

Ep #81: The Science Behind Feeling Stuck



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Ever found yourself setting a goal and feeling great and so excited about it, and then it's time to do the thing and your body and mind are focused on everything but that thing you said you were going to do, like journaling, setting limits on your own screen time, daily thought work, writing your quarantine novel, applying to grad school, starting your own podcast, the list is endless.

We recently talked about the concept of the minimum baseline, and this week, we're going deep nerd on it, to talk about the nervous system based why of not doing the thing you so want to do and feeling wicked stuck in your own not-doingness.

Curious? Loving learning the science behind it all? Excited to nerd out so hard with me? Keep listening, it's going to be a good one.

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. I am reporting to you live from my bedroom closet. So we moved into our new house, everything is amazing, but my office is rather lacking in furniture and it's not an enormous room by the standards of the world, but by New York City standards it's like the Taj Mahal in there.

I think it's eight by 10 or something, and my furniture's not up, the bookcase isn't up, so it's wicked echoey. So here I am, sitting on the floor

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of an absolutely empty closet because I love you and I really wanted to get this show out to you on time because I committed to doing so.

So I'm doing it. And that is such a perfect segue into today's topic. So recently we talked about the concept of the minimum baseline, which is one of my absolute favorite tools for learning to trust ourselves just a little bit more each and every day, by committing to doing one small thing and doing it over and over until you fully trust yourself to do that thing, until you've shifted the story in your mind from I'm a person who talks about doing that thing to actually thinking of yourself as a person who's done that thing so many times it's just a thing that you do.

And once that's really cozy, you add another thing and then another thing, slowly and surely building up your belief that you will do what you said you will do for you and your own wellness and growth.

So today, I want to back up a little bit and this whole episode is a major nerd alert because you asked me to nerd more about issues like perfectionism and stuckness, and I love giving you what you want and need. So babies, keep those emails and the DMs coming asking for what supports you. It is one of the greatest privileges and gifts of my life to be able to deliver for you.

So today, we're going to go all polyvagal on it like we do, looking at the nervous system science behind why you may feel stuck when you try to do the things in life you actually really want to do, like doing your daily thought work, exercising, meditating, starting your own business, getting that divorce, whatever it may be for you, and why you may feel stuck doing the things you don't want to do, but also want to do but kind of wish were magically done, like the dishes or cleaning the toilet or taking out the trash. Whatever it is that will make your life better that you feel stuck around.

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And we will do so with a focus on explaining why you may feel stuck on a nerdy level, and why that stuckness makes sense, because science. First, as always, human to human, babe, I want to name how painful, frustrating, irritating it can be to live in the duality of both very wanting to do a thing and then just not doing it.

This is very much something that resonates for me, an experience I know so well. And as a feminist, I believe deeply in the importance of education and that it's so vital to understand what's going on in your mind and body before you can lovingly step in to intercede on your own behalf. To begin to shift and change these things.

And of course, because you know how we do, I'll be sharing some remedies to close out the show. But first, let's get situated in our bodies. Maybe you put a sweet little hand on your heart or on your belly, maybe you close your eyes if that feels supportive or lower your gaze. Please don't do either if you are driving. And take a deep slow breath in and focus on that long slow breath out.

So let's visualize this. You decide you want to start your own coaching practice, start dating again, to move your body or feed yourself in a new way. You may start spinning in the kind of perfectionist thought fantasy we discussed in episode 78, minimum baseline thinking. And you may be able to rein it in and to pick one thing to work on to build trust with yourself.

Either way, whether you're in that fantasy of I'm going to do all the things or you pick the one, you decide tomorrow is the day, and you go to sleep and the next day comes and it's like, all that motivation you felt yesterday just fizzles away, just melts out of your body.

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Or feels like all of a sudden, your brain is telling you to do everything in the world other than doing this new thing you want to do, that thing you've been talking about doing for ages. That thing you're actually really excited about doing, but you feel like you're walking in quicksand when you try to do it. Stuck, stuck, stuck.

