

Ep #289: Embracing the Grey Area: Breaking Free from the All-or-Nothing Trap



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. I feel really moved this week to talk with you all about all-or-nothing thinking. It is this habit we can fall so deep into without even realizing what's going on. It is fueled by and fuels our perfectionist habits, definitely our people pleasing and yep, codependency too.

It's this emotional outsourcing way of looking at the world that comes from feeling like we're so insignificant and we just don't matter. So we need to make sure that we're controlling everything. Lest everyone else kind of realized that we don't matter and get on to us, kick us out of the village and leave us to die cold and alone on the mountaintop when the lions and the marauders, etc. all come to lunch on us.

Which is inevitable, says our brain, because that's its job, right? Our brains are meant to protect us. And they do it in these ways that don't really make sense with our modern lives. Like making us see everything in stark black or stark white, all or nothing, right? Telling us that if everything isn't 127 million percent absolutely perfect, then we're doomed. We're doomed. We're doomed. We're an imposter. We're a failure. Everyone is going to know that we're unlovable.

And the thing is, when we go back to our definition of emotional outsourcing, when we chronically and habitually source our sense of safety, worth, value, and connection or belonging from everyone and everything outside of ourselves instead of from within, to our profound detriment, well, when we come back to that definition, we realize just how scary it is for us to believe that there's a gray, right?

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People either need to believe in us or we're "effed". But we need to 100% know we're "effed". Do you know what I mean? There's this false safety that makes us feel safer if we think we know 100% how people are feeling. And so they think we should just evaporate.

So before I give the whole show away, which is a habit of mine, there's a lot of complexity here, of course, a lot of detail. And I'm really excited to share this episode with you, because it's a thing, in most of our lives, that keeps us in that spiral of emotional outsourcing. And it's really challenging to get out of it, as long as you think life is really this all-or-nothing thing.

Beyond that, it just makes life really unpleasant to think about it as all or nothing, versus really finding a cozy seat in the gray of it all. So, my loves, without further ado, all-or-nothing thinking.

Hello, hello my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. I am delighted to report that I got a wood stove for my home up here on occupied Munsee Lenape land, in the Hudson Valley of New York State, and I'm loving it.

It was just such a great decision to really make my space so super cozy as we head into the winter. And I just love curling up in the morning by the fire, doing my meditation, my thought work, my breathwork there, and spending some time really connecting with me before I head into a day of being of service. It's just so sweet and I'm loving it. So that's my update.

This week, I'm delighted to share some remedies to all-or-nothing thinking with you. I'm a practical nurse creature after all, and I love a good remedy. So last week, we laid out what black-and-white, all-or-nothing, good-and-bad, sort of moralistic framework of thinking is and how it creates a whole boatload of challenges in our lives.

It keeps us from living a life of deep joy, ease, and interdependence. And those things are my goal in life, for sure. To bring a lot more of that in, and to continue the work of dropping the worry, stress, anxiety, future-tripping,

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ruminating, and codependent, people-pleasing habits that lead to, and are perpetuated, by an all-or-nothing, black-and-white, good-and-bad version of the world. From which I, for sure, made a whole lot of assumptions around the world and what I was making it mean.

Because when that was my framework, I for one was definitely running on unintentional autopilot. I don't know about you, but I was not pausing to recognize my own agency and power. The power I have, that you have, to regulate our nervous systems and to choose our thoughts to create our feelings, to support our bodies somatically, to create the sensations, the feelings, the bodily connections that help us shift into a life full of ever-greater joy by learning to live in that nuance.

Starting to recognize when we're in old habits is so vital if we want to change them. So we can start to live our lives in emotional adulthood and not in emotional childhood, which we covered way back in the day in Episodes 23 and 24.

And to do so, we need to raise our awareness, so we can challenge our long-held belief that all things are all or nothing, black and white, good and bad, so we can begin to step out of that dichotomous worldview and into the grey, the nuance of life.

To begin to question our habitual thinking. Which it's important to note right upfront is incredibly and totally uncomfortable to do at first. And like all of this work, once you're practiced, life just feels so much better. At least for me and from what I hear from my clients, we're not jumping to conclusions. And we are giving ourselves the space to decide how we want to feel about something versus staying in our old narratives.

So as we step out of this binary way of thinking, we're challenging programming that we've had often for a lifetime that says that setting a boundary will make people hate us, or that we don't deserve the job we've always wanted, why bother, that vulnerability on a date, or maybe ever, is to be avoided at all costs, or that being a good parent means never saying no.

