

Ep #105: Buffering vs. Conscious Distraction



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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This is *Feminist Wellness* and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, and Life Coach, Victoria Albina. I'll show you how to get unstuck, drop the anxiety, perfectionism, and codependency so you can live from your beautiful heart. Welcome my love, let's get started.

Hello, hello my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. And I hope if you live in the Northern hemisphere, you are staying warm. My family keeps taunting me, sending me videos of them on the beach back home in Argentina whilst I live in a snow globe.

I feel like every time I turn around it's snowing and then I shovel it and then it's snowing, and I shovel it and it's snowing. Nature's giving me really good workouts this winter, which is great because I really miss the gym. So there's something.

So today I want to talk about buffering. And when buffering, well, isn't buffering at all, but rather a form of deep self-love. I understand so deeply why we buffer or seek to push away our emotions, to cover them up instead of feeling them. I did it most of my life. I know it so well.

Listen, most of us aren't taught how to feel our feelings, how to manage them, or even how to understand or begin to relate to them. Fewer of us grow up knowing how to locate them in our bodies and what to do with all of those feelings when we do find them or when they come and find us, which seems like more often the case for us until we learn how to manage our minds.

And so of course in a society, in a culture that tells us that if you feel bad about something, if you feel disappointed, exhausted, if you had a hard day, you should pour a glass of wine or turn on the TV. You should buy

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something or eat something. You should turn to something outside of yourself to make the feelings go away.

So of course we would want to use something outside of ourselves to make the feelings go away. We were literally taught to do that, and so that makes a lot of sense to me. And as I spoke about way back in episode 14, buffering is the psychological term for this habit of trying to use something, anything, even “healthy” things like exercising or reading self-help books to attempt to avoid our feelings, which our brain tells us may be self-care but isn’t really.

Because the truth is buffering never actually works in the long term when your goal is to make the feelings go away. Because feelings don’t go away. They will come back if you’re not processing them through your body. Because they will continue to live on inside you. Our human emotions need to find their way out, to be felt most importantly, and also to be looked at, to be processed, to be related to in a loving and kind way, to be learned from.

And so while buffering doesn’t work because science, active, conscious, intentional, distraction is a beautiful and self-loving self-care tool that is really important for you to have in your toolkit when you’re learning how to feel, manage, process, and experience your emotions.

The tool of active distraction is the use of anything that temporarily takes our mind off the feeling we’re having so we can allow our body-mind to find a resting place, particularly when we’re processing something heavy, learning new tools like thought work, when things feel like too much, when we’re having that urgent feeling within us to solve something, to fix something about ourselves, or when we feel overwhelmed.

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This is a particularly important tool for folks dealing with trauma, PTSD, or CPTSD, or the chronic trauma of living under racialized capitalism and the patriarchy. And it's also useful for all of us who, again, don't know how to manage our emotions or grew up in a family where having emotions and voicing them, expressing them was not a smart thing to do or to show.

So as brilliant and amazing genius children, we learned to shut our emotions down, to not feel them, show them, or express them in any way. Likewise, if emotions were labile in our family of origin, meaning for example, if a parent was sad one minute and then was laughing the next, or was like, in an okay enough mood then would have an angry outburst, if the emotions, particularly of the adults in our family of origin were not something to be trusted, if they were not reliable, then our child minds have come to the completely logical conclusion that emotions were a dangerous and overwhelming thing to be avoided. Not to be trusted.

And so there may be so many feelings that you may feel really uncomfortable feeling now as a grownup, which again, makes sense. So if you're just now in your adult life learning to feel your feelings in a more honest and complex way, which is the case for most of my clients in my six-month program, Overcoming Codependency, then what's important to know is that feeling your feelings in this new way can be overwhelming at first and that's okay.

So let's pause and let's define the term overwhelming because my nerds love definitions. So I think about two different kinds of overwhelm. Mind down and body up. So there's a difference between your brain telling this story I'm overwhelmed, which is caused by a thought, and leads your body to react accordingly, and usually leads you to spin in that story, thus not getting your work done or even getting started, which of course lead you to

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continue to feel overwhelmed because of your thought that you're overwhelmed.