So we'll start with discussing this from a polyvagal nervous system perspective and we'll loop it on back to thought work like we love to do. So let's start by thinking evolutionarily. Remember, the three core biological imperatives of being a human mammal. One, to avoid pain or danger, two, to seek pleasure and safety, and three, to be biologically efficient. Also known as to not ever change anything that hasn't killed you yet.

Starting from there, we can understand that back in the day, and I mean way back in the cave human days, if you called attention to yourself, if you had your own opinion that was different from the village leaders, if you did something silly like being seen or heard or were vulnerable emotionally or spoke your truth, lived your life on your own terms, any of those things could put you at risk of being cast out of the village and thus, likely to be a lion's lunch.

So we learned that it was not smart or safe to stand out. Fast forward to modern times. If you as a child felt unsafe being seen, if it felt unsafe to be too loud or too quiet, or if you heard or learned that being you in all your childlike glory meant that you were too much or not enough, and let's note that those inner dialogues often come together. The I am too much for him and not enough for him, or life in general.

If you didn't feel accepted or supported or loved in your family the way your child brain and self needed, if you learned that the way to not be the scapegoat, to not be criticized, not be judged or controlled was to look

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perfect on the outside, or that you were safe when you were anticipating other people's needs and doing task after task to prove yourself and your worthiness, then all of that got encoded in you as a smart way to be safe.

And in an ironic turn of biochemical events, if you grew up with high levels of internal and/or external stress in your early childhood years, then things being okay, setting goals and meeting them, life being calm, feeling good can actually feel really stressful because biological imperatives.

It is such a wild change from what your body is used to when it's used to adrenaline or epinephrine and cortisol racing through your body in sympathetic activation or that dorsal immobilization. When either of those extremes, and they're not so extreme, they're very common and part of all of our everyday, but when those were predominant in your early life, the thought of making your world the one you want to live in and actually doing it can create a stress response that stops you from actually doing those things.

And now as an adult, your brain may be singing that old childhood song from your habitual survival thought patterns that says it's dangerous to do things like take care of yourself first, say no to others, set boundaries, launch that new career, take the time to exercise, set goals and trust you're going to stick to them, charge what you're worth, for your time, for your expertise, feed yourself with love instead of being on a restrictive diet, to simply be seen for who you truly are as your most authentic self.

To use your voice and speak up for yourself, your wants, and beliefs, to have an opinion, stand by it, to not take things personally. I could go on and on, my love, but I think you get the picture here. When you try to do the things you say you want to do, your beautiful self-loving old protective mechanisms come to the fore to scream danger.

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And that may not sound like a scream. It may sound like, “Oh, I’ll do my thought work or exercise or go live on Instagram after I do these 473 things around the house,” or, “I’ll start that movement plan tomorrow,” or it may sound like that classic perfectionist fantasy thinking we talked about at length in episode 78, which is why we start with setting a minimum baseline for meeting our goals.

What’s so important and has been so healing for me is to recognize and honor that these voices, yes, the ones that hold you back from doing the thing you say you want to do, are voices of self-love. They’re just confused about what is dangerous to you as an adult.

If you really pause to think about it, there’s actual no real time danger in most of these things, these actions. But we have these old subconscious thoughts that yes, these are dangerous things, yes, it is risky to take care of myself. One of the reasons is that it may have felt dangerous in childhood.

And another reason is that you’re still carrying the thoughts, the beliefs from way back then, which makes perfect sense if you haven’t had a tool like the thought work protocol to help you pause and learn how to change those old thoughts and the feelings they produce for you, at the same time that your highest self is also saying, but it’s time to do the thing. To state my opinion, to set a boundary, et cetera.

And this is where we get to practice holding that duality. Practicing and believing and knowing that you can both hear the old thought, don’t take care of yourself, don’t speak up, it’s better not to share what you’re thinking. We can hear those thoughts, honor them, give them love, while simultaneously practicing not believing those thoughts. Recognizing them, doing that meta work of being your own watcher and practice using your

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prefrontal cortex, that most evolved part of our human mind to begin to believe a new story, to use this new tool.

