

Ep #57: Perfectionism: Keeping Your Enemy Close



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Perfectionism is a mindset, a thought habit, often informed by your childhood and societal lessons. A belief that you are anything other than completely perfect and worthy of love exactly as you are. This thought habit can keep you chasing your proverbial tail, always trying to prove your worth to the world and to yourself.

And can lead you to put off projects, goals, workouts, dreams, dates because you fear deep inside that it'll all be for not. You won't do it perfectly, someone may criticize it or not like it, why even try? So you procrastinate and spin in worry, strengthening that old thought patterns in your mind, body, spirit.

I used to be this way too, my love, and I've got some thoughts to share with you about how you can begin to shift your thinking, regulate your nervous system, and support your perfect inner child so you can begin to see the truth. You're already perfect, regardless of what you do. Ready to hear all about it? Keep listening, it's going to be a good one.

You're listening to Feminist Wellness, the only podcast that combines functional medicine, life coaching, and feminism to teach smart women how to reclaim their power and restore their health! Here's your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, Herbalist and Life Coach, Victoria Albina.

Hello, hello, my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. These are some fascinating times we're living in. I am recording this as the Covid-19 everything is happening all around us, and before I dive in to talk about perfectionism, I want to remind you that fear, worry, anxiety, panic, these feelings, these experiences are natural, normal, and do not serve you.

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I want to encourage you to remember the basics. Hand washing, don't hang out in huge groups. It's not the moment to be shaking lots of hands at networking events or whatever, it's time for lots of sleep, lots of true deep self-care, self-love. It's a time for gentle movement. It's a time for rest, reconnecting with ourselves, with nature, with our hearts. And it's a time to say I'm not going to panic right now.

This virus, it's a novel version of a virus, but if we look back on human history, things like this have always happened. And what we get to do is to center ourselves, to connect with our neighbors, to know who's insulin-dependent, who may need some extra help, who might need some extra food right now, who might need some toilet paper.

But it's not a time to freak out, and I have a Masters degree in public health. I've worked in infectious disease, I've worked at international global public health. It's not a time for worry. It's a time to wash your hands, say your prayers, and connect with yourself and the people you love.

All will be exactly what it will be. This is what I have to share with you. Okay my loves, deep breath in and out. If you're listening to this episode before listening to last week's show on perfectionism, I'd like to invite you to pause, to go back and to download last week's show and then to come on back here to listen to this one.

So last week we dove into the details about how perfectionism can show up in our lives, how it holds us back, and where it may have come from. Today, after all of this exploration of what perfectionism feels like and can look like in our lives, let's talk about what we can do about it.

And the good news is there are so many ways to work with and support ourselves, to loosen the destructive grip of perfectionism, to change the story. One of the first, and I feel most constructive steps in learning to shift

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yourself out of perfectionist thought habits is to learn to befriend your perfectionism.

So befriending our perfectionism, and I literally mean like, getting to know it, being its friend, holding hands, going to the movies, but this process of befriending allows us to see how our perfectionism has helped us to survive. It's so important to acknowledge it in preparing to loosen its grasp on us, and this friendly relationship gives you a path to talk to those perfectionist parts of yourself.

First though, of course, I would recommend you start with supporting your nervous system. If perfectionism has led you to feel safe in your life, then you want to make sure to get your body on board. My favorite ways to do this are grounding and orienting.

Two exercises I've talked about on the show before and I've made you some presents because I love presents, which are downloadable recordings of my grounding and orienting exercises, to have with you on your phone, to carry with you, to support yourself whenever you may feel activated, meaning that your nervous system is kicked into that sympathetic part. The old fight or flight.

In short, orienting helps you to locate yourself in time and space, and gives your brain an anchor for its machinations. Same too with grounding, though for folks with a lot of trauma or more recent trauma, or if you've been working through your trauma and it feels really present, I would start with orienting. So you can head on over to victoriaalbina.com/orienting to download the orienting, /grounding to download the grounding. Easy peasy.

I want to also say just a little reminder, that if you start to do an exercise like grounding and feeling in your body doesn't feel safe or is inaccessible, a beautiful option is to focus on something outside yourself. So this has a

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similar effect. It helps your body calm because it gives your brain something to do.

In my upcoming masterclass, which is starting in May of this year, we'll be doing a lot of these exercises. And one of my favorites is one I lovingly called watched that beast. So the gist of it is when you're feeling activated and you can recognize that your sympathetic nervous system is activated, if you feel anxious, nervous, revved up, if your brain is just spinning and spinning and you're worrying about something, or physiologically, if your heart rate's going faster, like a touch of anxiety or panic, if your hands get a little sweaty, if you're like, I can't think right now because my brain just won't let me, you may be in sympathetic activation.

