

Ep #94: Empaths and Other People's Emotions



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Do you identify as an emotional empath? So many of my clients do. I used to myself. I hear my clients say that they are so often emotionally exhausted by the world because as an empath, they absorb, take on, and feel all the feels of everyone around them.

Like a firehose of emotion that's constantly turned on within them, flooding them with other people's anger, sadness, disappointment, frustration, and yes, joy and gladness too. Today, we're going to talk all about being an empath, the beauty, the challenges, what it might mean when you say you're an empath, and how to support yourself, especially during the holidays in a continuing global pandemic.

Curious? 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. Things are going well in my world. I'm delighting as I am all the time in learning about my new landscape up here on occupied Lenape territory in the Hudson Valley of New York.

And it's been so beautiful to have all these new challenges, like we somehow didn't get the oil tank filled that heats our house. Oops. So I figured it out, that I could use diesel, and I went and bought a gas can and filled it and figured out the little nozzle and used a wrench and took the cap off and put it in there myself.

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It's these little things that help us to build trust in ourselves. And if you're used to country living, I bet you're like, okay, whatever. But chopping firewood, stacking it, all of these little things that are necessary for life up here that are new to me, I grew up in the suburbs and I mean, the great state of Rhode Island is one big suburb. Not a diss. Love Rhode Island forever, greatest state in the union.

Just it's new to me, and it's really fun to experience myself as someone who I trust to be resourceful, to be curious, to meet the challenges. And sometimes I grump a little and it's totally fine to grump. And then I decide I'm done with it and I get up and I dust my hands off and I go do the next thing.

It's a beautiful experience. I'm really, really glad for it. So one of the things that's been coming up a ton in my six-month program, Overcoming Codependency, is the issue of being an empath. And I hear my clients talking a lot about this with joy, but also with a lot of pain.

So you know that I'm both a total nerd and a woman full of the witchy woo, and I believe that some people are emotional empaths, born with the gift of feeling the feelings of the beings around them, including the trees and the animals and the earth. I think that's beautiful.

And for us humans whose mental cassette tapes are set to play the song of codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing thinking, I think there's often more to it. A complexity. And you know I love to break it down and take a deeper look at our lives and the stories we tell about them so we can decide with full intention, attention, consciousness, thoughtfully, if we want to keep those old stories.

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Or if we want to shift them, towards living into a brighter tomorrow. So I long called myself an empath and I used to get so overwhelmed by other people's feelings. When I perceived that something was wrong, that someone was upset, I made it about me. And I felt this urgent need to fix it, to make it better, to take it on as mine to manage.

I saw managing other people's emotional state as my job in so many ways. If someone else was uncomfortable, I was uncomfortable and felt compelled to shift it for both of us. Sometimes this empathic ability to feel other people's feels thoroughly in our bodies is a beautiful thing.

Feeling a profound rush of joy if a friend gets into grad school or achieves some milestone, or I remember this one, if I gave someone a present and they loved it, it felt tingly and amazing, like my body was full of stars and unicorns and sunshine. It was incredible.

And the opposite was also true. If someone was upset, I either swooped in to try to make it better, which we talked about back in episode 71, about being the fixer in other people's lives, or I took their upset on and made it about me and how I was to blame. They were likely upset because of some obvious shortcoming of mine. Clearly, my thought pattern went, I have done something wrong and I need to insert myself to make sure that their upset is soothed. At least make sure it isn't about me.

So in my experience, what I see in my clients, the experience of being an empath is often a combination of actually feeling the feelings of other beings, and projecting our own internal landscape, our internal ecosystem onto others. And paired with people-pleasing and codependent habits, this can lead us to make things about ourselves as a false narrative that says doing so will keep us safe in the world.

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And if people are mad at us or don't validate us, we're in danger. It's our job to step in, to make sure that all things are copasetic for everyone always. You don't have to identify as an empath to have this experience in the world. Most folks with codependent internal narratives have it because the core of codependent thinking is that we are responsible for other people's feelings, their mood, their enjoyment, their sorrow, their dinner. And if they aren't happy, we've done something wrong.

Part of the reason for this is biological, and so nerd alert, we have these fantastic things in our brains called neurons and we have about 100 billion of them, all connected to and communicating with one another. Neurons transmit neurochemical commands and impulses, both within our central nervous system and to our muscles, allowing us to be reactive and responsive to our environment.

You touch a sharp object, a signal is sent to your brain that makes you pull your hand away. Mirror neurons are those that react when we watch someone do a thing, like when you wave at a baby and they sort of reflexively wave back, like in a mirror.

Studies suggest that mirror neurons help us to feel the feelings of others. Like if someone laughs or cries, you may feel yourself automatically cracking up or feel tears in your eyes. Remember, as humans, we are social, we are pack animals. And when we are attuned to the feelings of those around us, we are safer because we are perceived as part of the community. Someone attuned to those around us.