And this cognitive framework must be grounded in a somatic one in my opinion because science. And that brings us to the third reason why you keep getting in your own way, my darling angel. And this is your magnificent neuroceptive response, which comes from ye old lizard mind in your brain stem.

And we've talked about lizard consciousness here before. It's that part of you that's built to look for and call out danger. It's constantly scanning the horizon for the next thing that is going to murder you, the next sabretooth tiger, and to have you as a nice little snack, which studies show is not great for your health to be a snack.

So that neuroceptive amazing part of your brain can luckily also sense safety and it picks those cues up and distributes the right neurochemicals throughout your body to create that sense of being safe in the world. And it's in that moment of feeling physically and emotionally safe that you can take action.

This is often what's happening when we create the goal in the first place. We feel safe enough to do so, but remember, the moment your lizard senses danger, back to the cozy bed or the couch you go to not do the thing that you are correlating on an evolutionary, childhood learning, social conditioning level to danger.

For example, being a woman who isn't polite, meaning she says no and she means no. being a human who is selfish, meaning she takes care of herself before taking care of everyone else, being a person who is lazy,

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meaning she rests when she's tired, without beating herself up, guiltting herself, shaming herself, doing any beating up or name-calling.

See where we're going here my little ravioli? Those beautiful, magnificent, and sure, challenging parts come online to say hold the phone there, kitten, that is not a great call to tell him you can't go out tonight even though you're so exhausted and already took your bra off. Am I right? That's my marker.

I'm like, in the pre-COVID days, I'd get home from a long day and if I was still dressed and still had my bra on, maybe I'd go out. Once it's come off, we're not going. But the part of you that is scared of being abandoned if you say no, I'm not available, is worried that he'll be disappointed and then he'll probably abandon you, which is definitely a bad idea. So you go against what you actually want for you.

You put your bra on and march your little self out that door to do a thing you don't want to do because brains and child parts and neuroceptions of danger for saying no. This barometer of what is safe and what is dangerous, ruled by the lizard and the all mighty amygdala, look to the history book of your life to know what is safe and what is dangerous, to see what has been written there previously.

So if having an opinion and voicing it got you made fun of as a kid, if being in your body was unsafe, if being your authentic weirdo delightful amazing loud child self got you scolded, if setting a boundary got you in trouble, then your protective parts store that information and remind you forever and ever until you teach them something different, that doing these things is patently stupid, overwhelming, just too much and just not something to do.

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And so it stops you in the only way it knows how. With an urge to buffer, which is to do anything you can to not feel a feeling. It's also the theme of episode 14. And so you buffer, you try to push away your emotions, and you find yourself, meaning you've gone unconscious.

Any time you're saying, "Oh, I just found myself doing it," you've gone unconscious. That's okay. But you binge on anything you can find in order to distract yourself from the discomfort of your protector parts screaming stop trying to improve your life.

So that can be TV, exercise, food, alcohol, gossip, complaining, pretty much anything can act as a buffer, and it's the energy with which you do it that makes it either a buffer, a checking out, or something beautiful you're doing for you as self-care to check in.

And while yes, those behaviors, overdoing it with anything, doing anything to buffer and try to not feel your feels, they certainly don't serve you. And the more you can recognize them as self-love, the more you can gently intervene as your own most loving parent, the more you can heal.

Other common experiences of that neuroceptive response coming on board is to feel foggy brain, distracted, unfocused, to have writer's block. All those years I thought, whatever, I'm just not a person who can focus, I have ADD or something, ADHD, all of that I now realize, a large portion of it, some of it's my wiring, that's fine, was this neuroceptive response coming on board and it was fear.

It was not being in that safety with myself. So all of that, that blocking is your dorsal vagal response getting activated. Your immobilization or your freeze response, as your body tries to protect you from your thoughts. And

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so you take a nap, or you scroll your phone, you disconnect from the here and now because it's too much for your perfect mind and body.

