phase it out a little bit. Finding alternatives.

Is bubbly water a good alternative to a cocktail? And does it do the same thing? Or giving yourself something else to do where you would do that. Because I do think, and it's in the media everywhere, people have stressful jobs. They come home and they decompress with alcohol.

And so that is something too, like I have noticed myself doing that in the past. If you're watching a lot of Scandal, it's like all they do in that show. But it is, again, noticing your behaviors, why you're doing it. And is that something that you feel like is moving towards what you want, or is it pulling you away?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, it also depends on your age, I think, too. Right? Some of these less supportive habits that we get into in our early professional lives start to really have, we start to really notice, gosh, I got 8 hours of sleep last night, but I feel like hell and it was hard to get out of bed. And you're like, oh, right, maybe I should start looking at all the things that I'm ingesting that feel a little heavier now.

Nicole Shallow

Yeah. And again, it's not don't do it, it's a more awareness of, why am I using it? How can I maybe replace it a couple of nights a week? Or if I am really stressed and using it as a coping skill for that, how can I support myself in reducing my overall stress? Do I need to ask for help? Do I need to reach out for additional support? And moving towards that.

[00:34:01] Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. So one of the most interesting things about producing these conferences is that sometimes with all of the knowledge in the world, we're still not able to change our behavior or put that knowledge into practice.

So as a behavioral analysis expert, if I get it out, why is that? That we know well, but we don't do well, we don't use well.

Nicole Shallow

Right. So we just get in these habit loops. And so from when I started just entering this field as one to one, working with kids, learning how the science of behavior actually works, I was like, oh, this is why I do all these random things. My sister also has her own habit loops and if we get caught up in each other's, it's just too much.

But for me, I'll simplify it a little bit. So there's like a three term contingency that we look at, and it's a bit of a loop. So you have a trigger in the environment, we engage in a behavior and what happens after it is something we call reinforcement.

So it's either positively reinforcing or negatively reinforcing. Both things maintain that behavior. So that behavior will continue more likely in the future if following it is reinforcement. That's how these loops are maintained. I wrote down a couple examples that we've kind of looked at already, but caffeine, for example, is an easy loop to look at.

Meagen Gibson

I'm alert and productive after I have it, so I've got a positive reinforcement.

Nicole Shallow

Yeah. And I think it's actually more negative too, like you're feeling the pressure in your head, you're feeling tired, your eyes are heavy, your body doesn't feel alert. And then you have the coffee and that joy juice just brings it. And then it removes that feeling of discomfort that you originally had. And so that is so powerful in maintaining a coffee habit.

In order to change the loop though, you do need to have an alternative behavior that you can plan to engage in to still meet that same need. So you still want to feel alert, you still want to feel good and energized and focused. What can you do to get yourself there, that's not maybe coffee at 06:00 P.M.? Maybe it's something else that we could do.

Meagen Gibson

Right.

Nicole Shallow

I think that's the hard part is people know they engage in these behaviors but they don't actually know what the replacement that will still fill that need for them is. And then that's how we fall back into old habits because the replacement they tried didn't meet the need that they needed in that situation.

[00:36:55] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely.

Nicole Shallow

That's where my lens comes from because every person is very different. And then there's another part of it that can increase the likelihood that you might fall back into old habits. So in our world we call them setting events.

And it's something that happens in our environment that can increase the likelihood that that behavior pattern will come back or that will show up. And that can be stress, maybe a few nights like poor night sleep and you're just really struggling because your sleep is just not good, and so you're drinking way more coffee than you were, because it's a coping skill that just is easy and it works.

All of those things can also impact. So when I talk to people and when I look with parents and adults and anyone, it is like what is happening in the environment that is causing these shifts to come back?

Personally, anxiety is mine. If I'm working so much and I don't have a good enough balance, then that's when old habits start to pop up again. And so it's awareness and then I notice it and if I need it that night, I'm kind to myself. I'm like, yes, you know what? You can watch a TV show to fall asleep tonight. And then tomorrow we'll try again.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly, right.

