

Ep #146: Codependency, Perfectionism and All-or-Nothing Thinking



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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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. As we keep moving into the holiday season and towards the new year, my mind turns, as you might guess it would, to the theme of all-or-nothing thinking.

Tis the season to overeat, overdrink, to buffer like wild at holiday parties, all to turn around and beat ourselves up the next day with that old moralistic diet culture thinking we've been trained to think that has taught us that food is either good or bad, healthy, naughty, a cheat food that we need to guilt ourselves for having enjoyed.

And following closely behind the season of bountiful buffering, as I've come to call the holidays is New Year's resolution time. The magic of New Year's. It's this time of magical thinking that says tomorrow, New Year's day, I shall awaken a wildly new and different person with completely different habits that I will complete with utter perfection day after day after day.

Without doing any thought work or somatic practices or any setup to make that happen, right? Without looking at my goals, or my values, or my why. Magic, right?

And that is the kind of society-wide all-or-nothing thinking, black-and-white thinking, good and bad thinking that keeps us trapped in these old stories, these old habits where we set ourselves up to moralize on ourselves, quite frankly to be mean to ourselves while not actually accomplishing the things we actually want to accomplish.

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Let's back up, my beautiful nerds, and recognize that while there are some societal level issues around this thinking we do need to address, to a brain that evolved in order to keep its owner safe at all costs, all-or-nothing thinking, good or bad thinking is - it's not so dumb after all, right?

It's alluring. It's strategic seeming, and supportive of that singular objective. For you, my darling, to survive another day so you can propagate the species. It makes sense biologically speaking. If the only thing that matters is keeping us alive, our brains and bodies can best do that if they have two very simple and opposite categories in which to organize any and all incoming information.

Poisonous pokeberry, unsafe category. Raspberry, safe category. Rattlesnake, unsafe, garter snake, safe. Lion that will murder your face, house cat that - okay well, can we pause here and be real? Our house cats would murder us in the face if they could.

But you get the point here, right? The house cat is not actually a threat to your life on most days. So your brain says that one is good, so the other must be bad. That this is a threat and that is a boon of berry-based delights.

But the truth in our modern times is often somewhere in the middle. And if we continue to stay in our old patterns of all-or-nothing thinking instead of learning to see the grey, the nuance, the complexity, especially when it comes to our feelings and our interactions with other humans, the stories we tell about ourselves, then we keep ourselves stuck in survival mode.

Not because thriving isn't available to us, but because we are keeping ourselves apart from it unnecessarily. All-or-nothing, black-and-white

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thinking is a huge part of the codependent internal landscape. And what keeps people people-pleasing, and of course, perfectionism rolling along. It's the bed stone of it all.

Either you're worthy of love and care because others say it, or you're worthless. Either they are pleased with your decisions and choices so you can feel safe and okay, or they're displeased and that internal script tells you to leap to action to make sure that they are now pleased, to attempt to manage their minds for them.

Either you know how to do it perfectly, or your brain offers you thoughts like, "Why bother even starting if I can't do it perfectly?" Or once started, often after weeks of pressured perfectionist procrastination, you stay up until 1am, struggling and suffering and striving to make it perfect, whatever it may be, because nothing less than all or nothing perfect will do.

So from that understanding that this habit is part and parcel of our codependent framework for living, knowing that people pleasing and perfectionism are symptoms from that codependent story, today, we'll look at some common reasons why we develop this habit, why, as always, it was genius in childhood, how it messes up our lives now.

And next week, because your girl is always a super practical nurse at the end of the day, we will look at some remedies. Some ways to shift this kind of thinking for good and of course, I've got a present for you because I love presents.

So black-and-white thinking is indicative of being in emotional childhood, which we talked about way back in episode 23. Children in all of their

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developmental brilliance see the world as black and white because it keeps them safe. They are small, after all.

In emotional adulthood, episode 24, we can see the nuance, the grey. As children with our limited knowledge of the world, it feels safer for our brains to believe that we know what is a lion and what is a lamb.

When we grow up with stress, distress, or trauma in our homes, in chaos, whatever that chaos was, when we grow up not feeling seen, if feelings in our homes were outsized and too big for us to manage, feelings like big anger or big sadness, or if feelings were not something we became versed in, if they were not talked about, a la stiff upper lip living, well, as children and later as adults, we may not know what's lion and what's lamb.

