

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

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. There are so many amazing things about my romantic relationship that I am endlessly grateful for; the safety, the curiosity, the care, the growth, the support, the encouragement, the fun, the deep and powerful love, and coregulation of our nervous systems, and also the super deep nerdity.

Well, I have called myself a Buddhist-lite for the last decade plus. My wife, Billey, is a for real vows-taken Tibetan Buddhist. And because she is exactly who she is, she's so friggin nerdy about it, which is so attractive. She's constantly like, Buddhism has all these lists. I love a list; this episode has five different lists. She's often rattling off about the *pāramitās*, and it's just so fun and amazing to have someone, who's so expert in something I've been so interested in for so long, constantly around. It is such a gift.

Recently, she was talking about a term in Buddhism that parallels so much of what we tend to do in emotional outsourcing, aka codependent, perfectionist and people-pleasing living. That term translates to “idiot compassion”. That's when our compassionate actions stem not just from genuine care and understanding, but from a place of avoidance, fear, discomfort, not really recognizing it, and trying to control or trying to manipulate; all the things we do an emotional outsourcing.

Idiot compassion can lead us to enable harmful behaviors, or perpetuate unhealthy dynamics in our lives under the guise of, “I'm just being kind.” It's like putting a Band-Aid on a gaping wound without addressing the root cause of the problem. And it keeps us, and the people we are covering up for, swirling in all of our old painful behaviors, when instead we could be growing and stepping into what's next.

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

So, before we go on, and we're going to dive deep, let's pause. Because as you can imagine, I'm not loving this translation. I mean the "idiot" part, of course. It feels unnecessarily and unsupportively harsh and judgmental to me. And I believe that most of us who grew up in emotional outsourcing have had a just enough of that, thank you very, very much.

I could call it "naive compassion" or "uninformed compassion". These terms, they bring up a sense of innocence and a lack of awareness rather than implying judgment or criticism. When we engage in naive compassion it's not because we're foolish or lacking in intelligence, but we just might not have really grasped the complexities of the situation or understood the deeper dynamics at play.

When we think about the nervous system, and I go straight to functional freeze, when we're in functional freeze, yeah, we're not really present to what's going on in the moment. We don't have a full grasp of what's what because we're not present. We're not here.

Another option could be misguided or misdirected compassion. These terms acknowledge that our intentions can be rooted in genuine care and concern, but our actions may inadvertently lead to, well, unintended secondary consequences. That is, the perpetuation of harmful patterns we just mentioned.

This term, this rewrite, invites us to reflect on the alignment between our intentions and the actual impact of our actions. Which can remind us to step into the humility and openness that's needed for learning and growth. I'll also say that in emotional outsourcing, when our thinking is codependent, we often really lose our grasp on that connection between what we did and how it impacted others.

Intention and impact, there's a gulf there, right? "Well, I just meant to be helpful. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings." Like, "Okay, fine. Walk all over

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

me then.” Those kinds of things we say, we don't really put the two and a two together, so that term could be really helpful.

Alternately, we could use the term “overzealous compassion” or “overzealous empathy”. There's something in there I like too, because they gently highlight our habit of going above and beyond in our efforts to help others, often to the point of neglecting our own wellbeing or enabling behaviors in others that don't serve them or us, or really anyone.

These terms encourage us to find a balance between compassion for others and for ourselves. Remembering that true empathy is when we honor both our own needs and the needs of others. And it is never about self-abandonment. That's not what true empathy is, right? If you're not in the equation, where's the empathy?

I'm really liking “confused compassion”, because it reminds me that I just did an ‘oopsie’. I didn't do anything wrong or bad in crossing that line of compassion, that sort of cover-up compassion. Ooh, cover-up compassion, I like that one. But that's kind of what happens from it, right?

Anyway, confused compassionate reminds me, “I didn't do anything wrong. I'm still a good person.” I just did this thing that we do, right? It doesn't mean anything about my value or worth as a human being. There was just confusion between what my younger, emotional outsourcing self believes to be best, and what my evolving, growing self wants to be and do in the world.

And in that confusion I do this thing where I'm compassionate beyond what supports the other person and myself, and I crossed this line into living, managing, controlling, sort of doing their life for them.

So, I present all these options because options are wonderful. Figure out what works best for you, I'm going to go with “confused” or “misguided” for now.