So here's how watch that beast goes. If you're a person with sight, find something that you can see. A squirrel, a dog, a plant, a tree outside your window, or a plant in your home. And begin to describe it to yourself in outstanding amounts of detail.

For example, that squirrel is quite small. It has about four different shades, maybe five different shades of brown on it, it's little paws are so tiny and cute. It has little tufts of fur on its ears. Oh look, it's smelling the ground, oh, it found an acorn. It's now holding the acorn in both hands, it's smelling it. Is it licking it? What is that squirrel doing?

And just focus on this external thing, a beast, a tree, a plastic bag floating by your window in the wind. Focus there until you feel your body calming down. Keep going, keep breathing until you feel that calm, until you feel that exhale in a deep place in your spirit. Breathing out with a sigh helps your body shift into parasympathetic, which is the rest and digest. So it's something you can try as well.

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Deep breath in and out. So watch that beast is a thing you can do if you're a sighted person. And if you're a person without sight, a blind person, you can do the same in your mind's eye if you've had vision before, or a great thing to do would be to go with texture. And this works for mammals sighted or unsighted mammals. It doesn't matter.

But I just wanted to provide this option for more accessibility. So texture. So if there's a shag carpet or a really fluffy pillow or something embroidered or a pair of corduroy pants, feel it. Put your hands on it, touch it to your face, describe the texture, the weight, the heft of it in detail to yourself until you too feel yourself exhale in that deep way.

Now, you may choose to orient or ground yourself if that feels safe. If that doesn't feel available at first blush, consider doing it for just a wee second. And I mean seconds here. The key to nervous system regulation work is titration, which means slowly adding more challenges and supports to your system with an encouraging, loving energy. Never a pushing or shoving energy.

Remember my beauty, you can't heal hurt with more hurt, right, my sweet one? So we don't push or shove ourselves in this family, but my goodness, do we encourage ourselves to try the things that maybe feel scary for just a second, and giving yourself the chance to try it, to see if maybe it would work for your perfect self.

Consider, for example, feeling into your toes or your ears, if sinking fully into your body doesn't feel accessible. Slowly, gently, and with love, increase the amount of time and the depth of feeling you engage with. There is no rush here. Healing is on no time frame. Just be good to you, my darling. Listen in as best you can.

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So, back to befriending that brilliant gift of survival we know as perfectionism. And here I want to remind you, this thought habit is a gift from your child self. It just no longer serves you now. Like yeah, your childhood sweater. So think of a sweater that you had as a little kid. It likely doesn't fit your adult body now. That's not a bad sweater and it kept you warm back in the day. It just doesn't serve you now because it's a toddler size three and you're a grownup size whatever.

So a good way to get to know your inner perfectionist is to imagine them again in vivid detail. You may want to draw them or write a bullet point of their characteristics, or detail them in your mind's eye. Get to know what your perfectionist sounds like. Does it have a shrill insistent voice? Is it barky and demanding?

That wasn't very barky, was it? It is demure and cutting? What does it look like? Is it tall, broad-shouldered with menacing eyes? It is scowling with angry eyes? Does it wear anything but finely pressed suits? What does it smell like? Rotting bananas? Chanel number whatever?

Once you have the picture of your perfectionist, you might ask them what they most need. Often, the deeper answer here is that they need a friend. A person to be kind to them, a listening ear, understanding, compassion, to be told that they're already perfect and don't have to keep attempting to prove themselves.

See if you can imagine giving them some of that care. The truth is that our inner perfectionist can be and is your friend. Because all in all, this is just part of you and this part of you which is not all of you is really just looking to protect you and thinks it needs to earn love. And above all, it wants to avoid being rejected.

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If you can remember this, you can develop tender feelings and a kind relationship to these parts of yourself. So now that you are friends, even just acquaintances with your inner perfectionist, you have a better chance of changing your story about what it is that gets you motivated and what helps you to achieve what you want to achieve.

Remembering motivation is just a thought and it's one that perfectionist thinking can attempt to block if you're not bringing your awareness to it. So you get to ask, what is the story that we - me and my perfectionist - are telling us here? Have you decided that you are a failure because you made a mistake, so that makes you some kind of bad unworthy friend, lover, boss, employee, cousin?

Have you and your perfectionist decided that you are a failure because you weren't able to read someone's mind and anticipate their needs? Making note, of course, that that kind of a thought is a hallmark of codependent thinking, which we talked all about very recently in episodes 54 and 55, and way back in the day in episodes 29 and 30.