We are also attuned to signals and cues of danger, of unsafety. We've talked about this in terms of our autonomic nervous system, as in our conversations about polyvagal theory. When you see someone smiling sincerely, you feel safer, more social, ready to engage as your ventral

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vagal system comes online and says this is a safe human, this is a safe mammal, it's okay to connect here.

So it's natural and normal and human to be in touch with the feelings of those around us, and yes, once again, that can be an absolutely delightful, gorgeous thing when it allows you to feel other people's joy, when it allows you to connect in with how someone else's emotions touch a tenderness inside you, and when you can use what you learn from feeling other people's emotions to spark and further your own emotional growth.

And finally, when you can feel those emotions coming towards you and can put up your own most loving boundaries to say this is where I start and you stop. I will not allow your emotions to negatively impact mine. Where this propensity to feel other people's feelings hurts us is when we take those emotions on, when we compare and despair, when we make what someone else is feeling in their body, sparked by their own thoughts about whatever circumstance is happening, when we make those feelings mean something about us.

Something about our worth, our value, our wellness in the world, something we are personally responsible for, need to take action to remedy or change. Something we need to fix. Something we need to take blame for. And I hear so much of this with my clients who are working to overcome codependency in my six-month program.

Many of us grew up feeling like it was our job to manage the feelings in our household. So we withdrew or we inserted ourselves, interjected. We were the joker, trying to make everyone laugh so they wouldn't feel upset, making that witty comment to distract.

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Maybe we were the scapegoat, which is not a role most people choose, but rather is one that's imposed upon us, but it does the same job of taking the attention, the blame, taking it all on ourselves or having it thrust upon us and so we grow up believing that it's our role to be the blamed one.

That that's what we do in this world, and so we take on other people's feelings and take on the blame for them too. Predominantly, what I see in my clients working with their codependency is this story. I am an empath and thus, I take on everyone else's feelings. Not just feeling them and knowing that's yours and this is mine.

In interdependence, we believe we are autonomous humans. Individuals that make up part of this beautiful collective, the communities we call home. And yes, we take care of one another, and we do so interdependently, without losing our sense of self by taking on someone else's feelings.

And this is where the need for healthy boundaries come in. Both energetic boundaries and spoken boundaries. So we can get clear on where we stop and someone else starts, so we aren't taking on other people's feelings and energies as our own. Because if you listen to this show each week, you likely identify with having codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing habits.

And for us, it's not just about feeling what others are feeling. It becomes about taking it on, blaming ourselves, reacting with anger, resentment, disappointment, or fear, and hurting our own tender hearts in the process. And my darling, let's get practical. Your girl's a nurse after all, you know I love to get practical.

In any given day, we each only have so much emotional energy and when you're busy feeling everyone else's energies and are allowing them to

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impact you, oh my love, you're likely not taking care of yourself because you're so busy managing all the incoming energy, sorting through it, responding to it, reacting to it. Where is your energy for you? Where is your energy for your own life?

So often, back in my days practicing functional medicine, I saw this overlap of those who called themselves empaths. Quite frequently, those socialized as women, because we're taught to take on the world, the household, the family, the world is our responsibility. And I saw this really strong correlation between identifying as an empath, saying yes in the affirmative, I do, I take on other people's emotions, and exhaustion.

Chronic GI symptoms, most certainly insomnia, depression, anxiety, and adrenal concerns. I am also, as you know my nerds, trained in epidemiology and this is based in zero studies of my own, but rather my experience in the clinic for so many years, seeing this pattern over and over and over again.

And I would posit this is why managing our minds, learning to be really masterful at thought work is a vital part of our mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional wellness. Yes, I think it's vital to do all the lab work, to do all the therapy, to really dive deep. And so often in clinic and my own life, one of the deepest root causes of so much suffering was not having these clear emotional boundaries and not knowing how to stay on our own side of the street.

So my beauties, let's do what nerds do and let's talk remedies. I love talking remedies. The reason I love life coaching is because it's so action-oriented in so many ways. We feel all of our feels, recognize the thoughts creating those feelings, and work to take aligned action to improve our lives. So let's dive in.

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The first will be no surprise if you are a frequent listener. Awareness. I want to invite you to be thoughtful, mindful, aware of that compulsion within you to swoop in to be the fixer. I'll invite you to ask yourself, what is your mind trying to prove? Is it that you're worthy of love and care because you care for others over yourself? Ask yourself with love and kindness what you seek to gain from letting other people's energy into your body.

Step two is acceptance. If this whole framework, this whole conversation is resonating for you, you may have learned in childhood or otherwise that it's your job to manage other people's emotions, and you get to come into full acceptance of that.

