

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

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. Here we are at episode 101. Fun new intro, new vibe, very exciting. I hope you enjoy it. I want to take a moment to give a massive shout-out to my producers Pavel and Angela at Digital Freedom Productions.

They are absolutely the best ever, and if you're ever looking for producers for your podcast, they're the folks to call. Thank you, Angela and Pavel for being patient, loving, and kind with me and for sending me pictures of your adorable kiddo. I'm so grateful for you and all of your support.

Okay, so this week, I want to talk about something I see in pretty much all of my clients in my six-month program, Overcoming Codependency. And as always, totally did myself in many different ways for years and years. And that is believing that it's on you, it's your job to manage other people's moods, feelings, and emotions for them.

With your family, or friends, your partner, at work, even on the subway some days. So my beauty, do any of these sound familiar? Your partner is annoyed so you try to make them laugh or distract them. Your mom is mad at your dad, so you try to make her see the good in him so she won't be so angry. An employee of yours is upset about a new policy that came down from corporate, so you try to convince them that it's not that bad, versus listening to their concerns.

As a child, your parents fight frequently, or a parent is emotional labile or volatile. Their moods aren't reliable, or they have outburst of anger or

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

sadness, so you learn to do your best to be the perfect girl, the good girl, to get straight As, accolades, prizes, blue ribbons, or you clean the house or otherwise try to lessen the burden on them as though that would change their mood and make the home feel safer to you.

Finally, you want to break up with someone, but you worry that they'll be upset. So instead of telling them honestly and directly what's not working in the relationship, you make it all about you. It's not you. It's me.

In these situations and so many more, we try to manage other people's emotions for them, as though that was actually possible. Because it feels like our job to get people out of what we see as "bad moods" and yes, that's an air quotes. And they're perfectly understandable reasons why we do this, but my love, it doesn't serve adult you or the people in your life to do this. So let's dive in and talk all about it.

We'll start by saying you are not bad or wrong if you do this. And if this is a habit of yours, a pattern in your mind, you likely may not even realize you're doing it. There's no need for shame, blame, or guilt here, my kittens. So what we're talking about here is not just humans showing up for one another.

Coregulating nervous systems, connecting, being loving, and kind. All of that is fantastic. What we're talking about are situations where we feel a drive within is to attempt to change someone's mood, often at our own expense, in that way that is typical of codependent thinking.

In the presence of big feelings, we can suddenly start to feel wildly uncomfortable. If I'm not even comfortable with my own feelings, I'm sure not going to be comfortable with yours. And what's often happening underneath all that emotion is this super subconscious codependent logic

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

within us that says I'm not safe if they're not happy, I can't be happy if they're not happy.

Let me give an example. I was talking to a client of mine, Tina, and she was sharing that her 22-year-old daughter recently failed out of university. And Tina was sharing how frustrated she is that she tries to tell her daughter day after day what she should be doing to be happier in life.

And in my client's own words, she says that her daughter is moping around the house and not getting anything done and not being productive. My client shared that she thinks if her daughter is not being productive, she can't be happy.

And so Tina spends her days telling her daughter what she should do, what she needs to do in order to be happy. She's trying to manage her daughter's emotions because she's uncomfortable seeing her daughter struggling and allowing her to figure it out on her own.

She thinks it's her job to give unsolicited advice. Advice the kid didn't ask for and clearly doesn't want. And caveat here, her daughter's not suicidal. This isn't a case in which it really is imperative for someone to step in. This is a 22-year-old trying to figure it out and effectively handling this on her own.

But her mom is linking her own happiness to that of her daughter. She's telling herself that if her daughter is unhappy, then she herself is unhappy and it's her job to fix it. As long as that story is the one she keeps thinking, it's going to be hard for her to be happy unless her daughter changes her mood.

