

Ep #43: Worry and Your Nervous System



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Do you find yourself rolling around in worry, not taking action in your life or spinning in your thoughts about what a symptom or a situation could mean, feeling paralyzed by not knowing the future, spending your time now worrying about something that might happen, or might not?

Worry is so common and it keeps you from living the intentional life or your dreams. Ready to let it go? I'll teach you how.

You're listening to Feminist Wellness, the only podcast that combines functional medicine, life coaching, and feminism to teach smart women how to reclaim their power and restore their health! Here's your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, Herbalist and Life Coach, Victoria Albina.

Hello, hello, my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. It's so funny the way life works. When I was a primary care provider all those years, we'd have, like, themes for the day that our patients would bring to us, like on Wednesday, everyone had a UTI, on Thursday, everyone had a sore throat. It's like it would be the thing for the day.

And what's funny is that I've been looking a lot at my own habit of worrying and spent some time over the holidays with someone who I love who has a tendency to project into the future and to spin in anxious worry about things they can't control. And so I've been doing a ton of thought work about my own worry habit, and I put together this episode for you.

And you guessed it, as soon as it was done, I had six, literally six life coaching clients on the same day who all came to talk to me about their worries. Funny, right? Like the universe was like, "Hey, Vic, this is a really important topic. The people are really worried."

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So, I'm excited to talk with you today, and next week, all about worrying and how to release yourself from the sticky grasp of those old habitual worry thoughts. If you've been listening to the show, you've learned that you have the power to change your feelings through two amazing mechanisms; by attending to your body and your remarkable nervous system, and by raising your awareness of your thoughts, knowing that they lead to your feelings, upon which you take action, and have a result in your life, the think-feel-act cycle I laid out in episodes 35 to 37.

In episode 38, we talked about how to take courageous action to live the intentional life of your dreams, which is my greatest dream, that through this show and the work that we do together, you learn how to live your life on your own terms with intention and awareness.

And so I'd like to posit that worrying is always optional. You heard that right. It's always a choice to go into worrying. It's not mandatory. Your brain might tell you it is, "He failed at math so I have to worry. I found a lump, so I have to worry. I'm launching my business and maybe no one will want my offering, so I have to worry." But that's just habit thinking.

That's your monkey mind, your own unintentional story. "I have to worry," is not a fact because you never have to worry. In the thought work protocol we use, "Worry about it," is never the circumstance, the C-line. A circumstance is something that we state when we're doing our thought work, which is a fact, something that 100% of people on the planet could agree with as fact.

Meanwhile, worrying is always a choice and it's a thought you're having, and it's an action you're taking. And the important thing to recognize is that neuroscience has shown us clearly that human brains can only do one action at a time with full focus. And when you're worrying, that's an action.

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Worrying is the action you are currently taking in your life. And if you're focused on worrying, you cannot focus on the steps that would make your life better; getting the kid a math tutor, getting an ultrasound for that lump, making offers in your business and providing value ahead of time.

Worry becomes your action. It's all you can do when you're doing it. And if you're taking action, calling the tutor, calling the doctor, putting your blog out there, you get to recognize that, in that moment, you've stopped worrying, even if it's just long enough to make a call and get the next right thing moving. That's evidence that you can stop worrying if you choose to stop having worry thoughts. And how amazing is that?

The truth is, there's no situation in this human life that can be solved by worrying, or even improved by worrying about it. If worrying were a solution, we'd have a lot less problems in this world. Worrying solves nothing. It simply begets more worry. And if there's something concerning in your life and your reaction is to spend your limited time and energy on this planet worrying, you're just upsetting your nervous system more, giving you something else to worry about because your nervous system loves you and will respond by shifting into sympathetic activation, more freak-out.

Freak-out begets freak-out, scientifically speaking, of course. And listen, of course this isn't about blaming the victim. I'm not saying you're bad for worrying. Quite the opposite. It's about empowerment.

As I talked about before in episode 19, you can't heal hurt with more hurt. Worrying about something challenging just hurts you more, my darling. Instead, you can recognize your worry thoughts and can intervene on your own behalf.

Every time you hear yourself starting that thought, "I'm worried about..." you can recognize that you are making a choice and you can make a

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different choice. And listen, I know that can feel really challenging, but that's the challenge, right?

The challenge is to learn to intervene for your own best life by bringing your awareness to your thoughts, your feelings, the actions you're taking, and the results you're creating. How amazing is that?