Remember, acceptance doesn't mean you like it, condone it, think it's great. You just accept that it is, frankly, just what it is. And you get to accept the fact that that old story just isn't true. The only emotions you are here on this planet, in this lifetime to manage are your own, my darling one.

So let's talk action. I think the most important is boundaries. Boundaries are so vital here, both energetic and otherwise. You get to learn what you do and don't want to let into your energy field. What emotions are yours and what are truly someone else's.

And in so doing, you get to understand and believe that other people's feelings are not your problem to fix, and that you literally can't change someone else's feelings for them. So you get to decide. You get to choose to stop trying and you get to experience yourself as taking care of you first, filling your own emotional cup, so you can show up with love for those you care about in a real way, because you want to be of service. Not out of a misplaced sense of obligation to manage someone else's feelings for them.

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Four, create a consent culture in your friend circle. We talked about this way back in episodes 27 and 28 about asking for consent before you download your emotions on to someone else, and asking the people you love to do the same.

Consent is such a key feminist concept, and we get to do this in our conversations, as well as elsewhere in our lives. And my beauty, you get to do this too, to create a culture of emotional consent for talking about emotions, big and small.

And I get it, it can feel like a big deal to ask those you love to check in before telling you their heaviness. And that feeling comes from thoughts like it's not okay to say no when someone else wants to share, or well, I don't want to hurt her feelings by telling her I'm really exhausted, or I have no bandwidth, or I just don't want to hear it.

And the truth is that it's not only totally okay. It's healthy, vital, and protects your energy and the relationship to do so. Some simple language I recommend and use with my friends is, "Can you check in with me before you tell me what's up for you around x, y, z challenging thing? I want to make sure I have the bandwidth to support you and me in this conversation."

That action is possible when your thought is, I get to and I deserve to manage my own inner ecosystem however I want to, and the people I love get to respect that or not. And that creates the feeling - as I say that the feeling in me, let me check in. It's confidence.

I've got this really big cheesy smile. I feel confident in my body when I say that. And I'll make an important note here. If the people in your world are not willing to respect those boundaries, then that's just more information for

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you and you get to make your own decisions about whether a relationship in which boundaries are not respected is supportive for you or not from a place of acceptance and not from a place of judging that other person for their capacities.

Finally, self-trust. My beauty, you're not a constant F up for having the survival skill of feeling everyone's feelings. It doesn't mean anything bad about you at all. You just get to decide if you want to continue to let other people's feelings feel like your burden to carry, fix, or manage.

With time and attention and deciding to truly trust yourself, you can learn to discern what emotions are yours and which really aren't, and can make loving choices for yourself and others from that place of deep trust in your ability to hold your own emotional boundaries.

Because I love you, I made you some meditations, some exercises to help you to strengthen your emotional and energetic boundaries. Head on over to victoriaalbina.com/empath to download those meditations.

And if you're looking for more support and guidance, to truly understand where you stop and others begin, to break free from those codependent and people-pleasing habits of taking other people's emotional state as your own, you're going to want to check out my six-month program, *Overcoming Codependency*, where you'll learn to be a thought work champion, so you can get clear on your own thoughts and feelings and what they're creating for you.

So you can feel at peace within yourself no matter who's angry or grumpy around you, so you can take action on your dreams without worrying what other people will think of them. This course includes hundreds of hours of me through lessons each week, live weekly coaching, and a private direct

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messaging system where you can get coached by me every single weekday for six months.

All within the loving container of a small community of humans, dedicated to overcoming the painful lessons of codependent thinking, so we can drop the anxiety, the stress, and the painfully lousy boundaries and can learn to stand strong in our power, to really deeply feel our feelings, and to process them through our bodies, so we can live in our wildest self-acceptance and joy.

The course starts up again in February 2021 and is filling up fast. You're not going to want to miss your chance to start the new year off right. Instead of just making a bunch of new year's resolutions that might of us don't carry through on, and then beating yourself up for later, instead, you can make the choice to invest in you with an expert, dedicated guide, so you can really make your life the one you most want to live.

Check it out now, victoriaalbina.com/masterclass. Thank you for joining me, my love. It is always a delight to talk with you about these issues and how we can live our lives in ways that feed us, instead of drain us.

Alright, let's do what we do. Nice gentle hand on your heart, nice slow deep breath in 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. I'll talk to you soon.

If you've been enjoying the show and learning a ton, it's time to apply it with my expert guidance so you can live life with intention, without the anxiety, overwhelm, and resentment, so you can get unstuck. You're not going to want to miss the opportunity to join my exclusive intimate group coaching

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program, so head on over to victoriaalbina.com/masterclass to grab your seat now. See you there. It's going to be a good one.