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

But not just happy. Joyful in the way that Tina thinks is the right way to be happy. Finding joy through productivity. But what she's doing by insisting her way is the best and linking it with her own emotional state is she's depriving her daughter the chance to figure it out on her own. And she's creating an adversarial relationship there.

Listen, no one likes to be managed or told how they should feel. And in that kind of a situation, when you insist that your way is the way, you're not building trust. In fact, quite the opposite. So what's motivating Tina?

Well, she grew up in a household where messy feelings weren't allowed. A family where codependent thinking was modeled by both of her parents. And she believes that in her heart, she's being a good parent by telling her kiddo what to do because that's what she saw as parenting growing up.

But mostly what it is is that Tina gets to attempt to push away the kid's sadness, which is something that she is uncomfortable with. So she wants to put a kiss on it and make it feel better, which is really cute when that works with a two-year-old, but doesn't serve her adult daughter and is not a loving way for two adults to connect in mutuality, recognizing each one of them to have autonomy.

It's not an interdependent way to connect. It's a codependent way. So when you are looking to manage your own anxiety, stress, or worry, through attempting to manage someone else's feelings, it's always a losing game. And you will lose 100% of the time.

Because if the story goes, I'm only happy if my husband is happy, then you've given away your power to create your own feelings. Because no one is happy 100% of the time. That's not how life works. Even repeating that

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

story that you need to ensure that others are happy so you can be happy means that your joy is conditional on them.

And my sweet darling, that is not way to live. So let's start like we do with ideology. So why do we do this? For one thing, the patriarchy tells humans socialized as women that we should always put other people's feelings above our own, that we have a responsibility to keep the peace and take care of everything else at our own expense.

And for many of us, we also picked up this habit as children by watching the adults in our lives and how they navigated their feelings, ours, and those of other family members. If we were upset and we were told don't cry, or if a sibling or another kiddo hurt us and we heard, "It's okay, he didn't mean to," we may have learned that the response to someone sharing their feelings was to negate them and that that was the right thing to do, even a kind thing to do.

In addition, we may have learned this strategy of trying to mitigate, lessen, or change challenging emotions in others as a brilliant childhood survival adaptation. Nerd alert, it makes perfect sense from a biological and evolutionary place to do all of this.

As human mammals, we are primed to seek safety, comfort, connection, to be accepted by the community and our family unit in particular. Thus, making us more likely to be saved, defended, and protected when the lion or marauders come in the night.

And so the neural pathways in your child mind got programmed to understand what we believe is safe and what's not. What we think will help us be seen and taken care of, and what will put us in danger, emotionally or

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

physically. And these thought habits are often formed when we are so small that we only know our family of origin.

And when the emotions in the room or within us are either too big for our child brains to understand, such as fits of anger, apparent crying, or your crying being dismissed, screaming or fighting in the home, when the framework for emotions in your house is based on the stiff upper lip, suck it up buttercup sort of story, lots of different scenarios, or where your child brain recognized or decided the emotions in your house were actually unsafe, then flash forward to now, those same emotions expressed by an adult to you, an adult, may seem like a problem that's on you to solve.

And this happens with the children in our lives too. We don't like seeing them upset because we've come to believe that being upset, sad, angry, worried, anxious is a problem.

So someone has a big feeling and your inner children start to drive the bus again, to believe that familial mood management is your job. And you seek safety in the survival mechanism of trying to control or manage other people's feelings for them as a way to feel more comfortable yourself.

I have a client, Serena, who as a child would get up for hours in the middle of the night while everyone else was asleep, and she would clean the house top to bottom because she hoped it would make her mom less volatile, more happy, and that it would somehow make her magically stop drinking.

Serena's not alone in this kind of story. It's a theme I hear quite often with slightly different details, of trying to take action or present ourselves in a specific way in order to keep or make our grownups happy. At home, school, life in general.

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

As adults, we understandably slip into this same kind of behavior and thinking because it just feels safer. Well, until it doesn't. And this programming is both a root cause of and part and parcel of codependency, perfectionism, and people pleasing.