And, to be empowered around your mental health is to start with education, to understand what in the effing eff is happening in your head when you jump to worry as a thought habit. So we'll start there, my perfect one; profound feminist framework, education first.

As always, it's important to pause and to normalize worrying. So, nerd alert, evolutionarily, you are wired to evaluate your surroundings for danger, to keep an eye out for things that may eventually kill you. This is the job of your nervous system, and in particular, your sympathetic nervous system, the one that manages fight or flight.

And thousands of years ago, the things that could possibly kill you were really simple to recognize; lion, tiger, bear, fire, flood, blood, so simple. And as we have evolved, our bodies have gotten out of alignment with what is danger.

We've lost our connection with that deep intuitive knowing of what is immediately dangerous and our brains can run off to worry about all sorts of things that are completely out of our control. Bodily symptoms and sensations are the number one thing that people worry and even panic about in my practice, followed by someone else's decisions or actions, and conversations they don't want to have, like with a partner or a boss. Those are the top circumstances that lead people down the worry superhighway to Nowheresville, USA, and fast.

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And as a healthcare provider, let me say, no one's symptoms have ever improved because they worried about them; not one. Taking action, yeah, that could help, but spinning in worry, that's never helped migraine symptoms improve or a broken limb to heal, never helped a preemie to mature or develop, or a pregnancy to go how you want, your Hashimotos to heal.

Literally the opposite happens when we stress. When we go into nervous anxious worry, stress stops healing because science, and your perfect amazing sympathetic nervous system, which feels you worrying and thinks the end is neigh. And, of course, it's important to talk about social conditioning.

Humans socialized as women are often trained and taught to worry about things like our appearance, whether we're married and have kids at some appropriate age, if we're being a good parent, so many things. And if we're not meeting social norms, it's easy to globalize and to catastrophize. And catastrophizing is a topic I'll be covering very soon. It's sort of the cousin of worrying.

And it's easy to make things like not being thin enough or pretty enough or, gosh, whatever enough basically mean that we'll die cold and alone on a mountainside, right? And no one's consciously thinking that, but your body may be responding as though you are thinking that.

Our culture, society, the patriarchy, capitalism, they give us a lot of invitations to worry. And I, at this point in my life, politely decline them all and invite you to do the same. And many of us were raised by adults who hadn't done their own inner healing work, who hadn't healed their inner children, and who worried as an automatic response.

One of my most beloved humans has this habit of worrying and freaking out. She frets and stresses and worries about things that my brain is like,

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“Gosh, I didn’t even realize that someone could worry about that.” Like, not in a judgment way, but in an earnest, like, “Wow, that is fascinating,” way.

And this interesting thing happens with worry. It’s like we’re trying to buffer against the feeling or sensation that’s underneath the worry by making it a cognitive process, by overthinking it. And trust and believe, overthinking is my own personal favorite buffer. I know all about it. And it’s one that I’m working to rewire by raising my awareness.

My point is, my darling, we can use thinking as way to not feel, especially if you have a trauma history and being in your body is too scary right now, or if, like me, you were raised by serious nerds and thinking was the most amazing thing you could ever do and feeling wasn’t particularly prized.

So, before you start doing your thought work, I want to encourage you to do some nervous system work. So, nervous system work is how you set yourself up to have the physiologic safety to do the thought work and to have it get you somewhere.

Imagine that you’re in this moment of worrying, panicking, spinning in those thoughts that all is doomed, just saying, “Oh okay, I’m going to have a new thought,” is unlikely to work as well when your nervous system is activated, when you’re feeling agitated. If your sympathetic nervous system, the one that’s creams when you see a lion coming to eat your face, is all activated and online and running your body and your parasympathetic, the rest and digest part, the calmer part is offline, not running the ship.

And yes, my nerds, freeze is a part of the parasympathetic, but today, we’re going to stay really simple here. I’ll be diving more into the nervous system in later episodes and nervous system calming is the first thing we’ll be doing in my upcoming six-month course, the Self Love Prescription, coming out in 2020. So we’re going to dive real deep on the nervous system soon enough and if you can’t get enough, want to dive deeper,

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send me an email, get your name on my list so you can be the first to hear about my new course. I'm so excited about it.