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And while none of those things are true, we believe them because we've been taught to. When we buy in to that all-or-nothing thinking, we keep our world very small and keep our old cassette tapes in our brain running in the background, making our decisions for us ahead of time.

While this may feel very safe according to our reptile brains, it's also very limited and limiting. I want to invite you, my darling love, to take a look at your own life for a moment. Where is your brain telling you an all-or-nothing story that is neither factual or truthful or helpful to you?

Mine does it all the time, and a big part of my own work in the last decade has been challenging myself to pause, to connect to my breath, to have that somatic and bodily awareness, and to challenge my brain to see the grey in life.

That a situation or circumstance may not be inherently good or bad, and that I have the power to use the thought work protocol that you are learning here on the show, along with somatic body-based practices based in felt experience to make choices about my life and what I want to make things mean.

For example, before working as a hospice nurse, I totally thought that death was bad because it always had been that in my life. My abuelos died; bad. My tio died suddenly at 46; bad. Innocent humans the world over... We can drop the innocent... That's moralistic, Vic. Listen, always bringing more awareness to my words. Humans the world over die of preventable disease. And the effects of latestage radicalized capitalism; all day, bad.

And while I do see those things, particularly that last one, as quite bad indeed, I'm realizing now that I can pause and take a look at my thoughts. That is; after working as a hospice nurse, I came to see that death can be a phenomenal gift, and I can welcome it in for the people and the animals I love when the time is right for them.

That doesn't make it less sad, but it does make it less knee-jerk bad. What it does is, it doesn't make it an inherent problem that creatures die; I will

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die. It makes it something that I can take case by case and can choose my own thoughts about.

Through my years of work as a life coach and as a nurse practitioner, there have been 1,000 different situations in which my looking at the world through my own lens of all-or-nothing, black-and-white, this is good, this is bad, could be a disservice to myself and to the human in front of me.

Over these years, I've learned not all pregnancies are joyful and welcomed, and not all pregnancies are a terrible nightmare. Not all beginnings are good. Not all endings are bad. Not all opportunities are actual opportunities. Some are a chance to decline an opportunity and to say, "This is no longer for me."

What may be a mind-numbing, earth-shaking diagnosis to one person can be a wakeup call another person needs. In my own life, I thought that breakups were very, very bad, that they had to be sad and terrible things. And now my point of view is so very different.

I can see breakups as an opportunity, a chance to live life in a different and beautiful way, to free myself and whomever I'm no longer dating up to find and create a life and a love that truly suits us. I can see the nuance of it, the gifts of it, the grey.

One of the central tenets of my work is this; a child had coping skills you developed to protect your tenderness from the world were amazing when you were young, freaking brilliant, like wow brilliant.

For many of us, it was mind-blowingly smart to hide our authenticity away when we were told we were too much. It was freaking brilliant to not express our needs and to lose touch with even knowing what our needs are when they were chronically denied, mocked, or if we were told we don't do that sort of thing. For example, having emotions, in this family.

It was so, so, so smart to protect ourselves that way. And we developed some nuance and complex responses to the stress, distress, and trauma of our childhoods and family lineages. Some skills.

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Perfectionist thinkers can be counted on to get the job done and that's fantastic. Codependent thinkers can read a room like no one else. We are charmers. People pleasers are champions of getting people to like them and approve of them and celebrate them for keeping everyone else happy.

See what I'm doing here, my love? None of these thought habits serve you and they are at your own expense when they are keeping you showing up outside of your authenticity. And there are gifts that come from these thought habits too.

They're not just black and white. Gifts such as a robust sense of empathy, compassion, love and care for others, a deep desire to help. All those skills we gain to survive can be things that we use to thrive, and they can be things that hold us back.

What's vital here, my love, is to celebrate your child self and see the grey, the nuance of these skills in your adult life, so you can use thought work and somatics to choose the thoughts, the behaviors, the feelings that continue to serve you and can release the rest.

Because now as an adult, you get to make those choices, to think outside of the binaries you may have learned, to choose your own adventure, like those awesome books from the 80s that I devoured as a kid, to see the complexity of it all and to forge your own path and your own understanding so you can choose to see things in life as neutral first, as a choice, as a thought exercise, and to then make a decision about how you want to think about those things from there.

And so I'll invite you to pause and to think about the circumstances, situations, things in your own life that you used to immediately – and used to can be like, 27 seconds ago – you used to immediately label as good or bad. And I want to invite you to see the complexity, the nuance of them, the grey.