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

Confused or misguided compassion, while outwardly appearing selfless, often stems from deeper psychological patterns that complicate our emotional landscape. It's not just about avoiding conflict or seeking approval; it's about how our internal narratives shape our interactions in fundamentally profound ways.

So, let's talk about why we do this, beyond the general 'it's what we do in emotional outsourcing.' What follows is not an exhaustive list and are presented in no particular order. One... and yeah, there's like four more lists to come. I love a list! Come on, it's a great way to organize them, right?

One: At its core, misguided compassion can be seen as a psychological safety net. For many, especially those of us who have experienced instability or inconsistency in emotional connections during formative years, aka you had emotionally immature, unavailable or inconsistent parents... and we talked about that in Episode 167... we can have a deeply ingrained fear of abandonment or rejection.

This fear motivates us to engage in behaviors that are superficially altruistic, but are fundamentally about securing our place and peace in relationships. To attempt to feel real belonging, in an attempt to calm our nervous system in the social milieu.

This form of compassion is a defense mechanism against our deep-seated fears that if we stop being useful we might end up all alone. And what happens to small mammals who are left alone? We die cold and alone on a mountaintop, right?

Two: There's a strong element of control in misguided compassion. By managing the emotional climate around us, we feel a sense of control over an otherwise unpredictable world. This illusion of control is seductive because it gives a temporary sense of mastery and competence.

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

However, it is a double-edged sword. While it might provide short-term relief or a sense of power to do for others what they could totally do for themselves, it ultimately perpetuates a cycle of dependency and doesn't allow for genuine emotional intimacy or growth for anyone involved.

Three: On a neurobiological level the patterns of confused compassion are often reinforced by the brain's reward system. Acts of kindness and care release dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and satisfaction.

For someone deeply entrenched in cycles of emotional outsourcing these neurochemical rewards can make the behavior compulsive, because we release dopamine in anticipation of doing the thing, right? It's an anticipatory molecule. So, that means that we keep doing it without even realizing that we're doing it and doing it. You keep doing it without awareness or consciousness even though it's effing with your personal boundaries, your self-worth, and your relationships.

Four: Fear of confrontation and conflict can keep us doing this. As humans we are wired to seek harmony and avoid discord. In emotional outsourcing we take this tout en and try to keep things copacetic at the expense of our own wellbeing; choking down our upset, hurt and frustration to not upset the proverbial 'llama cart'.

Confronting someone or challenging harmful behaviors can be uncomfortable and anxiety inducing. Especially when we don't know how to regulate our nervous system, which most of us don't when we're deep in emotional outsourcing.

So, we opt for what we believe to be the path of least resistance, even if it means enabling destructive patterns, aka other people treating us however they want, and us not saying "boo" about it.

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

Five: There isn't a one of us with emotional outsourcing habits who doesn't host a full and extended family of insecurity Gremlins in the shadows of our minds. Part and parcel of emotional outsourcing is doubting our own worth and lovability.

So, what with not being fools, we seek validation and approval from others as a need for assuaging these insecurities. And what better way to gain validation than by being the ever helpful, ever compassionate savior? By rescuing others we seek to prove our worthiness and indispensability, even if it comes at the cost of our own wellbeing.

Part and parcel of that as well, is this constant turning of the other cheek. "She didn't mean to. It's okay. He was tired. I'm sure they would have been kinder had they thought about it." And because we doubt ourselves, and we doubt and don't trust that part of us that says, "Hey, that didn't feel good," we continue to give the other person the grace, or an idiot, in terms of our compassion towards them, and continue to be taken advantage of over and over again.

Of course, we need to talk about our social conditioning and cultural norms, especially within the patriarchy, white settler colonialism, late stage capitalism, and Neo-feudalism. This is the invisible hand that shapes our beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, generally without our even realizing it. From a very young age, so many of us, especially those of us socialized as women and girls, are bombarded with messages glorifying self-sacrifice and martyrdom, and equating our worth with our ability to serve others.

We're taught that putting others needs above our own is the epitome of virtue, and any hint of selfishness is met with scorn and disapproval. Come on, now. It's no wonder we find ourselves tangled in this web of misguided compassion. Seeking validation and approval through acts of selflessness at great personal cost.

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

Now, if you haven't heard Episodes, 113 and 133... of course, they didn't; of course, you did... give those a listen. They're faves of mine, and can help you to bring some of this compassion home to yourself.