Alternately, you could go into the high alert, the hyperdrive of sympathetic activation, hypervigilance. And could feel anxious or panicked or worked up over what your conscious mind might call seemingly nothing. When this would happen in my life, I would find myself because we can step out of ourselves in hypervigilance too, which is funny enough.

You'd think we'd be the most tapped in, but alas. So I would find myself cleaning the sock drawer or running around the house like a little Vic tornado, cleaning everything, when I actually needed to be charting my last patient or writing contact, having a vulnerable making conversation, making a video, or doing any number of things that part of me wanted to do, but it turns out part of me was petrified to do because of that neuroceptive response.

And yes, your thoughts can of course perpetuate this cycle. When you have that protective response and you allow yourself to judge, guilt, or shame yourself for having it, you drive it further into your lived experience. You make it something more and more real. Something to be believed.

And our bodies are always weighing out how many experiences of doing this thing and feeling safe have I had versus experiences of doing this and feeling unsafe. Our first remedy to this whole process, the way to bring yourself back to center not surprisingly to long-time listeners is daily thought work.

And this is the work we do in my six-month masterclass, to help you spot those habitual reactions to a psychological experience so you can have thoughts chosen for yourself ahead of time and on purpose that you can

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use to support yourself, to meet yourself with love and care when those protective reactions happen because they're going to. It's part of being a human.

As long as you're judging these responses and judging yourself for having human responses, getting truly annoyed with them or mad at them, your body is going to see that and you are going to see that as more danger. And so the stories become harder and harder to rewrite as the rewriting becomes laden with unsafety.

So that's the first step, my beautiful love. Awareness. Being your own watcher, which we talked about way back in episode two, which is officially about a thousand years ago now. And being your own watcher means recognizing that you are not your thoughts. They're happening because they always have and they always will, and just because you think it doesn't mean you have to believe it.

Let me say that one again. Just because you think it doesn't mean you have to believe it. You can question your own thoughts and decide if you want to keep them. You can practice noticing the thoughts and the feelings they create and then pausing, breathing, writing them down, getting that cognitive distance from them so you can evaluate them.

And again decide, is this a thought I want to keep having? Or is it one I want to release? And then you can decide if you want to actively and with wild self-love create a new thought to practice when your sweet monkey mind, your darling protectors come up to say hello, and stop you in your tracks on your way to achieving a goal.

And in this process, we can work with our neuroceptive response, not against it. Understanding that we only learned that being open, vulnerable,

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risking failure, et cetera, was unsafe because we learned it to be. And so we get to use the remedy of conscious intentional safety to start to reverse this internal trend.

By consciously bringing in more experience of safety, we can literally shift that neuroceptive response and that is just absolutely mind-blowing to me. We can engage our neuroplasticity, our brain's ability to literally change and grow, to be plastic, which means malleable, so we can change our relationship to that which we once labeled unsafe. And in so doing, can bring more regulation into our beautiful nervous systems.

My love, can we pause for a second and awe at the magnificence of our human minds and bodies? Like, what? It's so amazing. You can spend 25 or 35 or 45 years thinking that doing x, y, z is unsafe. And so your body rallies against you doing it, and you can pause right now, and you can start to rewrite those old stories.

Wow, how amazing are you? Your mind, your body, you are the most amazing, my beauty. Wow. So if you find yourself in part ready to do the incredible and hard things you want to do for yourself, to set that minimum baseline and to work towards it, taking courageous action after courageous action, failing forward, failing again and again and again for your own growth, then you get to start by establishing internal safety.

And as always, we start small. I've said this before and I will say it again. I don't believe in taking baby steps. I think they're way too big. Instead, I highly recommend taking wee little kitten paw, like picture a kittens' paw. It is so tiny. That is the size step I recommend you start with.

And in so doing, you get to honor your own window of dignity, also known as the window of tolerance, meaning just how much of something

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uncomfortable you can sit with before your brain says basta, no more, I'm done, nervous system is going to effectively flip out. Either go into that sympathetic activation or dorsal freeze.