To ask yourself, how would someone else in the same situation, the same circumstance, what might they think? And when we do that, we can help

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ourselves to step out of our own unintentional thinking and to bring a new way of thinking, a new framework, a new rubric on board so we can see the thoughts beyond our habitual thoughts.

So let's dive into those remedies I promised you. So how do we begin to separate out the truth from the polarized fear thoughts in our mind? Well first, you need to be able to identify when all-or-nothing thinking is causing problems for you.

I want to invite you to take note of when you're using those extreme words like always, never. Those words are beautiful hints that your brain is in the all-or-nothing vortex. From there, I'll invite you to pause, to breathe, bring in some compassion, always bring in the compassion, and ask yourself, is this statement true?

Is it that they never text you back in the timeframe you think is appropriate? Does he always respond curtly? Does she never help with the housework? What's real and true and what is a thought habit here?

Pausing, tuning into your breath, and getting real about what's real can be so helpful here, my darling. I want to invite you next to drop into your body if that feels safe and accessible for you, and if it doesn't, stay with me.

I want to invite you to use your connection to your emotions and the sensations in your body as indicators of what's coming up for you. So let's do that together if you feel moved to join me. I want to invite you to bring to mind something you have habitually labeled as bad, but not like big trauma bad, my darling. Just like ugh bad.

Like missing a flight, or losing your keys for a little while. Something of that level. So as you think about that bad, that ugh, that thing that makes you whiney, I want to invite you to bring your awareness into your body.

Do you feel any constriction anywhere? Any tightness? Any tension? Maybe your stomach, your chest, or your throat gets all clammed up, all seized up, maybe you're feeling it elsewhere.

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Are you holding your breath or taking little shallow breaths into your chest as you think about this tough situation? Do you feel anxious or like you want to shut down, run away, fight, flee?

This set of feelings and sensations may be because you feel trapped with options that are very limited based on the restrictive worldview and the story you're telling about the situation you're facing. This is always bad in the mind leads to feelings in the body of generally of tightness, of pushing against, of I don't like this, let me tense against it like a boxer in the ring.

Maybe you experience other indicators of when things are just off for you. And that could be your hint that you are thinking your options are limited by calling one thing good, one thing bad, and not seeing the grey in the middle there. So of course you tense against it if your mind-body believes there's only one way to think about this, so there's only one way to feel.

We do this as well with things we tell a positive story about. What about winning the lottery? What comes up in your mind and your body there? Do you feel a joyful flutter in your chest at the thought of winning the lotto? Do you feel brightness behind your eyes, ease in your hands? Feel into it.

Give yourself a moment, attune to your breath, see what's happening there, see what the messages are. Studies show that on average, lottery winners are no happier in the long term than they were before that \$40 million win fall. Fascinating, right?

It's almost like your thoughts create your feelings. And yet, if our brains are coding winning the lotto as an instant ticket to feeling good, then our body responds that way. We have that flood of all those beautiful brain chemicals that make us feel good because of that thought.

That thought, "This is good inherently," that keeps us from seeing the complexity. And it's important to add that when we do this in our own lives, we do it to other humans too. We make assumptions about how they must feel, should feel in a given situation, so it's an important place for your own

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growth and from a collective standpoint of community care, of collective love and growth and wellness.

It's important to raise your awareness so you can take back your power to decide how something makes you feel, and so you don't impose your all-or-nothing assumptions on anyone else, which can be super negating, unkind, and just not loving.

So back to your body. When you feel these sensations come up within you, you can check in with yourself by asking a few simple questions. Where in this situation is my brain telling me I'm in danger, at risk, unsafe? That some situation is inherently good or bad means it's safe or unsafe in the body.

Is it true that in this moment, I'm actually in danger or unsafe? And important note, if your body is like, yes, you are in danger, then my darling, please do run.

Two, in what ways can my perspective and my perception of this situation be blocking me from seeing the truth and from getting what I want, getting what I need? What ways can my perspective on this situation be keeping me from seeing other alternatives and options?

Three, how might I be able to see this situation that serves me and moves me forward? Not in a way that keeps me small, stuck, and believing the thoughts I was taught to think by my socialization, by my conditioning, by the patriarchy, by my family of origin.

How can I step out of that old line of thinking so I can decide how I want to think, and thus how I want to feel, the actions I want to take, and the results I want to create for my own life? Because that last point is the point.

When you step out of all-or-nothing thinking, you take back the wheel. You get to steer the ship of your own life and to decide for yourself what you want to make things mean.

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Like how a perennial theme of ours here on *Feminist Wellness* is that failure is not a bad thing. That it's not that you are codependent, but rather that you have codependent thoughts and can shift and change them. That your past doesn't need to determine your future. And all of that is possible when we step into the glorious grey.