Finally: The role of trauma. The urge to rescue others can stem from a driving need to attempt to regain a sense of control and agency in the face of past helplessness. By saving others we seek to reclaim a sense of power and purpose, even if it means sacrificing our own wellbeing in the process.

Our nervous system believes that taking care of others is the best way to be safe, often because we learned that it actually was growing up. And the more we can regulate our nervous system, the more we can see which situations don't serve us, and when we're teetering into yield, not-so-smart compassion.

When we constantly prioritize others needs over our own, we neglect our own boundaries and self-care. Leading to burnout, resentment, and ultimately a depleted sense of self. It's important, no, it's vital, to raise our awareness and to begin to recognize when we are engaging in misguided compassion.

This kind of inquiry requires a keen eye and a willingness to look inward with honesty, curiosity, gentleness, and care. Because remember, when you're mean to you, you shunt that nervous system right on up into sympathetic activation... maybe go into a touch a dorsal freeze, checkout, collapse... and you're not going to get any good work done.

So, here are some signs that your compassion may have jumped the shark. Should it be the "proverbial shark"? Probably, because it's not a literal one, is it? One common sign of engaging in misguided compassion is consistently neglecting your own needs and boundaries in favor of helping others.



## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

For example, you might find yourself saying yes to every request for assistance, even when it comes at a cost to you. Like, sacrificing your own time, energy, wellbeing, not doing your self-care, hobbies, or the things you actually want to do.

Another red flag is a tendency to swoop in and rescue others from their problems, without giving them the opportunity to learn and grow from their experiences. And obviously, we're not talking about safety here. If the toddler's walking into the pool, swoop, swoop.

This can manifest in various ways, such as constantly bailing out a friend or loved one from financial difficulties, or repeatedly taking on responsibilities that rightfully belongs to others, covering for someone who's constantly hungover or late, on and on.

Folks who engage in misguided compassion can often go to great lengths to avoid conflict or discomfort, even if it means enabling harmful behaviors, or keeping those painful and wicked unhealthy dynamics in their relationships rockin' and rollin'.

We find ourselves tiptoeing around difficult conversations or sweeping issues under the rug, rather than addressing them directly and end up keeping people in our lives long past those relationships' expiration date. Because giving them the benefit of the compassionate doubt, making excuses for their lousy behavior, and keeping our head down, feels safer to our nervous system and inner child than saying, "You know what? This sucks. I'm out. Rescue yourself."

Constantly seeking validation and approval from others for our acts of kindness can also be a telltale sign of misguided compassion. If we measure our self worth based on how much we're able to help others, or seek praise and recognition for our efforts, that's a big ole hint that our actions are driven more by need for external validation than just genuine care and understanding.

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

Now, is it nice to be recognized and appreciated? Oh, my goodness, of course it is. But check the balance there. Check the intention, check your reason why, and check your balance.

Engaging in misguided compassion can leave us drained, resentful, depleted, even when we're outwardly putting on a very brave face. If we feel resentful or overwhelmed by other people's needs and requests, it can be a sign that we're neglecting our own wellbeing in the process of trying to help.

Having said that, I want to make note that of course, there's not an unexhausted mom on this planet, at all, full stop. I mean, of course, other than the 1% with wild amounts of help; to caveat in both directions there. I see you, exhausted mama, bear. I love you.

And I understand that because of the patriarchy and capitalism, and all the things, you're exhausted. Because you're doing all of the things. I don't need to tell you what you're doing, you're doing all of the things. It may be some misguided compassion, check it out, but it also might just be part and parcel of being a human and also a mom in this moment. Right?

Finally, the last sign is encouraging dependency. So, this is one I see the most, and can be the most draining and unhelpful for all involved. Continually providing assistance or support, without encouraging self-sufficiency or accountability, can perpetuate dependency and prevent others from developing the skills and resiliency to navigate life's challenges.

I'm not saying to not take care of the people you love. Oh my gosh, goodness, jeepers, no. We care for those we love. We support them. We help lift them up in challenging times. We engage in harm reduction. Yes, and we have a consciousness and awareness of the boundaries and limits of care. And when we've stepped in to encouraging dependency...

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

So, if our efforts to help are keeping someone dependent on us; us funding them, us living for them, us supporting them, us doing everything for them; rather than empowering them to support themselves to the best of their capacity... We're always framing this within "capacity"... then it may be time to reassess our approach.