Top down brain to body. I think I am overwhelmed, thus I feel overwhelmed. A great place to intervene here is to pause and to work the thought work protocol, to examine the think-feel-act cycle in your own life and to ask one of my favorite questions. Is this statement I am overwhelmed a thought or a fact?

Is it a fact? Like a court admissible statement of fact that you having five things or 50 things on your to-do list means that you are inherently factually 100% of the time overwhelmed? Or are there plenty of times and thus plenty of evidence, my nerds, that the number of things on your to-do list does not always equal overwhelm?

See what I'm doing here? We are challenging the initial hypothesis, my darling. We are being scientists about it. Lovingly questioning the initial statement that your brain is feeding into your body-mind, and thus, asking yourself, do you want to continue to believe a story, I am overwhelmed, number of things on list equals overwhelm inherently, that story that may lead you to fall down a swirling rabbit hole of doom.

And it's fine by me if you want to go there, but it probably serves your life a lot more to pause and to see if there's another thought that could get you where you want to go, to feeling calm and peaceful, to accept that you have x number of things to do in the 24 hours you were gifted this day. To embody being ready, willing, and able to start.

To start simply and slowly and to begin to get your work done one little thing at a time, doing the next right thing and the next and the next as we talked all about back in episode 42. When overwhelm is a thought, you are

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functional. Functional while being frazzled. And you are able to go about your life, but you're also spinning in this story.

If you sit down and journal it out, do thought work about it, and can shift the story, that's brain-based overwhelm. When the overwhelm is physiological, that's a different ballgame and that's when our nervous system is too revved up or too shutdown to be really able to function optimally.

When we are in or are approaching either unsafe sympathetic overdrive, that fight or flight state, and are feeling ever more hypervigilant, anxious, even inching towards panic, or when we're headed towards that wow, this is too much energy of unsafe feeling, dorsal shutdown or immobilization, deer in the headlights, that wow, I just cannot.

And I'm saying unsafe feeling because it's not that you're literally actually not safe in either of those moments, but that's certainly how it can feel inside. And that's when our internal protector parts come up to try to get us to stop whatever we are doing and what is super important is that we listen.

That we listen and honor that energy. Those parts of us that really need us to pause. And the way we do that is through conscious distraction, which is when we intentionally and temporarily choose to not keep rolling around in intense energies or feelings, when we decide, using our prefrontal executive thinking cortex to not think about an intense situation for a moment.

When we pause the thought work, pause the journaling to allow ourselves to simply be. And to give our brain something to do because brains get restless when they don't have a job. So I'll encourage you to use your physiology to your benefit and don't leave your brain unemployed. They hate that.

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We do this, take these moments to consciously distract because sometimes focusing on a powerful or strong emotion can make it feel even stronger. So if we're thinking zero out of 10 like, anger, sadness, disappointment, frustration, the way to get it up to 27 out of 10 is to let our brains continue to work it and work it and roll around with it.

And in that way, we lose our objectivity about the situation at hand and our capacity in that situation. And so we are less and less able to calm and soothe ourselves as we go from a four to a seven to a 27, which can lead us to feel evermore out of control.

By hitting that internal pause button, you allow the emotion the time and space it needs to settle in your body, to decrease in intensity so you can actually use the tools you have like thought work, journaling, drawing, dancing, meditation, movement, or somatic body-based practices like what I teach in my six-month program, you can use those skills to manage your feelings in a healthy way.

Deciding you're going to distract yourself can also keep you from engaging in behaviors that may be harmful like substance misuse, overeating, lashing out at someone else or at yourself, or other self-harm. Conscious distraction is harm reduction and my goodness, do I love harm reduction.

So I see the difference between buffering and conscious distraction as the difference between self-suppression and self-expansion. Self-suppression is buffering, leaving ourselves, checking out, using distraction to attempt to sidestep painful challenging emotions, while conscious distraction is self-expansion.

Using distractions to allow ourselves a cool down time to regulate ourselves so we can be present for our emotions, for the people we love,

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not to pretend that the feelings will go away if we watch TV long enough. And what's key there is that conscious distraction is temporary. It's not some permanent hall pass to get out of being present in your life and to just Netflix your days away.