I'll invite you to simply bring your awareness to times throughout your day, your week, your month in which your brain goes immediately to labeling that person, place, thing, situation, thought as good or bad, black or white, evil, amazing.

Just look. Just notice. Bring your awareness to it and start thinking about where this is holding you back and start giving yourself permission to have your own way of thinking about the circumstances of your life and start holding truly judgment-free space for your own mind.

Next up is linguistic pattern analysis, which is a tool that helped me get clear on my own patterns in relationships so I could leave a relationship that didn't work for me once I understood what was real and what was my habitual thinking from my codependent survival skills.

And this kind of analysis is something we do all day long in Anchored, my six-month program. So you start with listening in for those keywords we mentioned. Always and never, which are always harbingers of doom.

Be mindful of thoughts that paint someone or something in an extreme light, like my new date or partner is perfect, or when all you're doing is poking, nitpicking, always looking for something that's not quite right about this person you're dating, this person you're seeing, the people who you're in relationship with.

Take a look at what your brain is doing. Sometimes it's that avoidant behavior, that avoidant attachment rather, that we've talked about here. Where it's like, "I like you, but I want to put some space between you and me." And that's a great invitation to your brain to go into black-and-white

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thinking, to go into all-or-nothing. “I like you but these things make you... I can’t go there.” Versus seeing the grey there.

Also notice when your knee-jerk cognitive response to something is to make it bigger than it is. Phrases like, “This is a total catastrophe, it’s a disaster, it’s the worst, it’s torture, it’s a nightmare.” When you can’t see possible solutions because you’re so wrapped up in your thoughts that the situation is a crisis, that’s a big hint, my darling. You’re in that all-or-nothing vortex.

And often, from there we can’t get to solutions but rather we drop into beating ourselves up, feeling shame, or guilt about the situation, and those are all... they’re your signs, your signs to pause.

Likewise for me, as an extrovert, I know that when I want to talk about it and process it and talk about it and process it and just talk and talk and talk, that’s often a sign that I’m trying to put something in a little category. I’m trying to make it neat and tidy and fit into a thing and be like, “Okay, they said x, y, and z, so I’m just going to decide that they’re good. Do you agree they’re good? Oh wait, you think they’re bad. Are they bad?”

And I’ll watch my brain do these mental gymnastics in an attempt to not sit in the grey. Meanwhile, for someone with more introverted tendencies; perseveration, rumination. So I process out loud, I talk and I talk, and they process within. Talk and talk and talk, but just inside their own brains often.

That person with the more introverted tendency may continuously spin in their thoughts about the situation. Again, in that work of category making, of labeling, of all-or-nothing, good or bad, terrible, fantastic.

In Anchored, we work to avoid this. So we don’t use the coaching space, either the live coaching calls or the daily coaching in Slack, as a way to tell the “woe is me” story and to stay there. We share what’s real.

It’s really important in all of this work to name it. To be seen and to not feel alone is incredibly important for those of us who felt alone as children, in particular. And what’s really, really, really vital is that we don’t stop there.

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And that's what happens when we go into all-or-nothing thinking. We stay in the "woe is me" place and that pity party with our tiny violin and we can't find a way out because we're spinning in those good and bad extremes.

And that's when we get to use the thought work tool in getting to neutral. So I want to invite you to try on some more neutral words like "sometimes". "Sometimes my partner forgets to pay their parking tickets. Sometimes my mom makes comments about my weight. Sometimes I'm unhappy in this relationship, and sometimes I'm not."

Try it on and see if a word like sometimes or often or occasionally, if one of these words might feel true and real in your body. If there may in fact be a slightly more nuanced approach to whatever moment you are in.

Another thing I love to do is to ask myself, "Is the thing we're talking about a thing I actually want to care about? Or am I reflexively caring about it without pausing to ask myself?"

So, your partner never does the dishes, but they do 87.4% of the cooking and 92.73% of the vacuuming. Do you want to continue to care about the dishes? Do you want to continue to have it feel like a problem? Is that the hill you want to die on, my darling?

You might, and that's totally fine. That's totally cool. But you might not. And you won't know unless you pause, step out of the extremes, and ask yourself what you want to think here.

Another tool I really like to use is to ask myself, "Where is this thought about this other person coming from?" So, if we go back to Episode 20, which is about how-to guides for other people, which is all about our internal stories about how we believe... This is like a codependent-thinking brain's absolute favorite. We know how other people should be, how they should act.