Okay, my darling, when you're in sympathetic enervation – enervation means those are the nerves that are, like, firing and online – when your sympathetic is all revved up and going, your cognition is slowed for really good reason. You get laser-like focus and blood and energy flow to your brain, lungs, large muscles, and away from digestion, thyroid, thinking, feeling.

Your brain is in a state where it's preparing because you may have to punch a lion in the nose or run from one. And you should probably be laser-like focused, right? Or you're going to be somebody's lunch. And when you're able to calm yourself physiologically speaking, to get your parasympathetic back online.

If you know from polyvagal theory, to move up the ladder, that is when you can focus, think, feel your perfect emotions and sensations and can do thought work and have healthy digestion, healthy periods, good fertility, not have autoimmunity, have healthy mitochondria, not have an imbalanced mood, the list goes on and on.

If your nervous system is dysregulated, my love, that gets to be your primary focus. And it can be a super complicated process to reset a human nervous system, and getting started can be so simple and easy. My three favorite ways to do this are, one, orienting, two, body scan, and you guessed it, breathwork.

Do note that as I move through these three practices, that if what's going on for you in this moment or what you tend to worry or even obsess about are physical symptoms, a body scan may not be the best place to go, it can actually be more dysregulating. Instead, I would start with orienting and focusing on your breathing.

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So, there are many ways to practice orienting. The goal of this practice is to locate yourself in your body in time and space exactly where you are because when you're in fight or flight, you're not fully aware of your body. You're just aware that there is a threat and you are prepared to react. It's a reactive place, not a responsive place.

Another nervous system option is freeze, which is generally used when fight or flight aren't working for you. You can go into a panic place and can feel numbed out. It's a place where you sort of play dead, like what possums do. They play dead and the predator will hopefully leave them alone.

And again, it's really challenging, and the opposite of your goal, to try and focus on cognition when you're in those fight, flight, and freeze states. So let's give you some tools to get yourself out of that place when your brain starts worrying.

My son is failing math, so I have a lot to worry about I found a lump and I'm so worried. I'm building this business, will anyone buy from me? I have to worry about that. I'm worried about starting this business.

Instead, you can focus on taking a big deep breath in and out and begin to orient yourself exactly where you are, like if you got off a boat on a deserted island and you orient yourself to the island. So, what you're going to do is breathe deeply.

Let's do it again together, in, and out, feel yourself in your body, maybe even just taking that big deep breath started to calm you. It's a beautiful thing, breathing in all that oxygen, blowing off all that CO₂, carbon dioxide, physically calms the body. And name five things you can see.

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So, in my office, I see the microphone. I see my computer. I see my water glass. I see a plant. I see the door. I'm beginning to take myself out of that place where my brain is racing, worrying, jumping to the next thing, jumping to a future I can't control and I'm orienting myself. I'm finding myself in this time, in this place, in this present moment, five things I can see.

Next, I would name three things I can hear. I can hear myself talking. I can hear the humidifier's gentle rumble. And I can hear the neighbor's kids. I hope you can't hear them. But I can hear their sweet little voices. They're actually pretty cute. It sounds like they're singing downstairs. Aw, that's cute.

Three things you can hear, one thing that you can taste – I taste my lip gloss. It's delicious. One thing, minimum, if you smell more than that, one thing you can smell – and I can smell the cedarwood I was diffusing before this call.

Five things you can see, three things you can hear, one thing you can smell, one thing you can taste. If you still feel a little agitated as you go through it, go ahead and name, in your mind or out loud, one thing you can physically feel.

So, I can feel my seat. I can feel my butt in this chair. The chair is hard, but also has a certain give. I can feel my elbow on the table. I'm starting to orient myself in time and space. I am in this room. I am recording a podcast. There is nothing to worry about in this moment.

Another option is to do a body scan. And just to say it, before I forget, I have recorded both of these options for you. If you go to the show notes for this page, so victoriaalbina.com/43, you can download both of these meditations. You can also go to victoriaalbina.com/bodyscan and those meditations will be right there for you to download as MP3s. Put them on your phone. You can do this on the subway, between meetings. If your

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boss emails you and you feel yourself starting to worry, excuse yourself to the bathroom or go to a conference room or step out, orient yourself to time and space, remind yourself that worry is always optional, it's not mandatory, it doesn't solve anything.

Find yourself where you are, and if it feels safe, it feels like the right thing for you to do, you can also do a body scan. So in a body scan, we go from the tips of our toes to the tips of our nose, checking in with each part of our body sequentially, getting really in touch and really aware of what's going on in our bodies.