Is a feeling a lion or a lamb? Is sad okay or is it a terrible scary thing? As adults, we can feel like we struggle to find the language of what we are feeling, so our brains go right to good or bad, safe or dangerous, you love me or you're leaving me, a.k.a anxious attachment, or you love me too much and that makes me uncomfortable so I am leaving you, a.k.a avoidant attachment and pseudo protective stance.

All-or-nothing thinking is a buffering factory you carry with you in your own mind. When we're in all-or-nothing thinking, we perceive any tension, discomfort, fear, anxiety, sadness, disbelief, disappointment as a sign that something has gone terribly wrong and we strayed too far out of the nest where we won't know what's lion or lamb, rattlesnake or garter, I must go back, we think.

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I am in dangerous territory here having all these feelings or witnessing someone else have them, and if I know what's good for me and you know I will, I won't step out of line again. Let's shut the feelings down, shall we?

And the truth is we're not usually actually in dangerous territory. We're just uncomfortable, experiencing an emotion, a conflict, a situation, a thought we don't yet know how to handle. And please, note that word yet, my darling. You can learn. If I did, you can. Let me tell you that.

We don't yet know how to handle it if someone we love is having a feeling like disappointment, upset, irritation, anger that we don't want them to have. Again, because it's uncomfortable for us. And so our brains are habituated to calling our feelings or someone else having feelings bad, negative, a problem.

And we are thus trained to run from it like that viper in the grass. The truth about this way of thinking is that most of us aren't in mortal peril on the daily. So this mental filing pattern of all good or all bad, it's put on things that aren't actually dangerous, but illicit a biochemical stress response in us such that things like applying for a job we've always wanted, going on a date with a person our best friend thinks we would adore, setting a boundary with a parent, telling your ex that no, you are not available for the 14th relationship postmortem, seeing that your mom or your boss texted, all these things and so much more can activate that same sympathetic, fight or flight, adrenal and cortisol, all night raver party that leaves us feeling anxious and worried and stuck as our brains habitually code these not actually dangerous moments as dangerous to our survival.

As these situations bring up the activating feelings, the sensations in our body that our brains associates with bad, threat, danger, run, with activation of the amygdala, the fear center of our minds. And so we are

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flooded with the chemicals that tell us that yes, the wisest choice is to bolt, to buffer, to change the subject, to amuse the other person or distract them or appease them to fawn so they won't have a challenging feeling that might lead us to have uncomfortable feelings.

And so the circle of activation, collapse, buffer, avoid continues on and on, starting with that all-or-nothing thinking. So of course, we buffer when our brains go to good or bad because if you're coding feelings as danger, it makes sense you wouldn't want to have them, and we'll eat, or drink, or exercise, or online shop, or be the joker or whatever it is for you as an attempt to not experience uncomfortable emotions.

But the thing we know is that when you are not having all of your emotions, when you are not holding open, full-hearted, judgment-free space for you and your feelings, then it keeps you from having the full human experience.

Because my darling sweet angel love, you cannot have the highest highs of peak joy and pleasure, you cannot have true easeful daily contentment if you push away the lows, the shadow feelings, the one your brain's habitually labeled as wrong and bad. The ones your brain is calling a problem and is linking to danger.

Because it's buffering against them before you can process those feelings through your body and can come into a different relationship with them. And it's important to note, that brain pattern isn't happening because we're actually making a mortal mistake or doing something terribly wrong. Most of the time, nothing is truly wrong.

We're just miscoding a situation from our childhood defense strategies. Black-and-white thinking is also linked to the childhood defense patterns of

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globalization and catastrophizing, the latter we talked about in episode 134, where we take one tiny thing and we make it huge because it feels safer to make it bigger, because then maybe we can be sure we're not mistaken a t-rex for a toy panda. Makes sense, right?

But when we globalize, when we catastrophize, when we make things huge, we are having huge responses, more activation, more fight or flight, which leads to more dorsal, more collapse. And less time spent in ventral vagal, where we are peaceful, safe and social, where our digestion is optimized, reproductive function, thyroid function, cognition is optimal there.

