
Episode 185 Transcript

Gym to Boardroom: Building Resilience Through Physical and Mental Habits

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Guest: Nicole Zapoli, Owner, NZ Fitness

Full Transcript

[00:00:00] **Announcer:** You're listening to The HR Mixtape, a podcast for leaders who want to understand people, strengthen culture, and navigate change with clarity. Today's conversation starts now.

[00:00:16] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** Joining me today is Nicole Zapoli, professional fitness and wellness coach at NZ Fitness. Nicole helps leaders build sustainable habits that support resilience, energy, and long-term performance.

[00:00:34] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** Nicole, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

Nicole Zapoli: Yes, thank you so much for having me.

[00:00:40] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** So you have a fitness and wellbeing background, but I really want to know: what made you passionate about resilience in the workplace specifically?

[00:00:51] **Nicole Zapoli:** So, yes, far into my adulthood, I had things that I really had to work hard to overcome from my early adult life. And the amount of resilience and strength that you build in the gym carries over so much into the actual workplace. I really believe that's the reason I was able to continue to stay the course, following my passion, my dream, and what I have been working so hard at for so long. There are so many parallels between the two.

[00:01:39] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** I love that. Resilience can be one of those terms that people see as, "Just toughen up." I'd love if you can help us understand: what's a healthier way to think about resiliency?

[00:01:51] **Nicole Zapoli:** Yeah, so definitely it is okay to acknowledge whatever emotion you may be experiencing inside, but not allowing that to necessarily hold you back. Maybe take a timeout, or go do a workout. The things we run into, especially when doing tough strength training, I love CrossFit and weightlifting, and those styles of training are great mental training as well. Getting into workouts that are uncomfortable and tough, where it feels like you have a really long way to go, it could be so easy to give up. Sometimes you can actually experience emotion in the middle of the workout and not really understand why. It can catch you off guard.

[00:02:53] **Nicole Zapoli:** All of those things, the more frequently you are practicing getting in training and working on the mental piece, the better you get at it, and the more you can apply it to the rest of your life. But just thinking about it in an almost callous way, whether that's us talking to ourselves or thinking about someone else, like "just toughen up" or "just get over it" is so much bigger than that. If we don't deal with it or acknowledge it, that can really hold us back, and it can show up in other ways in the future.

[00:03:37] **Nicole Zapoli:** It's definitely better to acknowledge, observe, and be aware of it, then figure out how to move forward. I've had conversations in my head in the middle of workouts where I'm experiencing discomfort, like my legs are burning or my lungs are burning, and I'm thinking, "Why am I even doing this? What is the point?" And it's almost like that moment of acknowledging your why behind why you do anything, and the standards you hold for yourself. And within that, having grace and giving yourself space in those times when you need to take a moment and rest or take a breath, and then refocus, bring it down a little, and continue forward, rather than letting it completely discourage you or get you stuck.

[00:05:14] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** That connection between working out and how your emotions respond, I love that you brought that up. I've definitely had my own moments in a tough Peloton session where you just get overwhelmed emotionally by everything going on. It's such a good analogy for a lot of the things HR professionals have to deal with in their line of work. So how have you helped people think about using movement to develop small daily habits that can help build resilience over time?

[00:05:50] **Nicole Zapoli:** My entire book is built around this. I released it last year, and it's all about my six shifts to living your strongest, healthiest, happiest life, really about building on those six shifts. Those daily habits are our foundation. They may seem a little insignificant, or like there are bigger things to tackle. The whole idea is that consistency and the foundation we're laying allows us to build on it, continue to grow, and over time we'll be able to look back and say, "Wow, I've really been able to continue on. It hasn't been perfect, but I've stayed consistent within just those six shifts."

[00:06:56] **Nicole Zapoli:** I share a story in the book about learning to drive a stick shift when I turned 16. I had just gone to the DMV, and I was with my dad in Houston in the summertime. The air conditioning had gone out in the truck he was letting me drive. I was still learning, and it was hot. When you're nervous, of course, I was pouring sweat and shaking. I was the first car in line to get on the freeway and I kept stalling, and all these cars were honking at me and flying around, throwing their arms up.

[00:07:49] **Nicole Zapoli:** My dad just sat there calmly and patiently. He said, "Just let them go. Do not worry. Just let them go around you. We'll get through this. Everything's fine." And I eventually got the car moving in first gear. I had no intention of shifting gears after that. I was totally fine staying in first gear the rest of the way. And he calmly said, "We're getting on the freeway, and I need you to push the clutch in and I'll help you shift gears." Just that calm, steady, patient voice and presence right there with me, being able to bring that emotion down and be that steady support alongside me during a very stressful, scary experience.

[00:08:46] **Nicole Zapoli:** Eventually, of course, I learned how to drive the standard. With that gentle, patient, steady encouragement and support, I share this story because it applies so well to life and has stuck with me since then. It was a pretty traumatic experience, but if I had just stopped there I would never have learned to drive that truck. But it was bigger than that. I became confident in shifting gears, from first all the way up to fifth and back down to first. All of that applies to life as well. We're not going to be moving at the same rate all the time. Sometimes we need to take some rest and some moments of reflection or quiet time, and sometimes it's time to pick it up and really challenge ourselves, even when it's scary.