I saw this in a coaching client, recently, whose husband was always unhappy at work. It didn't matter where he worked. He had a new job every few months, and he was always getting picked on. Someone was always bullying him. There was always a complaint at work, even though she had other friends who worked at that same place who just loved it.

So, after years of this, she supported him from her own savings to start his own business. And when he didn't put the work in to make it functional, she kept bailing him out financially. She kept stepping in to help him at work, at his job, the business she was funding, while she had a full-time job and was the primary caretaker for their kids.

She was working longer hours herself to fund him, and so she was exhausting herself to keep his dream afloat, while she was stressed and burned out. He was, frankly, chillin' and not actually doing much to keep this going.

So, what happens when we're always the one jumping in to save the day, and we give folks the grace over and over without them changing or showing up to take care of themselves? It's not great for anyone, to be real. We start by thinking or just lending a hand, but before you know it we're knee deep in everyone else's muck.

This over giving can slam us straight into burnout, right? And, the resentment can creep up quietly when we're pushing our own needs aside. It's a bitterness that isn't just about being unappreciated, it's about us betraying our own boundaries. Because we were taught to do so growing up in homes riddled with emotional outsourcing.

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

But let's face it, feeling like a doormat can really knock you, and the grudge we hold against others for it festers. turning our once warm and loving feelings, that led us to be compassionate to begin with, icy-cold. In relationships, these lopsided energies can feel like we're the only one putting in the work. It's like being stuck in a dance where we're the only one moving, which is super awkward.

Not only does this rob our pals or our loved ones of the chance to grow, because hey, why bother when you're there to fix everything, it also cements us in this savior role that can be so challenging to shake off. This is not the stuff of healthy, balanced relationships, it's a recipe for connections that are as shaky as a house of cards.

Bottom line, while our heart is usually in the right place when we're engaging in misguided compassion, the fallout is real. It's vital to dial it back and start setting some solid, loving, well-communicated boundaries for our own mental wellness and for genuinely healthier, stronger relationships.

So, wouldn't be *Feminist Wellness* if we didn't dive into the remedies, right? So, let's start by cultivating self-awareness. It's the first step in breaking free from the cycle of misguided compassion. It involves developing a keen understanding of our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, which is where the thought work protocol can come in, which is so helpful. As well as recognizing the pattern and triggers that contribute to our tendency towards overextending ourselves for others.

Practices like mindfulness meditation, journaling, and of course, somatic awareness techniques, like those I teach in *Anchored* and the *Somatic Studio*, can be invaluable tools for greater self-discovery. Central to breaking free from the grip of misguided compassion is, of course, self-compassion.

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

This means finally treating ourselves with the same kindness, understanding, and empathy that we constantly extend to others. Especially when we make mistakes, or realize, “Aw, man, I'm doing that misguided compassion thing again.” By cultivating and nurturing a supporting relationship with ourselves, we build resilience and inner strength to navigate the challenges of life with greater ease and grace.

And in so doing, my nerds, we build more capacity in our nervous systems to stay with ourselves when life gets lifey. Setting clear and healthy boundaries is essential in preventing the pitfalls of misguided compassion. This means learning to say no when necessary. “Thank you, I'm actually not available to help with a bake sale. I hope it goes really well.”

Arrgh, it can be challenging. Saying no to others... I think we all recognize this, or many of us recognize this... cognitively, it doesn't make us selfish or uncaring. It's an act of self-preservation, self-respect, and resentment prevention. And I want to really honor that for those of us who grew up being the good girl, the golden child, who grew up feeling like we couldn't say no and still be loved or lovable, we couldn't be safe if we said no, we've got to ease on into this, right?

So, we start by orienting our nervous system. And if you don't know what that is we'll put a little link on the page, or you can head to the top of [VictoriaAlbina.com](http://VictoriaAlbina.com), there's a bar there, and you can put your name and your email address in when you click it. You'll get my free “Orienting Exercise” sent right to your email.

We orient our nervous system, right? That buys you a second as you're looking around and grounding. Here's the kitten step, you're ready? When someone says, “Oh, hey, could you help out with X, Y and Z?” And everything inside you wants to scream no, but that good girl training, that home training that you have, tells you you have to say yes or you're a bad person, here's what I want you to do. Say, “Ooh, I'll let you know.”

