

Ep #93: Pleasure



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With Your Host

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We talk a lot here, you and I, about healing. About learning to manage our adult minds, about reparenting our perfect inner children. We use thought work to shift and change our ways of thinking about our lives, to live with intention.

And all of that is enormously important. It's my life's work to show up and to coach and support you, to change the way you think, to get unstuck. And it is so vital in the midst of all the suffering and discomfort of doing our internal work, of seeing our shadow, to make time and space and room to prioritize pleasure.

Because my beauty, those things are your birthright. And if you're not doing your healing work to increase your pleasure, why are you doing it, my sweet one? So I'll ask you, are you making room for pleasure? Are you prioritizing it? Do you want to? If any of this is intriguing, I'll invite you to keep listening, my love. 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 feel like I start every episode these days by gushing about the natural beauty of the corner of occupied Lenape territory I now live on in the Hudson Valley. And you know what, I'm okay with that because oh my goodness is it gorgeous up here.

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And one of the things I've been thinking about as we move into the shorter, darker winter days is how vital it is to have beauty and pleasure in our lives. And how confused so many of us are about what that means and why it matters, and how many stories we have in our heads that associate and I will say both as an immigrant and having grown up in the very puritanical and otherwise amazing state of Rhode Island, greatest state of the union.

Pleasure can really get associated with being lazy, being selfish, being something other than amazing. It can get tied in with all these morality tales about us and well, I think it's all BS. I think pleasure is our birthright. And I've been finding so much pleasure in all the simple little things.

In the changing leaves and waking up in the morning and it being darkish out and stepping out onto the porch and watching the world come to life, seeing the deer and the wild turkey in the yard, seeing my breath on the air and remembering being a kid and being like, look I'm a dragon, which I maybe still say loud these days too because I like being a silly goose. Why not?

Life gives us so many opportunities to tune into ourselves and the world and to feel true and deep and lasting pleasure. So let's dive in to talk more about it, my love. Pleasure matters because true pleasure is, in my mind, about embodiment and being present, mindful, aware, truly, really deeply in your body in the moment. Truly present to yourself and the world.

Not worried about when the pleasure will end, not in analysis paralysis, asking questions like is this the most fun thing I could be doing right now? Or worrying and wondering what others will think of how you're enjoying your life, what you're doing when you're feeling pleasure. Just allowing yourself to be and to be in your body.

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Not overthinking, not rolling around in your mind and your stories, but truly in your body. Presence is vital. Healing, powerful. It's the place from which we recognize that we can make choices, that we can have free will, that we are most connected in with the beautiful truth of our own selves, our being, and are truly with ourselves, experiencing life, not just thinking about experiencing life. Presence is vital.

One of the things we often do in my six-month masterclass, Overcoming Codependency, is we have dance parties. So we meet every single week and we do an hour of super intense coaching together, looking with love at those thoughts that make us feel unworthy, that lead us to attempt to try to control others, to stay in codependent thinking that keeps us feeling emotionally beholden to other people's emotional states and desires, on and on.

So we do that. We dive deep. We look at our minds and our old stories and we work in the moment together, holding one another in the collective energy of the space to make change, to shift, or to practice being present with what is, with whatever disappointment, stress, worry, to not make it a problem. We do that deep work. And then we dance.

And this is free movement, unchoreographed, free dance. It's like what little kids do. This practice of inhabiting our bodies fully. And it provides an opportunity to step into joy, to integrate what we're learning and feeling into our bodies, releasing our attachment to what others think or our judgments of ourselves or others because let's be real, we all look silly. And that's the point.

We dance to feel inhabited, to mobilize any tension in our bodies, any armoring from a lifetime of having codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing thoughts, which keeps you really tense, really tight, expecting that

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you'll have to fight or flight or collapse and give in at any moment. And so we dance, and we feel present in our bodies.