We are spending less time in peace and more time in freak out, or collapse. So why do we do this? Why do we do this, my darlings? Well, we often go to these extremes because it helps us to feel in false control.

If we grew up with uncertainty, whether it was uncertain if we were going to be loved because we got a B+, or uncertain that there would be food on the table, or whatever uncertainty in the middle may have been true for you, when we grow up in these ways, not feeling really securely attached in our family of origin, then believing that we know what is yes and what is no, what is good, what is bad brings us a sense of control.

It's false control, but it feels like control. And we understand that again, going back to biology, few things feel as safe and comforting to a human as to know that we know what there is to know.

And so we cling to these stories because we believe until we know better, but we believe that it makes us feel safer. Perfectionism is another form of false control and a symptom of codependent thinking, which is based in and fed by this all-or-nothing thought pattern.

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If anything falls short of our own internal rubric for perfect, we immediately move to, “It’s just fucking garbage. It’s the worst. I am the worst.” It’s almost untenable to think otherwise because we’ve created a story that we are safe when we are in control, and we are in control when we are the ones declaring what is good and what is bad.

Of course it’s challenging within that framework to say, you know what, this is good enough, done and dusted and out the door, I will take it. From that old habit, coming to believe that an A- is okay is brain rattling. And thinking that a B+ could ever be good enough, oh my goodness, earth shattering.

And one of the places where I really see folks getting caught up is that we bring this all-or-nothing thinking, this I have to get an A+ all the time in order to be control, in order to feel okay, is to our healing work. I have clients who say, “How can we make this healing thing go faster? Tell me everything right now so I can get through this.”

Clients who think that feeling better all the time is the goal of thought work, of somatics, of healing, and I get it. They want to go all in and be all done because holding the middle is so challenging. But it’s just not realistic, and misses the point of being alive, and sets you up for more pain and suffering when you think that healing and growing means living a life free of discomfort, whereas recognizing that beautiful grey and learning how to ride the waves of human emotion, learning how to sit with the discomfort and take its hand is key to living a rich and fulfilling life.

For more on this, check out episode 80, Healing Isn’t Linear. And so all-or-nothing thinking can throw you off your own path of healing, whatever that looks like for you. This is another one I hear all of the time.

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So I was meditating every day and I felt really great, and then one fateful morning my car barfed on the carpet, or my kid had an earache or whatever, life got life-y, and I skipped my practice, and then I stopped for years. I just didn't go back to it. I had this really great habit that felt really great and it was just amazing and something happened.

Sub in exercising, healthy eating, breathwork, thought work, journaling, whatever it is. We swing from daily dedication to never shall I ever when there's a wave in the ocean of life. And we then take that pause and instead of seeing it as life being life-y, we then project our thoughts about our behaviors onto ourselves and allow our self-concept to change, all because of a little scratch in the record.

We come to believe our brains when they say, "When I'm doing all the things, I am a great person, worthy of love and care. Look at me doing all the things." And you "slip up" once, and because your mindset is all or nothing, your mindset shifts.

You start thinking that you yourself are bad because you missed a day. So why would you go back to your daily practice? Why would you take care of you if you didn't show up 110%, if you weren't all in the all? Well now, you must be all in the nothing. Why would you show up for you if you can't do it perfectly? And so you throw it all away.

It is those unkind thoughts you then think about yourself that keep you from resuming meditation or journaling or whatever you're beating yourself up now for not doing. So of course you don't go back to it, right? It's coded as a place where you were wrong and you were bad and ouch baby, ouch.

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That kind of thinking keeps us from seeing ourselves in our humanity. Meanwhile, if you hear the thought that says I skipped a day, a week, a month of practice, and you can choose not to believe it, you can instead choose a thought like, turns out I'm just a human and I can create comfort in the discomfort of the grey. I can give myself the grace here and can restart as easily as I stopped.

Then you can hold space for yourself and can take a Wednesday off from meditating and can recommit on Thursday because you're giving yourself that space to accept yourself as human, living a human experience on this earth, and can start to drop that all-or-nothing story that it has to be 110% perfect or why bother.

And when you're not giving yourself the space to be a sweet and wonderful human just humaning through, you create so much guilt for yourself, which can just as easily become shame about yourself. When you're not living from that reserve of self-worth and instead believe you need to create your self-worth every day through your actions, which I'm ever out here to tell you is complete BS.