These early habits can lead us to live a life in which our emotional state is so other-people focused, versus being focused internally. One of the things I often hear from my clients is that they are so disconnected from their own emotions. Especially disconnected from their emotions as they live in their bodies.

And so they live life in this sort of numb autopilot, which resonates in my own life as well. For many years, I felt like I had access to anger, sadness, gladness, but generally not a lot more than that. Not all the complexities and the grey in between.

And this makes sense. It makes sense if emotions weren't safe in your childhood. The pushback I get when I talk about this with clients is the story that we do this because we care. But my love, trying to stop someone from having the emotion they are having is not a caring thing to do. And believing that it is is telling yourself something that generally isn't true.

I find that we try to manage other people's emotions because we are uncomfortable with our own. So we do it to protect ourselves, and that's totally understandable. And at the end of the day doesn't serve us because it keeps a wall up between us and our ability to be present for our own emotions as much as the other person's.

A wall between us and truly showing up to support those we love in the honest moment of their actual feelings, which don't ever need changing. They need honoring.

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

So let's talk remedies. What do you do to begin to reprogram this code within you that tells you that other people's challenging moods or emotions are your job to fix or change, that they're a problem?

First of all, we need to get some cognitive distance. This is where journaling and doing thought work about these issues is so important. The more that you are looking at your own thoughts, feelings, actions, and results, the think-feel-act cycle I talk about in episodes 35, 36, and 37, the more comfort you will find in the discomfort of feeling your own feelings.

Next is raising your awareness. So this is vital because most people don't have any idea they're doing this. So just keep a little ear out for should-ing language. For example, "Well, you shouldn't feel so angry about this," or, "There's no need to be so sad here," or one of my old favorites, being the joker. Trying to change the mood, cheer people up, and that can come from that same impulse to fix any problems that someone discloses to you, or that you perceive.

A really important thread through here is that we often take it personally when someone else is having emotions. We make it mean something about us when we make it our job. And you get to remind yourself that what other people are feeling is not on you. It's not about you. It has nothing to do with you.

Truly, it's about their experience of life, which is not yours to manage. To be clear, I am all about accountability and responsibility and repair when we F up. If you're new to the show, please do go check out my apologizing series, episodes 72 through 76 for more on that.

So I'm not talking about not apologizing here, not owning the impact of something you've said or done. Quite the opposite. I'm talking about not

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

taking it on as your problem when someone else is mad about something that has nothing to do with you.

Like getting a speeding ticket, or sad they didn't get a promotion, or someone broke up with them, or if they're anxious or worried about COVID. Whatever it is, it's not about you as a human. It's their thoughts, their nervous system, their feelings at work. And you can intentionally consciously choose to support them if you have the emotional bandwidth and space to.

And that's a lovely thing to do, to show up for the people you love. But never let it be at a cost to yourself and never from a sense of obligation or has to. You get to do it from wants to.

So feel into the difference there in your body. I have to get him to not be irritable versus I can show up to support him if I want to and have the energy in my own life to do that. Feels really different, right?

And that's super key to remember. Your agency in those moments, and that you can make the choice to show up or not. And when we don't take the moment to pause, when we respond from that sense of obligation, well, we're likely to hop right on the resentment train. The train that goes directly to nowhere good.

My beauty, holding non-judgmental loving space for someone's feelings is the opposite of trying to manage them. We can only hold space for others to have their own experience and work through it when we don't let our egos get involved, when we don't make it about us.

And that's always my goal. To show up and hold space when I can and to use my direct communication skills, which we talked about back in episode

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

33 to say, I love you and I'm not available to hear about your breakup right now, let's talk tomorrow.