Finding the pleasure that exists when we let ourselves go there and connect inward. And it's a beautiful way to integrate what we learn cognitively. Integration is as important as learning in the first place. Taking the time and space we all need as mammals to take our smart brain learnings, our thought work, our realizations, our a-ha moments, and allow them to get digested, metabolized, made real in our bodies.

My beauty, we do live in our bodies, after all. And by honoring our human, mammalian need for pleasure and play, we honor the fullness of our humanity. Not just our smart thinking parts. And we need it all. The thoughts and the feels, the analysis and the pure unbridled pleasure.

When we're used to a life of people pleasing and being mean to ourselves by holding ourselves to our own perfectionist thought fantasies, when we grow up in chaos, stress, trauma, when our child selves learn to hide our authenticity away to protect us, when it felt safer to go along and get along than to live in our realness, when it has felt safer over a lifetime to prioritize other people's happiness and comfort over our own, all cornerstones of living in a codependent mindset, not an interdependent one, well, then of course it can feel challenging to connect with your own pleasure and to prioritize it.

I mean babe, of course it does. And sweet one, that makes sense. The most sense. And when your brain and body believe you when you say I'm happy if everyone else is happy, then what happens to you when others aren't happy? What then?

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I mean, okay, I'll tell you. When that was my framework for living, and other people weren't delighted with what I did for them without them asking me to, I felt resentment, anger, frustration, disappointment, self-blame, stuck, lost, worried, anxious, depressed, I had really slow digestion, which if you think about polyvagal theory, that makes sense. On and on and on.

So how do we keep that from happening? Well, the key is to make your pleasure, your joy the source of your pleasure and joy. When we allow ourselves to experience pleasure fully, we experience ourselves as not questioning things. Not pulling them apart and trying to understand, manage, or control them, but rather just allowing ourselves to be.

And thus, pleasure can be a profound resource for our nervous systems, bringing us into ventral vagal with ourselves. And I want you to see how powerful that is. You can bring you into the safe and social and connected part of your nervous system for you.

And the more you believe and trust in your ability to do that with and for yourself, the more you can allow others to bring you pleasure and joy and happiness because your thoughts about your capacity to be in pleasure without beating yourself up for it or saying it's selfish or wrong or bad, all that starts to fade and is replaced with this story, this positive self-regard, this new idea of yourself as a person who's out here to receive and create pleasure in this human life.

And connecting in with the presence of true pleasure, of joy, helps us to come back to ourselves. And it's important to say it gives us a chance to pause and to take ourselves less seriously when our brains have the habit of catastrophizing, which I'll do a whole show about because it's the codependent, procrastinating, perfectionist's favorite thought habit.

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My darling, when you allow yourself to get really present to the pleasure, it's hard to worry in that moment. I mean, if you think about it, if your brain is full of the thought I am present to my joy, how could you worry right then? And pleasure can serve as a beautiful way to move us out of that habitual angst, anxiety, stress, and to allow your adult and child selves to simply play and revel in being alive and human and here.

And to go all former hospice nurse on it, not all of us have the gift of being alive in this moment. But you do. I do. Why not find all the joy you can? And beauty, presence is powerful. Late-stage capitalism is profoundly anti-pleasure. These systems of oppression tell us our value comes from working and producing and not in resting and being truly present in our bodies in real ways, finding presence and pleasure throughout the day.

Instead, we're told we need to put our heads down and suffer through and stiff upper lip it and live our days for that TGIF moment. And I know another way is possible, no matter your circumstances. And before you come at me that that's my privilege talking, it sure is. And it also isn't.

Joy can be found, pleasure can be cultivated, regardless of your circumstances. And yes, privilege such as financial security allows one access to a certain kind of pleasure and greatest ease in finding it. Totally true.

Like the pleasure of vacations and days off and not working in a sweatshop and not being subjugate to the police state in the ways Black folks and people of color are. Big yes right there. And there is another kind of pleasure we're talking about here.