Nicole Shallow

Even as a sleep specialist, I found myself being really hard on myself. But we're all human and so it is just knowing that it's okay and you can always get back on track.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I love that. It's very relatable. And so much of our responses to stresses or life circumstances are situational or seasonal or things like that. Right. People deal with seasonal affective disorder and I have a lot of sympathy for people who live way in the extreme northern or southern tips of their hemisphere respectively, because you don't get a lot of sunlight in the summer.

Heavy curtains to get those night time cues, right? I mean the sun sets by like eleven in some places and then comes back up at four and I'm like, wait a minute, can we go back to the darkness? That's hard.

My entire team is in Europe and they're all way, way ahead of me. And so when I started this job, I started a terrible morning routine of getting on my phone and working before I had even gotten out of bed, before my feet had touched the floor. No one asked me to do that, right?

So I had to re-establish the boundary for myself so that I can manage my anxiety, so that I could get the rest that I needed not only in the morning, but also to wind down in the evening.

[00:39:37]

These stressors and ordinary life circumstances are going to throw our anxiety through a loop. And anxiety and sleep are so tightly interwoven together, aren't they?

Nicole Shallow

Yes. Anxiety, if it spikes, it can really just throw things and so it's giving yourself the tools to manage the anxiety. So I always suggest if it's really severe, please reach out to a counselor. Reach out for support. Because sometimes anxiety, the inclination is to just avoid and retreat inwards.

There's a time and a place, of course, for that, but also finding support to help you manage the anxious thoughts, the anxious feelings. And look at it from a really global picture because sometimes anxiety can stem from hormone imbalances.

It can be nutritional, there's just so many, it's just so complex and it doesn't necessarily mean something's wrong with you. It just means we need to support your environment to help your body get back into that regulated, calm and relaxed place because something is off.

And, like you mentioned, boundaries. If you're an overgiver, which I am an overgiver and I feel a lot of guilt around saying no, and all the self help books say, say no. Mm-hm. Yeah. When you just want to help so many people, you also have to remember, without you, there's no help.

So you need to take care of yourself first. You need to put the air mask on first before you can save the people around you. So yeah, it's really coming back to how are you taking care of yourself during the day?

And that's where I think, how I approach sleep is a lot of where can we find joy in your day? Where can we help you move towards your values and what's important to you? And sleep actually will get better without only just focusing on the sleep part.

I've had so many experiences in my life where I'm like, wow. Romantic relationships were a huge stressor. Found my partner, everything was settled. And I'd never slept so well in my life. I was like, okay, so there are some parts of that where you're like, okay, if there are pieces that are out of balance, it's finding that balance and bringing it back in.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. The whole life gets a little bit of a look, doesn't it?

Nicole Shallow

It does. Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

We're not in any way, shape, or form recommending that everyone quit their job and quit their relationship and go live in a yurt somewhere in the woods. Although that sounds really nice, actually.

[00:42:21] Nicole Shallow

Yeah. That is part of, I think it's managing the stress. There's a lot of, I'm in Canada and in DC and inflation is up, like, there's a lot of money concerns, working with people who are really stressed, and they have a right to be.

There's a lot of moving parts right now, and we don't know what the future holds, and that can be very unnerving. But just focusing on the present moment, here and now, what can you do for yourself? That will help. Just kind of recenter things.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And I always like to say, if you can manage your anxiety and get great quality sleep, the instigators of stressors in your life won't change, but your ability to respond and your capacity to respond to them will change, which then puts a hitch in that loop of it all feeling like it's constantly on this slow build to nowhere.

Nicole Shallow

Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

All right. Nicole Shallow, thank you so much for being with us. How can people hear more about you and your work?

Nicole Shallow

Yeah. So you can find me on social media @yourbehaviourgal, and the behavior is spelled with a U, because I'm in Canada.

And then www.yourbehaviourgal.com, and there's a mailing list on there. So if you want to stay up to date with any promotions or any new courses or new...

Meagen Gibson

Challenges and things like that.

Nicole Shallow

Challenges. It is your place for sleep health. I like to keep it fun. I like to keep it light and engaging, so hopefully you come and find me. And I look forward to connecting with anyone who follows along.

Meagen Gibson

Thanks again, Nicole.

Nicole Shallow

Thanks for having me.