And I want to give a little hat tip here to Jane Clapp, who's a phenomenal movement therapist in Toronto for offering that language shift from window of tolerance, meaning how much can we put up with, to the framing of window of dignity. So how much of an input into our body can we experience while staying in our dignity, in our integrity with ourselves. So good.

So we get to raise our awareness, what is within my window of dignity, what can this organism, what can it handle in this moment? Honoring it. Not judging it, not criticizing, just taking stock. Like before you start making coffee, you look and see how many beans do I have, right?

So how much space is there in my window of dignity to do this activity I want to try? And then you get to slowly, slowly titrate, or gently increase your ability to tolerate or sit with the discomfort and to feel dignity in your body, to feel grounded and aligned, and basically okay. Like not collapsing and not freaking out.

Okay enough to do the thing you really want to do. And it's unlikely that assigning yourself four hours of focus time a day is a great first start to increasing your window of dignity, but maybe like, five minutes, 20 minutes. Maybe that's doable. Or maybe instead of exercising for an hour each day, it's a 10-minute walk. Exactly what we talked about in episode 78, but nerdier because I'm using nerd words.

And that is the thing that I'm bringing in here to add to the minimum baseline is this consciousness of safety in our bodies. Doing that minimum

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thing but with the knowing of how your mind and body works in attention to the goal. To rewrite what is dangerous and what is safe within and for yourself, engaging your amazing nervous system. Not fighting against it.

So let's do what nerd love to do and talk about all of this in actionable remedy steps. So step one, bring awareness to what sends you into that dorsal shutdown, that immobilization, or that sympathetic fight or flight response. Remember, we do not judge nervous system responses. They are all just magnificent gifts of more information.

No judging needed. It won't get you anywhere anyway. And no nervous system state is bad. They're all beautiful and perfect, though admittedly some just don't feel that great.

Step two, honor it, love it, thank it. I often do this out loud. Thank you body, thank you mind, I see you. I see what you're up to. You're trying to protect me from succeeding because that is scary to you. Cool, cool, cool, cool, cool. Thank you.

Step three, pick a thing to practice with like journaling, movement, writing your book, asking for help, setting a boundary, whatever is up for you that you want to work on and with. Nothing is too small here.

Step four, before you get started doing this practice of working towards your goal with more nervous system awareness, orient yourself to your space, which is a way to bring yourself into the present moment, the here and now. And because I love you, I have a free meditation download that's an orienting exercise and I would love to invite you to head over to victoriaalbina.com and you can download that right off the homepage.

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Or if you want to get all modern with it, you can text me the word meditation and your email to 917-540-8447. And that will get you - I will send you the orienting exercises, a series of meditations, and that will put you on the list to get my many times a week because I'm not trying to make it daily, my many times a week emails that are often an inspiring message or a message of love.

But anyway, you can send me that text message and I will get that exercise right on over to you. So orienting. This is a practice that lets your perfect protectors know that adult you and your highest self are online and that you're doing something new. It lets your body and your mind know that you're not a little kid, you're an adult. And in this one moment, when you're about to make that phone call or open the computer, whatever it may be, you are safe with yourself.

Step five, scan your body for activation energy. Any zaps or pings or discomforts from your mind-body telling you you're not safe. Expect them at first and always give them love. This is normal. It's totally okay to have all that activation energy.

Step six, decide ahead of time what you're doing to do if that sympathetic, anxious, revved up feeling or that dorsal sleepiness check out sensation come on board for you while you are attempting to take action. You could have a thought ready like, "I am reminding myself that I am safe in this moment to do this," or, "I am committed to taking this action and I trust myself to take this small and mighty step."

And you can also combine that new thought with something physical like using my ventral vagal playlist, which is also free for you because I love you and you can drop me your email in a text as well to get that link. You

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can also take slow deep breaths and focus, like we do, on that long slow out. Because it's that long slow exhale that actually calms your body.