We are taught this false story about what pleasure is and what it's derived from, that we get it by spending money, acquiring things, eating gorgeous

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things, drinking fancy cocktails. And while sure, those things may give you a short-lived dopamine boost and can absolutely be done with consciousness and intention, I continue to hold that none of those things are the root of true pleasure.

And before we talk about true and false pleasure, I'll say that women and humans socialized as women are taught that our pleasure doesn't matter as much as other people's. Not in a real way. Sure, we're taught to take pleasure in purchasing the latest whatever, handbag or eye cream to look youthful or whatever, to take the spa weekend and pamper ourselves.

But on the daily, we're not taught to honor our wants in a real way. Instead, most of us are taught that we need to put other people's pleasure ahead of our own, caretaking and protecting other people's leisure, rest, nourishment, and joy ahead of our own. That if we're moving our bodies, it best be for the purpose of getting thinner and smaller. And if we're going to eat, well, it better not be high calorie.

And a woman at peace with, nay, in love with her own body, and vibrantly embracing her pleasure and sexuality in a real way, ridiculous, selfish, self-serving, tacky, conceited, very, very bad. And it's very exciting to see women of all shapes and sizes celebrating their bodies publicly in new ways these days, ways that certainly didn't exist when I was a kiddo.

It's still kind of new. Overall, we're taught that women's pleasure is dangerous and will lead to certain doom. Yeah, I'm looking at you, Eve. There's this morality tale about pleasure, but particularly about women's pleasure as being a dangerous thing.

And so many of us are taught to be pleasing, rather than to seek pleasure, and to not do things like asking for what we want directly, not telling a lover

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exactly how to give us pleasure, not to take time and space to even connect with our bodies and feel our bodies, so we can learn what's pleasing for us.

We are so detached from our senses. Limping along on that hamster wheel of productivity, not pausing to learn what we want. Our pleasure is transgressive and radical. It's a thing worth fighting for, a thing worth making space for, working to get in touch with, build, honor, and engage with in new ways every day.

And my sweetest love, pleasure is not a thing you have to earn. That is so vital to say. In a culture of treats and cheat days, you only get dessert if you prove you are worthy of it. And while you're giving yourself that treat, you also need to make sure that you only have the 100-calorie pack. Lest you have too much pleasure and destroy your own life.

And it's interesting to zoom out like we do, my nerds, and to look at how deep these puritanical morality tales that say pleasure doesn't matter or isn't something to center or prioritize in our worlds and our lives. As a public health nerd, it's interesting to look at how public health has an overarching hold on this country, in the United States of America, has hurt itself, and thus, the health of the public by not recognizing and really centering the power of pleasure.

And if you're interested in digging in, there's a lot written about this and all the problems it's created. The example that comes to mind is HIV prevention education. In the early days, those campaigns didn't acknowledge pleasure and certainly didn't address it directly.

They didn't talk about the fact that HIV is sexually transmitted, and that people will continue to seek out pleasure because it's one of the core

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human biological imperatives to seek out that dopamine rush of delicious, amazing pleasure.

And so they talked about everything other than how to have safer sex and reduce your risk of getting HIV. And that's also why statistically speaking, in terms of education around STIs and pregnancy, abstinence only education does not work. Because mammals will seek out pleasure, and telling them simply not to just doesn't work.

Meanwhile, telling them how to get pleasure in a safer way with less stigma and shame helps us to change outcomes in real ways. And what's key here is learning to embrace pleasure without guilt and shame. Because so many of us seek out activities generally regarded as pleasurable, but don't get pleasure from them because we're beating ourselves up for eating the cake, having the sex, drinking the alcohol, moving our bodies, going for a run when other people need us to cook dinner.

So I think of pleasure as a positive feedback loop. When you begin to truly understand what is pleasurable for you, not what you were told and taught, socialized and conditioned to believe is pleasurable, and then you allow yourself to go for it without shame and guilt, and at first, it can be with 1% less shame and guilt, and next time, like 3% less. That's how we do. Little teeny tiny kitten steps, my kittens.