Like, if they are completing the role of mother, father, brother, sister, boss, partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, we know what those roles mean. And that's coming from our brain trying to cultivate safety for us. Trying to protect us

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by saying, “These are roles. I know what they include. And I’m quick to see,” because of back-or-white thinking, “you are not doing father right. You are not doing girlfriend right.” We’re quick to that.

So, we talked about that way back in Episode 20. I often ask myself, “Am I telling myself a story that is based in my beliefs and my attempts to source false safety?” Come on, brain, you do that. Brains do that. It’s okay. No judgment. No shame. No guilt. We’re just mammaling along doing the best we can.

It’s these beliefs about how it should be done and how people should act and think and be. And if so, if I am doing that, if you are doing that, then that’s a moment when I get to pause and I ask myself... The skill we learned in Episode 143... “Am I choosing to be right here? Right by my own paradigm” of course “over being happy in this moment? Could I let someone be wrong? Could I let myself be wrong and have that be okay? What am I blocking myself from insisting that this story is true?”

I think an example could be really useful here. I love a good example. So, the other day, I was on a call with a woman who is a schoolteacher and who is not feeling stimulated at work. She said her brain was bored and she wants to do something different.

But while her brain is bored at work, it is also doing all-or-nothing thinking about her capacity to leave her job and whether it’s a good idea. So, her brain was creating these two extremes, “Either I keep my teaching job, or quit and start my own business. But then my family will be homeless, and starving on the street within minutes.” Her brain went straight to Les Mis when there was no need to go to there. She was in full Jean Valjean mode. And she was blocking herself from acting on her dream because of this habitual, unchecked all-or-nothing thinking that told her, “Keep the job you don’t like or your whole family will die,” effectively.

And in coaching her around this we started by honoring this habit. Because it’s a habit that keeps us thinking we are in control, thus we can feel, in some version, of control, thus we can feel safer in our bodies. And any time

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our body does that for us, no matter how misguided, it's something in my mind that ought to be celebrated.

Because it's our mind and our body attempting to use the best skills they have to take care of us. So, we pause. We honor the habit. And we're grateful for that self-loving part of our brain that tries to protect us that way; that way of thinking keeps us from taking risks that may be good for our growth, our healing, our expansion.

Because again, the growth is in the nuance. It's in the nitty-gritty and the grey. So, when you feel your beautiful brain going to these extremes, pause and ask, what am I projecting onto this moment? What am I making this thing mean that is making it all or nothing?

In the example above, my client was projecting her fear of scarcity, of losing control on this choice to stay in her job or not, and all that projection didn't align with the facts. Sure, she was in a stable job where she had a salary. And she's not happy there and she wanted something different.

When I asked her why she was staying, she could see that she didn't like her reasons. She was staying because of her fear of change, her fear of not having control, having to sit with uncertainty, fear of discomfort. When you do the all-or-nothing thinking, you don't actually have to deal with those challenging feelings of the middle ground, which means you don't develop the skills to tolerate that discomfort.

Once you practice noticing this kind of thinking and asking if and how it serves you, you can begin to make different choices. And you can practice sitting in the middle ground where there is grey and uncertainty, but also possibility. Oh my beauty, there is so much possibility when you step out of all-or-nothing thinking. That's when life gets expansive.

And that's because all-or-nothing thinking is a buffer. It's a tool we use to not feel our feelings. And buffers don't serve our wellness, my darling, not at all. Instead, we stay in the mind drama and chaos... that's often super cozy... from our childhoods. And staying there in the swirling spin of it,

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versus making a decision, can feel safer because we're telling the story that we risk nothing by staying in the status quo and all or nothing.

But without taking the risk to change the job, get the degree, leave the relationship, go on the date, are we not denying ourselves potential joy? Are we not denying ourselves the opportunity to do scary things from a place of self-love and internal anchored safety, so we can rewrite the story of who we are in our own minds and in our lives?

All-or-nothing thinking keeps us trapped in our own old self-concept, our own old ways of being, and keep us from living our most expansive lives. And I want that more expansive life for you, my darling, perfect, sweet, amazing, tender ravioli, if you want it for yourself that is.

So, my beauties, I hope these words have been helpful. I know that looking at my own thought patterns, my own all or nothing, good or bad, has been so incredibly helpful, so supportive for me. I hope you enjoyed this show.

Alright, let's do what we do. Gentle hand on your heart should you feel so moved. And 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, and I'll talk to you soon.

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 for a free webinar all about it. Have a beautiful day, my darling, and I'll see you next week. Ciao.