Have you and your perfectionist decided that you are a failure because you experienced something difficult, something challenging, something that stretched you, pushed you? And maybe the outcome of that event, that something difficult was not what you wanted.

If these are your thoughts, or if you have similar thoughts, it's most likely that everything you think or feel or happens will bolster these thoughts. And what doesn't fit or goes against these ideas of yourself will get tossed out, like when your mom says, "You're so pretty," and your brain's like, "You have to think that. You're my mom."

So this story needs to change. And the story can change because we are not our thoughts. Thoughts come and go like the weather. And just like we

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can easily let light, easy, simple thoughts go, through this work, we can let go of the thoughts that are emotionally heavy and create suffering. Those second arrow thoughts that you and I talked all about in episode 15.

First, we need to change our experience of these stories as valid. This of course is not a one-time event, but challenges to our stories are ongoing because we are engaged in creating a new reality, a new relationship with ourselves. And we need new muscles to keep us in that new story, to keep us on the new track.

Remembering, of course, that a belief such as the belief that something is wrong with you, you mess everything up, you have to work harder, harder, harder, those are just old thoughts that you've thought again and again and again, so often that your brain believes them as fact. And this is the work of de-facting. That's just so not a word but I'm going with it. Unfacting? That one sounds better. De-facting, unfactoring, I like unfactoring.

So we are unfactoring here, reminding your brain that just because you've thought it a thousand times doesn't mean that it's a fact. And if the thought that you're thinking is that you are anything less than complete perfection, it's time to unifact that one.

Okay, and so some challenges that you may ask yourself and your perfectionist, that inner perfectionist voice might be, does worrying really make us more successful? And if we turn away from worry, what can we do instead? Pro tip here, self-love and acceptance is the other option of what you can do instead of worrying.

You might ask, what would it mean to feel good about something we've done? What would that feel like, look like? How can I celebrate myself and everything I've achieved? How would it feel in my body to do that? You may ask how you could learn to take a compliment. How might learning to

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take a compliment, to accept that someone else thinks something good about me, bring me out of the familiar and often comfortable place of feeling bad about myself?

And how might this allow me to be closer to others and to show myself more love? What would it mean to not be good at everything, but rather, to be really good at what I am good at and to honor and celebrate that? I'll share, for example, that I am a lousy pilot, having never tried it. I haven't the first idea of how to even turn on a plane, but I don't expect myself to be a phenomenal pilot and I don't beat myself up for not being able to do it.

Instead, I focus on my strengths. Coaching, loving others unconditionally, having amazing hair, being hilarious. My Leo-ness is really shining in this new Virgo moon. Oh, my darling. As you ask these challenging questions, know that you are already in the process of reframing and reparenting yourself into greater love and understanding and getting your perfect and possibly quite scared inner children on board with all of this change is so vital.

Take a moment to connect with them any time you feel those perfectionist thoughts coming up for yourself. When you meet those stories with love, that is the act of reparenting and it's pure magic. Okay, now let's take a specific situation and apply some concrete steps to get our perfectionist self to relax and to stand down even a little bit.

So years ago, I was scheduled to speak at a conference, which is a thing I love to do. And this was the first time I was going to speak about a topic I felt passionate about and I was really nervous. I did lots of prep for my talk. I checked and rechecked my notes, spent time preparing my exact look because once again, a Leo.

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Ate a really good breakfast, I worked out in the morning, I got to the conference hall ahead of schedule, I was so ready to go. After checking in, I found a nice comfortable spot to sit, and I started to calm myself, to take in the environment, as the other participants wandered in.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw an old professor of mine. I had been in her class many years before and despite my best efforts, I'd only gotten a B in her class, which my perfectionist self was like, that is terrible, evidence that you're a horrible student, on and on.

So when I got that B, I'd felt like an utter failure. And with a sigh I'll say that I had sort of steered away from taking courses in this professor's area of interest, which is like a big fallout from perfectionism. We'll come back to that at some other time. So I started to get really anxious. I wouldn't call it panic exactly, but I felt a lot of fear, anxiety, shame.

My perfectionist saw an opening as I started to remember how lousy I felt to see that B at the end of this woman's class. My perfectionist started in on me. She started saying, "There was no reason to get a B in that class, Vic. You really didn't try hard enough. You could have put in more effort. And man, I can't even believe she's here. What? Is she here to see me fail again? I feel like I can never get a break. I worked so hard on this and I'm so ready to go and then like, why is this professor here? You know what, I'm just like, there's no point to step in, to step up, to speak. I have nothing to say. I'm just going to totally eff this up, like I eff up everything. This is a disaster. Okay, I'm going to tell these people I'm going to bail. These shoes are totally wrong with this outfit. You know what, they look terrible on me."