Again, for folks with a trauma history or folks for whom feeling into your body just feels whoa, overwhelming, on that physiologic nervous system level, don't do it, my love. The number one goal of all of my work is for you to live a profoundly intentional life in which you are listening to your body, listening to your spirit, listening to your inner child, and are living in alignment with all of these signals, from your mind, body, and spirit, and you're choosing the thoughts and the feelings that serve you, so you can take action and get the results you want and pushing through your nervous system's signals, pushing through your limits.

My goodness, babies, never a good choice. So listen in, take some deep breaths, ask your body, is doing a body scan the right thing for me right now? And if you hear your body say no, don't do it. Stay with orienting. Really feel into that. Get yourself fully grounded. And from there, from there, you can do the next right thing knowing that panic and worry will keep you from taking the actions you need to actually feel better and to live that intentional life.

These simple tools will allow you to begin the project of the long-term calming of your nervous system, the rewiring. Isn't it incredible that that's possible? So, when you start to see those warning signs that you're approaching a limit, which can feel like tension in your neck, a weird

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queasy feeling in your belly, whatever it may be for you – I personally get itchy when I'm approaching a limit – you can start to orient your nervous system to this calm place all on your own, which is so amazing.

And, of course, that takes us to breathwork. The breathwork I teach is a three-part Pranayama breathwork where we breathe deep into the belly, heart center, and out through an open calm relaxed mouth.

I've come to call this breathwork journey meditation because it can be quite a psychedelic journey. That is one kind of breathwork. But I want to say, breathwork is just paying attention to your breath. It doesn't have to be a particular modality and not every modality is the right one for you in a given moment.

Because I've spent these years really getting my nervous system settled through the journey breathwork that I do, my body now responds to my going in, in, out, with a profound calming effect, like I can literally feel my nervous system getting into better alignment. I just take those two breaths and out and I feel myself. It's like this systemic calming, like those moments right before sleep when your body is almost in this luminal space. It feels amazing.

I do it on the subway, in the supermarket, standing in line at the bank. I just do it. And a breath that might work for you is simply breathing in deeply, and out longer than you breathed in, or doing the four, six, eight breathing, where you breathe in, hold, out, breathe in, hold, out for longer than you breathed in.

What you get to do, my darling love, is to come to understand what the most perfect breathing technique is for you in any given moment, by doing so and by practicing breathing in alignment with your own body and your own need, you build confidence. You build trust in yourself, which is the most important thing. and you build your body's capacity to believe you

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when you remind it that worry never serves you, worry never gets you anywhere, worry gets nothing done, because when you're worrying, it's the action you're taking.

And instead, you can do actions like orienting, doing a body scan, breathing deeply, fully, or however works for you. Worry jacks your nervous system, takes your body out of alignment, and leads you to worry more and more and more.

Your homework, my love, is to bring your attention to those little signs and signals from your body that an emotional or physical limit is approaching and to honor those signs and signals by orienting, breathing, centering, grounding, doing a body scan, if that feels right, lying down and doing breathwork, if that feels right, calming your central nervous system, and then reminding yourself of the true role of worry in your life.

It's a distraction that never ever serves you and keeps you from taking action, to call the math tutor, to get that scan scheduled, to put yourself out there in your new business.

Make sure to tune in next week, my darling. We'll be talking about the thought work you can do from a calm grounded place to quite simply stop worrying for good. I know you can do it, my love. I have that faith in you.

And if you want to take a deeper dive into the amazing transformational work that is breathwork journey meditation, join me for a class here in New York City or join me online in my four-week breathwork offering. It's also going to be part of my six-month course I'm so excited to share with you.

So, take a second, my love, make sure you're subscribed to the show so you don't miss next week. Go ahead and do that. And then make sure that you're on my email list. So you can do that by going to victoriaalbina.com,

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dropping an email to info@victoriaalbina.com, or you can Dm me on the Instagram or the Facebooks @victoriaalbinawellness.

Okay, my beauty, that's it for now. Practice this. Really work through it. Bring your awareness to it. And next week, we're going to dive in on some thought work. It's going to be super-duper great.

Remember, my love, you are safe, you are held, you are loved, and when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, talk to you next week.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you like what you've heard, head to VictoriaAlbina.com to learn more.