Doing so isn't being selfish in some bad way, mean, or unkind, or not loving. 110% the opposite. When you show up with your own emotional cup full, you show up with real love. When you show up because you're worried the other person will be mad if you don't, won't love you if you don't, because you're uncomfortable being around someone having whatever emotion, or because you feel you have to or they will not be okay, you're not showing up with a full heart, but rather, from a place of wanting to manipulate the situation.

And listen, I did this for years. I have no judgment here. I totally get why we do this. And I don't use the word manipulate or manipulative in a judgmental way but rather as a statement of fact. When we seek to make someone else happy, calm, less mad, whatever it is, especially if they aren't asking that us, we are manipulating them in order to feel safer inside ourselves, which is simply not possible if you understand the think-feel-act cycle.

And of course, if you're in a situation of abuse, my love, this is totally understandable. Please do whatever you need to do to get to safety always.

So when you find yourself doing this, I want to invite you as much as feels safe and accessible and okay for you to bring your awareness into your body. See what information your body gives you about how it feels to carry this often heavy burden of thinking it is your job to manage other people's lives.

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

Make note of when you feel this impulse to step in to change the mood or the energy and note what happens within you. Are there sensations in your body? A tightening? A momentary sense of relief? Like we're not going to talk about that heavy thing. A sense of tension?

So those are hints that you are not in your own lane, that you're trying to manage someone else's think-feel-act cycle for them, which really, if you think about it is just borrowing trouble and it's paternalistic to think that it's your job to manage their feels for them.

It's not a loving choice, though it may feel like it in the moment because the feelings that you save someone from will come up again for them because science. Grieving is a really good example.

So a client of mine recently said, "My father-in-law died from COVID but I didn't want to ask my husband about it because I didn't want to upset him." So it posits that the husband wasn't already upset. His father had died.

So the work is this; to practice this with and for yourself. Just allowing, accepting, and being with the feelings. Riding the wave of them. Not buffering against them or changing what you're feeling or what anyone else is feeling, but allowing yourself and the people you love the fullest experience of that feeling, which only comes when we allow ourselves to accept the feeling that we're having, versus pushing it away, which only creates more suffering, my love.

The more comfortable you are with your own emotions and being present with them, the less you'll want to manage or change them in your own life and the lives of others. Getting comfortable with allowing others to have emotions opens up so much space to get comfortable with and accept your own, and that's the payoff here.

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

It's so empowering in my own life to know that I can handle my own emotions. I used to try to run away from them all the time, to buffer against them, to tell stories about situations instead of feeling what I was feeling, to be the joker, and I did this in therapy all the time.

I mean, in my regular life too, but things would get to the really real real and all of a sudden, your girl was making a joke. And now, wow, the difference in my life is so profound. I feel so much more present in every area of my life as I gain more and more capacity to be present to my own emotions.

And I feel so much more connection with the people I love as I honor them and hold non-judgmental space for their emotions. Without that pull inside me to want to change them or their experience in any way, and that's what I want for you, my beautiful love.

To feel that freedom that comes with knowing you are resourced, you are capable, and you can start to feel your feelings little bit little, step by step, making just a little more space, a little more space, a little more space until you feel ever more available to show up for the emotional reality of the people you love and your beautiful self too.

Thank you for listening, my love. If you haven't gotten your copy of my new reading list for nerds like us, I'd love to send it your way. And I have a quick little ask of you. The podcast world is super weird, and for the show to show up in searches, it needs to have a lot of folks subscribed and a lot of ratings and reviews.

I would be so grateful if you are enjoying the show, if you could head on over to wherever you get your podcasts and Apple Podcasts is the most helpful, whether you listen there or not, and subscribe, rate, and review the show.

Ep #101: Managing Other People's Emotions

To thank you, I'll send you my reading list right to your email. Just head on over to victoriaalbina.com/readinglist and put your name and email in the little box there, honor system, and the book list is yours. How fun?

Alright my beauties, let's do what we do. Little gentle hand on your heart if that feels supportive. Bring your awareness to your breath. Nothing to change there. 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, 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.