It's a temporary reprieve and that is super important. Like how buffering behavior can look super different for different people and in different moments, the things we choose to use as conscious distractions are individual and situation-specific, which is why I'm always encouraging you to raise your awareness and practice being your own watcher so you can know in any given moment what the right most supportive distraction is for you in any given time.

As always, one of my favorite ways to tease this apart, to know if I'm buffering or engaging in conscious distraction is to ask myself why. So I'll literally - and you know me, I love to talk out loud to myself, "Darling, why are you doing this?" And then I'll get quiet and still for a moment to listen in for the answer.

And if the reason is an attempt to not feel something, to not deal with it, to push it away, then it's likely a moment of attempting to suppress a feeling within myself, to buffer. If I hear that gentle self-loving voice of my intuition say, "Baby, this mind, body, spirit needs a break," then a break we get.

And it's so important to be honest with yourself about what you're doing and why. To take radical responsibility for yourself and your choices as a way of continuing to build self-trust. Meanwhile, when you allow yourself to buffer without limits, then you reduce your self-trust and your sense of your own capacity to face your feelings and to own them.

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And you reify or strengthen the story that the only way you know how to manage challenging situations is by continuing to buffer, to self-suppress. The opposite is true of conscious distraction and self-expansive choices, which allow us to pause, reset, and get back to the work at hand, whatever it may be.

When I feel that creeping feeling of stuck or overwhelm while writing or working on something, I'll take a five-minute walk around the house or the block, I'll do some jumping jacks, I'll doodle, and I'll share some other ideas of remedies in a minute here but I do something that allows my nervous system a loving break for a set period of time and then I get back to work refreshed and knowing that I can move forward.

I don't have to tell an overwhelm story. And when that overwhelm experience is physiologic, using conscious distraction is doubly vital for my short-term and long-term wellness and reminds me that I will in fact always have my own back, versus forcing myself to push through, which does not work for me. And my love, it doesn't work for you. Not in a real way because science.

An example of this came up the other day when I was coaching a client. One of my few one-on-one clients. And we did a deep dive somatic practice where she was talking to and experiencing where different feelings lived in her body in relationship to her spouse asking for a divorce.

It was a powerful and intense session during which she realized some very old storylines in her head and the resonance of them in her body about her value and worth as a woman getting a divorce, and how this was tied to her family blueprint and how her mother was treated when she was getting a divorce some 30 years ago.

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As we started to wrap up the session, my client Bet's eyes started to glaze over. And I asked her if she was feeling like her body was in a bit of energetic shutdown. She said yes, confirmed that, and so I asked her what her plans were for when we ended our session. And she said that she was planning to journal about her experience. She really wanted to capture it.

While honoring that desire within her because she's a grownup, she knows what's best for her, I invited her to consider taking some time to engage in conscious distraction first. To give her body-mind a much-needed break, to allow her nervous system to regulate itself and to come back into equilibrium instead of continuing to push herself to stay in and with these big energies.

Bet decided she would work on a puzzle and wrote me later in the evening to tell me how much her body appreciated that break and how self-loving that act of not pushing herself to keep working on it in that moment felt. That it felt like some of the deepest self-care she'd ever done to not push herself to keep journaling.

So we've talked about how vital conscious distraction is in moments of overwhelm and it's an important tool to have at the ready because even when we're just going through our normal lives, when we're not in overwhelm, we all get worn down. And these days, doubly so as we head towards the one-year mark of this global pandemic, working from home, homeschooling, being out of work, missing our people, not hugging anyone, a new experience of skin hunger.

It can all feel like so much because it is so much. So some more subtle hints that it's time for a conscious distraction break could be hearing thoughts in your own mind like, "I just can't do this anymore. Nothing is

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working. I'm so frustrated. Wow, this is too much right now. I'll never get this right."

All these thoughts may be hints of overwhelm soon to come. You might physically feel worn down or depleted, you may have a queasy or upset tummy, because remember that vagus nerve. Our stomachs, our guts are one of our greatest indicators of what's going on system-wide or you may feel tension across your shoulders, neck, or jaw, you may notice shallow breathing, spaciness, or like you just can't focus.