Baby, that's when our whole lives begin to shift. It becomes easier to set boundaries when you know what you really want and don't, what brings you pleasure and doesn't. One way we get confused is by calling something a pleasure when it's really a false pleasure.

And for me, the difference between a true and restorative pleasure and a false pleasure, something we call pleasurable but doesn't actually charge

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our internal battery, fill our internal cup, is the difference between doing things with conscious presence and doing things as a buffer, which we talked about way back in episode 14, which is doing any old thing in this world and is an attempt to not feel your feelings.

And you can do pretty much anything with presence and being checked in, or you can do the same thing from a place of being checked out, or in order to check out. When we look at results, false pleasure, eating whatever food you consider taboo with shame and guilt energy, unconsciously putting Oreos or a kale salad in your mouth, those activities are not going to give you the result that true pleasure does if you're doing those activities on autopilot, or if the doing is driven by and clogged in guilt and shame.

When we eat for joy, to connect inward, to nourish ourselves, the result in our body is wildly different, regardless of what you're actually eating. And I saw this unconscious, unintentional way of eating a lot back in my functional medicine days, and I totally did it myself for years.

Eating while distracted to stuff down a feeling, or simply at the speed of wolf, which is not the speed a human needs to eat at, for you are not wolf, are you? And eating in this way, in this disconnected way and this false pleasure stuff it down buffering way, not only will not bring you pleasure but can be profoundly harmful to your wellness.

This concept of false pleasures can also apply to things like exercise and movement, and we've talked about this before, my beauty. You can take yourself for a run or do yoga as a way to punish yourself, repeating the thought that you don't like your body from that energy of not good enough, and it blocks the really pleasurable endorphins.

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When you engage in exercise from self-love and the seeking of pleasure, you allow it to bring you pleasure. When it's a get to, instead of a have to. My love, let me say this one more time. You get to have pleasure. You deserve it. It's your birthright to live checked in, present in joy.

You don't need to spend money, go anywhere, or do any particular thing to experience pleasure. You can choose to start with a minimum baseline approach, which we discussed in episode 78. And you can choose to find one pleasurable thing that you're already doing in your everyday life and simply label it pleasurable.

So you can wash your hands mindfully, you can decide that you get to feel the warm water on your hands, smell the soap, see if that feels pleasurable for you. You can hold a warm cup of tea on a cold day or a glass of cold ice water on a hot day and you can choose to take pleasure from it.

You can take a nap or rest for five minutes; you can take one slow deep breath and decide you're going to experience the pleasure of feeling the air moving in your body. You don't need a weekend on a Grecian island or a spa treatment to experience pleasure.

You can do it all with a crayon on the back of a receipt as long as you're present, like fully present. Or as present as you can be, understanding that getting present in our bodies can be a tricky thing, something to be thoughtful and gentle with if we have a history of trauma, particularly if that trauma took place in our bodies.

You know you, right? You get to titrate and do just a little bit and get a little more present in your body and find that pleasure there. And you can also remember that it's the false narrative of capitalism that pleasure is beyond

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anyone's reach. It's about the thought and the decision to engage daily and finding your own pleasure and naming it as such.

And simultaneously while recognizing pleasure as your birthright, wanting you to revel in it doesn't mean that pleasure is the solution to a thought problem. If you're having really mean or negative thoughts about yourself, that you don't like your body, your job, your marriage, your face, whatever it is, thoughts that you always mess things up, you don't know how to make a decision, whatever it is, spinning in those thoughts and making them strong in your mind through neuroplasticity and using or attempting to use something you call pleasurable like eating something, drinking something, watching TV to try to cover it up, well now, those seeming pleasures won't actually solve your problem because in that moment, they are false pleasures.

They don't solve anything, and they don't provide true pleasure because they just can't. There's no snack that can overcome those negative thoughts. That's what thought work is for my beauty. Because if your thoughts are that you suck, eating a glorious chocolate mousse will not and cannot change that.