On and on she chimed in this deafening manner. So what do we do in a situation like this where your inner critic, your inner perfectionist is going all out on you? Well, first, we breathe. Orient yourself to time and space, ground yourself, perhaps do a quick round of watch that beast or feel that

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fabric. And then call out what your perfectionist is saying about what you've done or said or thought.

Ask yourself, is it a judgment, a scare tactic, an insult, a demeaning name, a conclusion, a prediction of a crisis? So in this moment, if I were to call her out, I'd have to say she was judging me hard. Shaming me, moving me into full crisis mode. Next, look for the actual evidence. Give your perfectionist a little love and then be in the evidence.

Is there anything you can see that might tell you you are not a failure and that other humans might make similar errors because we're humans? Try to see the situation through the eyes of someone you love and trust, as though they were standing right in front of you or right to your side and ask yourself, what do they see when they look at me?

Perhaps literally ask someone you trust to tell you how they would understand the situation and what they would think of you. This internal and perhaps external scanning of evidence helps you to reframe the situation and frees you up to choose your thoughts with greater accuracy.

So in this situation, I'd give my perfectionist self some warmth and love and I could say to it, "I think you're afraid. I get it. You feel like a failure. After that B, you just didn't feel the same kind of confidence taking the course with the same professor or in her field, and that's okay. You didn't know how to manage your mind yet. And here we are, in the here and now, and you, my love, are so well prepared. You've been studying and working in this area of wellness, of psychology for so many years now. You have lots of valuable experience. People in the room are here to see you. And boy, do they look excited."

I may call in a beloved ally as a resource. If my best friend was standing in front of me, what would they say? They would tell me, Vic - well, let me just

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be honest about - I'm thinking of my beloved friend Eliah. Eliah would look at me and say, "Victory," which is what they call me. "Cut the crap. This is not real. You are not a failure. You're so amazing and successful and everyone's going to love your talk. You're such a nerd," which is of course, the greatest compliment in my world.

And just hearing that in my own mind, in my own heart, my thoughts and the thoughts and feels of someone I love really makes that perfectionist start to shrink. The next thing I would do would be to try to stay out of black and white thinking and to begin to move into the grey. Let yourself entertain the idea that it's not one thing or the other. Success or failure. And challenge yourself to think that most of life is somewhere in the glorious grey.

In this situation, I would maybe say to myself, "My talk is not a failure yet. Sure, it may not be amazing, but it can be really good. I can do a solid good job and some of the participants will be very happy that they attended." And in this moment of stepping into that grey, you can remind yourself, there is no need for A+ thinking when a B+ will do just fine.

B+ work is work that is done, that is published, that is sent in, that is on the editor's table, that is ready to go. A+ work is the work you persevere on, making you feel worried about, the work you procrastinate on and do the last minute, robbing yourself of peace and calm and love in your heart.

If I were to do a B+ talk, that would be just a delight, thank you very much. If we are being friends with our perfectionists, showing that little creature within some love, seeing them in a heart-focused way, we can give them the benefit of the doubt, and therefore we can say to ourselves that this part of our personality, this part of our psyche is trying to motivate us, but they haven't learned how to do it in a supportive and loving way.

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If your goal is to motivate you, what would a healthy, loving, kind, generous way to do so sound like? Remember, intense self-criticism and worry not only diminishes our self-esteem. It throws our bodies into disarray, elevating our heart rate, creating tension in our muscles and our gut, which spikes our adrenaline, which leads to our cortisol going up, which pumps the blood more and more to the heart and lungs, heart and lungs, and not to the brain, which actually stops us from thinking clearly as we go into that well-worn path of sympathetic activation.

Take some slow deep breaths. Calm, center, ground yourself however you can. And when your perfectionist comes up, you get to keep asking yourself what the kind and considerate ways to help you reach your goal are. Instead of thinking about the end, think about what small concrete step you can take next.

Therefore, you can take courageous action and do the next right thing. This is especially important if your perfectionist is pushing down on you so hard that you become avoidant, worried, fearful, or start to procrastinate.

So in this moment, at this lecture, starting to really worry and freak out, I might say to my perfectionist, “Breathing and grounding myself in the here and now, I know you want me to succeed. I know you want the best for me. I know you want me to be safe. And I need you to trust me that I am going to do the best I can. I’m going to look over my notes, I’m going to remember all my successes and how none of my failures have killed me yet. In fact, my failures are the things that have helped me to grow more than anything. I’m going to imagine myself, my inner children, and someone I love cheering me on. I appreciate all that you’re trying to do for me, to take care of me, and I want you to take a seat and watch me shine.”