[00:10:07] **Nicole Zapoli:** The best way to do that is with that steady, calm support that's there to help us have the courage to continue to grow, to shift gears, to maybe level up or do something new that's out of our comfort zone.

[00:10:30] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** As I think about that connection between physical health, mental health, performance, and anxiety, how can leaders start to demonstrate that calming voice that your dad gave you in that example, to help our own employees become more resilient in a way that's supportive? Your dad could have yelled at you. He could have said, "I showed you this a million times." There were a whole lot of not-helpful things he could have done. What are some of the things you've helped leaders see to pull that into the business world?

[00:11:03] **Nicole Zapoli:** I really believe that was a gift, my dad just being steady and patient. Knowing that that is the support I respond well to, and that if it allows me to overcome things, then how much more can I be practicing the same thing as a coach, as someone leading other coaches? My work experience has all been in the gym and coaching, training other coaches over the last 25 years or so. Starting as an assistant coach and knowing the different ways I responded best and how I learned and grew, it was the same. Being gentle, patient, encouraging, and supportive are all great.

[00:12:19] **Nicole Zapoli:** But you also need to be able to take truth and different feedback just as well. There's definitely a balance. As people leaders in the workplace, we still need to be direct, straightforward, and honest about what we need and how we need it, like within coaching: what the standard is and how we need to rise to that. But we also can't expect people or coaches to be able to rise to that standard first if we're not doing it ourselves. And how are we actually providing them the best support to rise to the level we want to see them performing at? That applies to pretty much everything.

[00:13:20] **Nicole Zapoli:** I think back about gymnastics and being coached by different coaches. I loved coaches who gave me really solid, straightforward feedback so I could improve, get better, and grow. I also had coaches who were just, "Good job," which was nice to hear, but I also wanted to know how to improve. And then I had coaches on the opposite end who didn't provide productive critiques and also

didn't provide any positive feedback either. Those were probably my least favorite. Taking all those personal experiences and applying them forward, leading and growing a team of coaches, being open as a leader to know that we do not know everything and there's always room to grow. The more we're open to growing and learning, not feeling like we know it all, that growth mindset is super helpful.

[00:14:58] **Nicole Zapoli:** Continually staying a student, a lifelong student of whatever we're in. My craft is coaching. Whatever our craft is, continuing to master and go back to the basics, the foundation, continue to refine and improve it as we're growing in all different directions.

[00:15:24] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** Your example of the leader being able to demonstrate the resiliency you're looking for is interesting because oftentimes we have leaders who may have done our jobs at some point in their career, but that isn't their role anymore. Their role is to lead, inspire, and make sure we're meeting our business objectives. There are still things they can demonstrate around creating good habits, having good mental health boundaries, using mental health breaks in the day. My husband is in a very unique role as a battalion chief, and one of the things he helps new firefighters do is climb the ladder on the truck. Many feet up in the air, so for some newer firefighters that can be very scary. He prides himself on going first: "Let me show you how to do it, then I want you to do it." He jokingly says, "If the old guy can do it, the young firefighter can definitely do it."

[00:16:32] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** Not everybody responds in the same way. Not everybody will enjoy the tough love. Some people might want the tough love instead of the encouragement. As you've worked through coaching, how have you discovered what motivates a person, and how did you work through that?

[00:17:01] **Nicole Zapoli:** When people know how much you actually care about them, when they know that you genuinely care about them and want to see them get better and improve, they're going to respond that much more effectively. As far as working with clients and coaching others, when they know you genuinely care and want to see them improve, just that bit of trust in that relationship makes them respond that much better. And they're going to receive your feedback much better too.

[00:17:42] **Nicole Zapoli:** There's a lot that everybody is working on to overcome from past experiences or whatever they may be carrying into the gym or into whatever space they're in. The more we can be aware of that and hold space for it, within empathy and with grace for those people, but also caring enough that we are going to let them know in an effective coaching manner. If they're coming in to receive coaching, your job is to coach and to let them know how to improve and get better. When that comes from a genuine place of care and love to help people get better, grow, and get healthier and stronger, that's going to come through and be communicated that way, most of the time.

[00:18:55] **Dr. Shari Simpson:** Well, Nicole, those were such good pointers around how we can build trust with our own team members and really think about using that in a positive way to help motivate and build resilience. This was a great conversation. It's good to hear from somebody a little outside of our industry and what they're doing, and how we can learn from them and bring it into the workplace. Thanks for taking a few minutes to sit and chat with me.

[00:19:18] **Nicole Zapoli:** Yes, thank you so much for having me on.

[00:19:27] **Announcer:** Thanks for tuning in to The HR Mixtape. Like, share, review, and subscribe to support the show and help more people discover these conversations. Until next time, keep the conversation going.