And expecting it to is just not realistic or self-loving because it's a subtle way of lying to yourself. By expecting what is actually a buffer to bring you pleasure and to solve your thought problem. So what it comes down to is that you can't skip steps. Healing isn't linear. And if you attempt to use false pleasure to cover up the discomfort and stress and challenges of life, the problems you're attempting to run from will come on back for you.

As the author Jon Kabat-Zinn reminds us, wherever you go, there you are. And no amount of false pleasures can change that. Furthermore, so many of us work so hard for our own healing and growth, and I love that. And I'll

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ask you, my sweet, sweet, sweet love, if you're not connecting with your joy and your pleasure, if you're not healing towards the goal of living in this present moment in pleasure, then what is the point?

What is the point of this life if not to truly feel all of the pleasure? Of the true pleasure? Of pleasure for the sake of it, not as an attempt to cover up or avoid our discomforts. For long lasting change, we need thought work, somatic work.

We need pleasure in order to heal the wounds of growing up in a household with codependent narratives, narcissistic mindset, stress, trauma, on and on. You get to recognize that those wounds live inside you until you really come to terms with them and really get at all the habitual thought process that run your world without you even realizing it, including those that drive you to seek false pleasure and avoid that true pleasure of being present with yourself.

Okay my beauty, your homework this week, if you'd like to, is to get really present. Pick one moment. You can do the most minimum 1%, teeny tiny, kitten step, minimum baseline on this. But decide ahead of time using your prefrontal cortex, when I wake up in the morning one day this week, or before I lay myself down to bed one day this week, I will take one moment to do something that brings me true pleasure.

It can be the tiniest thing. Watch a little YouTube video of oh my god, that one where the baby panda sneezes and then the mom screeches. Oh my goodness, okay, what I'm feeling in this moment is pure joy. I just think it's so cute and so funny and so sweet. It fills me with pleasure, with joy, and I feel really present.

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My cheeks hurt because I'm smiling so hard thinking about that. This is pleasure, babies. Hopefully you can hear it in my voice. Babes, I feel so much pleasure when I'm recording the show for you because I get all these DMs and these emails and these notes. I got a handwritten thank you card last week from a podcast listener. You know who you are. Thank you. I got it, I appreciate it.

And so I sit down to record the show and it's really vital to me that I meditate beforehand, and I get really present. And so it's an enjoyable process. And babies, you can find the true joy in whatever you are doing in your life. And that's your homework for this beautiful week.

Alright my darlings, my cheeks hurt. That feels nice. I like it. I love it when my cheeks hurt from smiling so hard. Okay, my sweet peas, if you are loving this show, if you are getting a lot from listening to it each and every week, and you're ready to give yourself the high-touch coaching support you need to take it all to the next level, to get real about your own habitual thoughts so you can shift them, I have a fantastic opportunity for you, which is my six-month program, Overcoming Codependency, which starts on February 1st 2021.

The group is already about half full, so if you're ready to ditch the thought patterns that have held you back, keep you feeling stuck, anxious, worried, overthinking, self-doubting, feeling challenged to make a decision or set a boundary, you're not going to want to miss this opportunity to have daily support from me for six months.

Doesn't that sound amazing? It is. Head on over to victoriaalbina.com/masterclass to fill out a short application form now before the group fills up. I cannot wait to welcome you to the program family, my love. What a beautiful way to start the year and so much more

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self-loving than setting a bunch of new year's resolutions that you're just going to beat yourself up for not carrying through.

Alright my beauties, let's do what we do. Nice deep breath in and out. Remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my beauty. I'll talk to you soon.

If you've been enjoying the show and learning a ton, it's time to apply it with my expert guidance so you can live life with intention, without the anxiety, overwhelm, and resentment, so you can get unstuck. You're not going to want to miss the opportunity to join my exclusive intimate group coaching program, so head on over to victoriaalbina.com/masterclass to grab your seat now. See you there. It's going to be a good one.