This is how I talk to my perfectionist, as if they were a friend, but actually, they are a friend. They’re a part of me that loves me so much. And as often

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happens with dear friends, sometimes you have to call a hard no or say stop when they cross a boundary of yours. And you can also try to extend great compassion to them, and thus, to yourself.

Remember, you cannot hate your perfectionism away. Shaking your little fist at it and saying, “Ugh, I wish I could just not be a perfectionist,” is unlikely to make it go away. Instead, you can reassure this protector part of you that you’re doing what you need to do. All is well, and that you’ll get it done as best you can, and that that is the true definition of perfect.

Finally, I would like to invite you to consider taking tomorrow thinking out of your vocabulary. It’s a framework that’s super common amongst folks with perfectionist thinking, to procrastinate, to put off for tomorrow what’s scary to do today. Because you fear, often subconsciously, often deep inside, that you’ll eff it up. Someone will criticize it, or worst of all, you’ll criticize you for it.

Remember, these mental scripts are rarely conscious. Few of us are walking around saying, “You know, writing that report for my new boss is really kicking up for perfectionist habits so I’ll just put it off until the last minute and then I’ll throw it together under intense pressure as a way to evidence to myself that I’m not worthy of my boss’s praise and support.”

We don’t exactly do that. Your brain just does what brains do when we’re not minding them, when we’re not managing them, when they don’t have out attention. So your brain buffers. It pushes away the challenging thoughts and makes you feel numb, distracted, unfocused, not in your body.

Again, the key here is to recognize and notice these thoughts and the feelings they create. Your nervous system reactions to them. So you can acknowledge and befriend them and thus begin to shift them. Any time you

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feel yourself putting something off, saying, “I’ll do that tomorrow,” with that slightly anxious or very anxious energy, I want to invite you to pause, to breathe, and to ask yourself why.

Why are you putting it off, my darling? If it’s that your day is really well scheduled and you literally don’t have time today then that’s fine. Just put it on your calendar and come on back to it. And if perfectionist thinking is part of your world, then that’s not likely to be the real reason why and that’s okay. Dig a little deeper, talk to your inner children, your inner perfectionist, and start to get some clarity on your own thoughts.

Show yourself your mind. Coach yourself. So you can breathe and learn to manage your thinking, instead of letting that old cassette tape from your family, your culture, society, impact you as perfectionist thinking for another day. Don’t put off for tomorrow what you fear doing today. It doesn’t serve you, you perfect and amazing human animal.

Keep breathing, keep practicing these simple tools. Remember your thoughts create your feelings and if you’re finding yourself in thoughts like, “I’m going to eff this up, I never do things right, oh gosh, she’s not going to like this, someone’s going to criticize or judge me,” it’s just an old habit. That’s just perfectionism and that’s okay, my beauty. You are so wildly capable of healing and of change.

That’s it from me today, my loves. I have a few things to share with you. I am still taking just a few one-on-one coaching clients until my beautiful and amazing masterclass launches the first week of May. So if you are interested in getting into the masterclass, getting more information, drop us an email, podcast@victoriaalbina.com.

I’m going to keep that group really small and it’s already about halfway full. So if you’re interested, be sure to be in touch because I really want to make

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sure you get the info and that you can join us. I am also giving away presents. I love presents. So we just had the one-year anniversary of the show. This is episode 57, and it's so exciting.

It's really just a delight. And so I made some sets of my organic essential oil rollers. There's one called Easy Now, which is really calming, centering, grounding. It also helps me if I'm restless and can't sleep. I also use it a lot on like, airplanes or other places where I could just use a little extra help to unwind.

The other one is called Rise and Shine, and it's lots of really bright, citrusy notes. They both just smell really good, so you can just use them as perfume beyond their medicinal, supportive qualities. And I'm giving away four sets for free on the house to four amazing listeners who head on over to Apple Podcasts, subscribe, rate, and review the show, and send me a screenshot of your review.

When you send me that screenshot, that will get you one entry into the drawing to win the rollers. And if you share it on your social media, Instagram, Facebook, whatever, and tag me, that will get you a second entry. Very exciting. And I'll be announcing the winners very, very soon, in next week's show as a matter of fact.

So, my beauties, so much good stuff going on. So much beautiful healing. Alright, let's take a big deep breath in together and out. Remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my darling. You are loved.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you like what you've heard, head to VictoriaAlbina.com to learn more.