My beauty, let this sink in. You don't create your worth through your actions. You're inherently worthy of love and care and attention and all good things, my sweet and tender amazing little ravioli, just because you exist. Just because you are.

When you're having trouble believing that when your brain is going to the nothing part of the all or nothing, know that that's okay too. I've had trouble believing it in the past. I know how painful that can be. So you can borrow my endless love for you while you grow your own for you. Sound good? You can have it.

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And I think that is so important, to situate this whole conversation in self-love and self-worth, and really moving towards filling up our own cup for, by, and with ourselves. Because the thing to remember is that from our codependent thinking, we make every little mistake, every little nothing in the all-or-nothing category, every little bad an indictment of our worth and the worth of everyone around us.

So we are harsh, not just on ourselves but on everyone and everything else because we have these thought errors that tell us that our very worth is dependent on whether we fit in to these good or bad, all-or-nothing categories, and that our wellness is dependent on how everyone else thinks, feels, and acts.

If our partner is exercising and eating well, we can feel safe because they're firmly in the good category. And since they're a reflection of us, we can feel good. Same goes with our children. If they're happy, then we can be happy, not just because they're happy, but because happy children reflect on us as their parents.

We spend a lifetime from our codependent habits trying to manage other people's minds, their thoughts and feels for them because we struggle to see them as autonomous, because we struggle to conceive of ourselves as autonomous.

There is just so much beauty in the grey. Beyond the all-or-nothing, black-or-white framework, and being open to being wrong in your thinking and learning something new, in being open to allowing other people to live their own lives without needing to categorize their choices or make them mean anything about you or your worth, to allow yourself more space to question what you learned implicitly and explicitly from your childhood, your family blueprint, your socialization, your conditioning, to chart your own course in

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this life and to say I don't have to think that this is bad or that is good just because I was taught that.

And that is something we can look at our own lives and where we're really leaning into other people's stories around our sexuality, around gender, around the kinds of relationships we're in, around our friendships, around our careers, around gosh, I mean, fashion, hairstyles, I mean everywhere, right?

We can take what other people tell us is good and bad and it's sneaky and it's subtle, and it's often not so subtle, right? But it creates the life we're living until we pause and recognize that we can pick a more liberatory way of thinking, one that helps us to step more fully into our autonomy, our agency, our authenticity, our power, our intentionality, our own capacity to choose for ourselves. To not just believe what others want us to believe because it keeps them feeling safe and in control.

My darlings, I'm going to hit pause here because this is a lot, right? To recognize all the ways we've learned all-or-nothing thinking, all the ways black-and-white thinking is part of our rubric for life. So I want to let this sink in.

And I want to invite you to start to be on the lookout, to see these habits in your own life. And I'll be back next week to talk all about the remedies. Mind and body ways that you can start to shift these habits, so you can create more room for your own thoughts and your own feelings in your own mind, your own body, your own life.

Take a moment now to make sure that you're subscribed to the show, which Apple Podcasts now calls following, so that the next episode lands

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right onto your phone without you doing anything at all, which is pretty darn nice.

And I don't want you to miss a single thing, particularly not the remedies show. And my darling, if you're loving the show, if you are really enjoying everything you're learning here, it would be a delight to have you join us for Anchored, my six-month program to overcome codependency, perfectionism, and people pleasing.

This is a collective community experience where we gather in so many ways every single weekday for six months to grow, to change, to heal, to shift our way of thinking, to get in touch with our somatic experience in life together, in a group of loving humans that support one another in this beautiful growth journey.

If you have tried all the things and are still not making the shifts you want to make in your life, I want to invite you to head on over to victoriaalbina.com/anchored to learn all about this life-changing program where you will get the skills and the tools you need to make sustainable, long-lasting, lifelong change in the ways you relate romantically, with friends, with your parents, with your partners, with your children, at work, and most importantly, with yourself.

The class starts in February 2022 and it's filling up fast, which is very exciting. So if you've wanted to join us, now is the time, my beauty. Now is the time. Alright my darling, let's do what we do. Put a gentle hand on your heart, on your belly, on your thighs, press your hands together, ask your body what feels good and grounding for you, and give yourself the gift of doing that should you choose to.

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Remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my beauty. 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.