You can run your hands and wrist under cool water if you're feeling a big dorsal shutdown, or you can do some jumping jacks. You can do gentle movement. You can use tapping. Whatever other resources you have in your toolbox to help you get back into ventral vagal, which if you're like, wait, what is that? We talked all about it in episodes 48 and 61.

So that's that safe and connected social part of your nervous system. And I highly recommend doing these small beautiful things before, after, during this task as needed. We do this to bookend the experience. So the goal here is to rewrite the danger cue with a loving safety cue.

And these resources help you. The movement, breathing, music, et cetera. And of course, I wouldn't be me if I didn't recommend bringing in a new thought to support yourself. For example, it is not dangerous to write in my journal. It is safe and something I want to do for me.

It is not dangerous to meditate for two minutes, though it may be uncomfortable, it is safe and a thing I want to do for me, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And it's going to take time at task, frequent, gentle practice to rewrite those danger cues as safety and that's okay.

You get to commit to it one tiny kitten step at a time, using your body and your mind with a goal of showing, not just telling yourself you're safe with you and there's no lion coming, no critical parent, no judgmental voice. Just calm safety in mind, body, and spirit for two to three minutes at a time.

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Remember my perfect one, this will likely be uncomfortable and that's okay. Your protector parts may want to keep you from doing even the smallest thing and that's okay. They can want that. You get to honor them, but you don't have to obey them. Just make sure that you're emotionally preparing yourself for that discomfort. Expect it and when it arises, give it love.

Step eight, as you move gently to expand your window of dignity or tolerance, you can start by doing the task just for you. If being seen is the stressful part, and you can remind yourself of this, "I am doing 10 minutes of movement just for me. I'm writing this blog post but I'm not going to make it live yet."

Allow your protector parts to feel safe enough to let you do the thing and then come back to it later in the day or later in the week as a second focus time dignity window expanding activity and gently encourage yourself to actually post the blog or post to your Instagram, record the thing, be seen. Reminding yourself all along that you're safe with yourself and what others think of whatever you're creating or doing or thinking or saying, it's really none of your business.

And finally, step nine, once you know where your edges are, you can add 30 seconds a day or one to two minutes a day to your practice time, expanding what you believe yourself capable of doing, expanding that window of dignity or tolerance. Whatever word works for you, by taking tiny kitten-sized steps at a time, aligning your thoughts, your feels, your nervous system, your body, for your own best good, to intentionally build your most amazing life.

My sweet beautiful one, if this podcast has been helpful for you, I want to invite you to check out my six-month masterclass. Currently enrolling for the next group that starts on September 28th. This is a high-touch, super

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connected community-based program. It's a small group, we meet weekly for live coaching.

There's live coaching from me over text available in a private chat group literally every single weekday. It's a whole thing, this course. It's a beautiful way to get more information about how codependency, perfectionism, and people pleasing can be showing up in your life and keeping you from living your life to the fullest.

It's the culmination of my 20 years in health and wellness and my own journey to heal my own codependency, perfectionism, and people pleasing. And just to really sum it up, it's the course that I wish I had when I was 20, 25, 30, 35, to really help me to get in touch with and feel profoundly empowered to manage my adult mind while honoring my nervous system and my inner children with somatics, breathwork, meditation, daily supported thought work.

It's an amazing program and it's hundreds of hours of time with me and I'm so delighted to share it with you. If you'd like to learn more or to enroll, grab a seat on my calendar. A seat on my calendar, is that English? Let's call it close enough.

If you'd like to grab a seat on my calendar, head on over to victoriaalbina.com/masterclass. There's tons of information there and you can fill out a short form. My team will be in touch to find a time for us to chat more about it.

It would be a delight to have you join us, my beauty. Particularly if you are new to the show and it's really resonating, or if you've been listening for ages and each of the episodes is like, yeah, that's me, this class is what I

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wish I had had 20 years ago and it would have been quite the balm for my sweet little soul.

Alright my beauties, I'm excited to talk to you about the masterclass. It's a blast. Okay, let's do what we do. Slow deep breath in, long slow exhale. Remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my sweet beauty. I will talk to you soon.

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.