Emotionally, you might feel stressed, apathetic, anxious, frustrated, and in real time, you may feel like things are taking way too long, like you've lost your objective connection to what you're doing and how it's going. This is when mindfulness and being the watcher of our thoughts and guardians of our bodies benefits us greatly. Because we will know it is time for some conscious distraction, for a self-expansive temporary break the more clued in we are to ourselves.

And the good news is that the more we tune into our minds and bodies, we'll hear the need to conscious distraction when it's a faint whisper instead of a slasher movie scream. Before having thought work, somatic, or body-based practices and breathwork on my side, for years and years I would push myself to work, work, work and go, go, go, produce, write, make things happen, and would only take a break when my body forced me to.

And I want so much more for you, my love. Because now I'm on the other side of it and taking those conscious distraction breaks, it's really been such a game-changer in my life. Because conscious distraction is choosing that break instead of doing it only when your body demands it and you collapse on the couch.

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Conscious distraction is a gift we give to our brains and bodies as we grow our relationship with ourselves, as we take our lives back from codependency, perfectionism, and people-pleasing, which are systems of thought in which we're constantly sourcing our sense of wellness, worth, and value from others, which keeps us locked in that productivity is the most important thing kind of way of thinking.

We're taking a break because you love yourself, to support yourself, as a way to check in and give yourself a break, it's just not what's on the menu for most of us when we're in those ways of thinking. So big old nerd alert here. Conscious distraction helps us to down regulate our amygdala.

So the amygdala is the fear center of our brain where the lion attack early warning system lives. And when we are in that overwhelm, in that go, go, go story, in the deep processing or it's all just feeling like too much, the amygdala can get activated and can think that there's something dangerous here.

And so when we pause, when we breathe, when we consciously distract, it activates different centers of our brain, which allows us to be more creative, more self-loving, and to be more objective about our lives by getting a little cognitive distance.

Through self-expansive choices, we can calm and engage our vagus nerve in a new way, the nerve which feeds our heart, lungs, and digestive tract, and we can shift into ventral vagal, our safe and social state, where all of those things that are so vital for our life, again, our heart, lungs, and digestion work optimally.

And by shifting into ventral vagal, we optimize our cognition as well. That is to say again, because science, when you take a break, you can think better

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after. That's pretty cool. So let's talk about some specific remedies. Some things that you can use to consciously take that break.

One of my favorites is gently throwing a ball either up in the air and please, don't hurt yourself, don't break anything. Use a tennis ball, not a golf ball or a lacrosse ball. So I will throw the ball in the air and consciously catch it or throw the ball against the wall and catch it.

And this really simple activity is great because in so doing, your brain will switch to using your motor cortex and will start working with your cerebellum. You'll get a little hit of our beloved joyful motivating friend, the hormone dopamine, and our brains love it when we throw and catch things, when we use our fine motor skills.

Think about how everyone is super impressed when someone catches something that unexpectedly gets knocked over. I'm getting excited just thinking about it right now. So impressive.

I got silly there, but it really is. It's such a simple thing to do. Try it. Next time you're starting to feel a little overwhelmed just pause, grab a tennis ball, throw and catch, throw and catch, and listen to the thud as it hits the wall because remember, we need to give our brains a task and this one is fine motor skills and tasks all over town.

Another favorite I love is to pause to hum. So that humming creates a vibration in your throat, which is actually supportive of the vagus nerve. And humming is really good for our sinuses and our vocal chords, and music engages your frontal lobe, temporal lobe, Broca's area, Wernicke's area, the occipital lobe, the hippocampus. I mean, it's like a brain bonanza.

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So really, you don't need to hum any particular song or know - not that I'd know how to recognize a note, that's not my forte. But just hum and breathe and keep humming. It can be a really nice break and I'll sometimes combine that with one of the practices that I teach in my six-month program, which is walking meditation, which is a super great one for folks for whom seated meditation just is not accessible, which we talked about in episode 103 the other week.