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

You're not freaking your nervous system and your inner children out by saying no, but you're not saying yes. You're not committing. You're buying yourself a little time to contemplate if you actually want to say yes or no. You can check in with yourself, and you can practice kitten step it, and not just going with that old knee jerk yes.

And then, you can text them later that night or the next day; I usually say to give yourself a minimum four hours, but 24 is even better. You can tell them, "No, I'm not available. Thank you." It's exciting, right? Isn't that such a fun kitten step?

Alright, next: Discernment. Discernment is the art of seeing things as they are, and making wise and skillful choices in your actions. It involves discerning between genuine compassion, and feeling into the fear, guilt, need for validation, etc., that drives misguided compassion. By cultivating discernment, using our somatic practices to feel into what these different kinds of compassion feel like, then we can make decisions based on our values. Based on what matters to us, and not our condition patterns.

Five: Embracing vulnerability is essential in breaking free from the cycle of misguided compassion. It means being willing to acknowledge our own limitations, imperfections and vulnerabilities, and to show up authentically in our relationships with others. When we embrace vulnerability, we create space for genuine connection and empathy. Free from the need to perform or prove our worth through acts of self-sacrifice.

Breaking free from misguided compassion is not a journey we undertake alone. I cannot tell you enough, we need to be witnessed in community. It's the only way to heal, my darling. Well, it's not the only way, but for me it's the most sustainable and lasting way. Who am I to say 'the only anything,' right? But for me, it has been the thing.

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

It is vital to seek support from trusted friends, family members, coaches, community members, mental health professionals, who can offer guidance, perspective and feedback.

Finally, practicing radical self-care is essential in nurturing our own wellbeing, and preventing burnout and compassion fatigue. This means prioritizing activities and practices that nourish and replenish us. Whether it's spending time in nature, engaging in creative pursuits, or simply taking time to rest and recharge. By honoring our own needs and investing in our own self-care we can strengthen our capacity to show up for ourselves and for others with wisdom, kindness, and authenticity.

Ah, my angel, compassion, when aligned with wisdom and self-awareness, is not just a virtue it's a powerhouse. It has the potential to heal, to uplift, to transform. But like any powerful tool it must be used wisely. It's not enough to act from a place of instinct or emotion alone, we need to couple our compassionate impulses with a keen awareness of their impact both on ourselves and those we aim to help.

I encourage you to pause and to reflect on your own experiences with compassion. Have there been times when your efforts to help were more about easing your own discomfort than truly addressing someone else's needs? Have you found yourself exhausted from over giving or stuck in relationships that feel one sided?

If so, it might be time to rethink how you express compassion. Consider the terms we've discussed... naive, misguided, overzealous, confused... and think about which one might resonate with your own patterns. Start thinking about what you might need, as you step back into more balance around caring for yourself and others.

This isn't just about changing how we act; it's about transforming how we think about our roles in the lives of others. And most importantly, how we take care of ourselves as part of community care and interdependence.

## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

True compassion isn't self-sacrificing to the point of self-destruction, it's thoughtful, it's balanced, and it recognizes the need for boundaries.

So, as you move forward, aim to infuse your acts of kindness with a deeper sense of purpose and insight. Reflect on the “why” behind your actions. Challenge yourself to adopt approaches that empower rather than enable. And most importantly, ensure that your compassion is as beneficial for you as it is for others.

It's about nurturing a compassionate heart that is wise, giving, loving, but not weary. And, actions that are as informed as they are well intended. Let's keep our compassion genuine and our boundaries strong, so we don't just survive the emotional whirlwinds but thrive in creating relationships that are truly reciprocal and rewarding for everyone involved.

Thank you for joining me, my love. It's been a pleasure to share this really powerful concept with you. I hope it's supportive.

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## Ep #272: Misguided Compassion

That's what I want. This is an act of service, so I want it in lots of ears.  
Thanks for sharing, my love.

Alright, let's do what we do. Ahh, gentle hand on your heart, should you feel so moved. 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, mwah! I'll talk to you see. Ciao.

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you want to learn more all about somatics, what the heck that word means, and why it matters for your life, head on over to [VictoriaAlbina.com/somaticswebinar](http://VictoriaAlbina.com/somaticswebinar) for a free webinar all about it. Have a beautiful day my darling and I'll see you next week. Ciao.