So this practice is about walking while listening and being present to our footsteps, feeling the air on our face, bringing our attention to our breath, and walking at a slow natural pace like we have nowhere to go because we don't in this practice. It's all about feeling your foot on the floor and lift your foot and the other, and really getting present in the particular part of your body versus going deep into your body, which again, as we've talked about before is inaccessible for a lot of folks, so focusing on our feet can make it more accessible.

And I'll sometimes walk up and down the hallway of my house while humming as a way to actively distract. It's a good one. We can also do the quotidian things of life. So sometimes I will do the dishes because it's something that I particularly find really soothing. I love the warm water on my paws, I have this really nice lavender dish soap that smells really good, and I find it really soothing, the practice of soaping up the dishes, rinsing them, I love it. It's a great active distraction for me.

You could play with a pet or a kiddo, you could go for a walk, you could do jumping jacks if you're physically able, if you're in a wheelchair and you have access to moving your arms, you could do arm circles. You could check in with the good people of Dunder Mifflin for 20 minutes while drinking a nice warm cup of tea. These are all great, simple, accessible, for free things that you could do.

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Another really nerdy one is that studies show that puzzles, both physical paper puzzles and actually also digital puzzles, which I found really surprising, but there are studies that show that these are a great way to reset the brain. And so there are studies where folks undergoing painful cancer treatment were given digital games to distract them and they reported both less anxiety and less pain, which is super rad.

So maybe you take a five-minute Tetris break or do a puzzle on the dining room table. Just as always, be thoughtful about making it temporary. If you're feeling stuck or overwhelmed at work, if you're being flooded with emotions, or your mind, your body just says take a breather, consider setting a five or 10-minute timer and then check in with yourself when the timer goes off about getting back to work.

You could also do something like reorganizing your sock drawer for 15 minutes. Man, when I first started this podcast, I had a lot of anxiety around it, which I've done some beautiful thought work around, some somatic work around, it's been really healing in a lot of ways. But I would get overwhelmed as I was preparing to produce the show, to write the show, to share it with you all, and so I would give myself brain breaks of organizing drawers.

And let me tell you, my utensil drawer, the sock drawer, the underwear drawer, sparkling clean, perfectly organized. All of these things can be engaging of your fine motor skills, which can help to distract your brain and can give you just enough pause, remember, set that timer, don't let it become the whole afternoon.

So you can do your thought work or you can do your homework, you can do whatever it is you want and need to do with more self-love and less stress and overwhelm. And this is important to say, my beauties. Whatever

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you're doing when you're doing these things, just do them. Let the judgment go if your brain starts to should on you.

You should be working; you should be focusing. Remind yourself that you are being intentional. You're not buffering here. You are actively choosing this activity. Let your critical protective parts complain all they want and then redirect yourself and your attention to being present with the conscious distraction.

That is what makes it powerful and what makes it not buffering. Let the activity wash over you, welcome childlike wonder and joy. Or welcome in a sense of being neutral. This activity is neither good nor bad. It's what I am doing to support my nervous system. Be present.

Temporary, time-limited thoughtful, intentional, conscious distraction is a beautiful way to take care of yourself, to have your own back, to build self-trust, and to show yourself deep and real self-love. Give it a try, send me a little DM over on the 'gram @victoriaalbinawellness and let me know what you thought of this.

If this was helpful for you, supportive, or if you're like, whatever, this is dumb, I want to hear it all. Because I think this is super useful. Alright my beauty, thank you for listening. As always, it's been such a delight to talk with you.

If you have been curious about my six-month program anchored Overcoming Codependency and have thought about applying, the time is now. Head on over to victoriaalbina.com/masterclass to learn more now and to get on my schedule to talk all about the program and how spending six months together, learning tools like I shared here today, learning how to use thought work and somatic body-based practices to bring about deep

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healing and to learn how to source your self-worth, your self-validation internally, instead of looking through that codependent lens for everyone else and everything else in your life to prove your worth to you. Because you're worthy, my sweet love. You were born that way; you always will be. It's time for you to get anchored in yourself so you can remember it.

Alright my love, let's do what we do. Gentle hand on your heart if that feels supportive. 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 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.