

Ep #103: Meditation Doesn't Work for Everyone



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With Your Host

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This is Feminist Wellness, and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, and Life Coach, Victoria Albina. I'll show you how to get unstuck, drop the anxiety, perfectionism, and codependency so you can live from your beautiful heart. Welcome my love, let's get started.

Hello, hello my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. I am really delighted to talk with you today about something I love, which is meditation. But first, I'd love it if you could head on over to Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your shows, subscribe, rate, and review the *Feminist Wellness* podcast.

I ask this of you because it helps others to find the show. Shows with more reviews come up more in search. It's just how the weird algorithm works. And I am here to be of service, to provide this content, these resources, the free PDFs, all the support for free for anyone who wants it, but they've got to find it first. So if you can help me to be of service by upping the rating of the show, I'd be so grateful. Thank you, my love.

So, I sure talk a lot about mindfulness, about how vital and healing awareness is as a first step towards our healing. And how much better my life feels when I am present. Really deeply present and mindful of my own thoughts, the sensations and emotions in my body, when I'm in touch with me.

So you might imagine that I'm a huge proponent of meditation, and you wouldn't be wrong. But I haven't always been. And what we're talking about today is that meditation is not for everyone at all times. And it's a really important topic to discuss as each of us learns what our own individual particular special to you, unique way is, to get to the healing and growth you so desire.

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The other day I was talking with a client Talia in my six-month program and she was distraught. Really beating herself up because she felt more anxious during meditation. And she was so upset with herself because she and these are her words, "Couldn't stick to a meditation routine or even sit for a few minutes."

Meditation just wasn't working for her. And she was telling this story that this means that she's a failure. Talia's experience is not unique. While there are countless studies about the benefits of meditation, it can help folks with depression, anxiety, can lower blood pressure, and can even reduce our experience of chronic pain, it's not always the right choice for all of us.

And it hurts my heart to hear that folks think they're somehow doing "spiritual life" or "wellness" or "personal growth" and yeah, all that is in air quotes, for folks to think they're doing those things wrong because that's total BS. And it's the wellness world and the hashtag this is how you do it kind of framing that has done you wrong, by making it seem like there's one right way, and that silence, seated, go inside meditation is that way and the only way.

And when we grow up with stress, distress, or trauma in our lives, when we're raised in an environment where feelings are negated in a stiff upper lip kind of way, or if they're just ignored or pushed aside, when we're mocked or criticized for being emotional or sensitive, when we learn that being in touch with our feelings, being present in our bodies is dangerous, unsafe, or just really not smart.

When we have survived breaches of our bodily autonomy, dropping into our emotions and our bodies can feel unsafe. And when it doesn't feel like a blissful wonderland to sit and meditate, we can feel guilt or shame about it. Like we are a failure, which can then worsen the anxiety we went to

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meditation to help quell in the first place. Quite the opposite of what we imagine would happen after 10 minutes of silence of a fancy little pillow.

Nerd alert, my loves. A 2017 Brown University and University of California study found that 82% of meditators reported increased anxiety, worry, some degree of fear, and in some, even panic during or after sitting in meditation. A figure that was astounding, and you know your girl's all about the epidemiology and reading those studies.

But I went and read the source studies and well, it panned out. But so these figures that at first, I was like, wait, what, makes so much sense. So when you stop buffering, when you stop trying to distract yourself from your thoughts and emotions and bring them all to the forefront of your mind, well, it makes sense. F

All of a sudden, your monkey mind can take over and can remind you of all the worries, all the stressors, all the terrible, and all the yuck you might push aside day after day. And of course that can make a human feel anxious at first.

And for those with a history of stress, distress, or trauma, whether it's chronic and systemic, such as from living within systems of oppression like racism, sexism, or homophobia, or acute trauma like an attack or a car accident, those wise internal buffers - because remember, we don't just talk about buffers as a bad thing. Often, they're to protect us.

So those buffers against reliving your trauma are there for a reason. To protect you from getting flooded with thoughts, emotions, memories that may be more than your nervous system can handle in a given moment.

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For some, this flood of emotion can be actually triggering and any time I say triggering, I mean it in the clinical sense. Not again like, how it's used on Instagram. So here I mean where your nervous system gets fully overwhelmed and you are not able to function.

So when those thoughts your smart brain has been pushing away come up all at once, it can be surprising and can lead to more anxiety, and yes, even panic, especially if you haven't been taught the skills to support yourself to come back to that safe anchor within yourself, that safe ventral vagal place that we've talked about before.

And so going inward, bringing our attention into our bodies can feel really scary. It can feel very, very overwhelming and may not be a prudent choice for some survivors or other folks holding trauma in their bodies, which makes sense because - and I love this saying - the issues are in the tissues.

Our experiences in this life get stored in our bodies, which is why just dropping in out of nowhere can really flood us. And it's also why the body-based practices, the somatic practices that I teach my clients can be so helpful because they can be a way to sort of, well, gently approach these issues without freaking them out, without triggering a massive bodily response.

I think of it like I had this puppy once who had been abused before she came to live at my home. And she was super-duper skittish, which makes so much sense. Sweet little baby Grace. And so I never walked right up to her. If I needed to pick her up or something, I would start walking like I was walking towards the side of her and then would turn and inch my body closer and closer to her, allowing her to equilibrate and re-equilibrate and sort of get used to the idea that I was coming close to her.

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And then she would let me hold her, pick her up, brush her, whatever I needed to do. But I certainly didn't go from zero to all up in her personal space. And I think this is hopefully a useful metaphor for how we can approach our own tenderness. I know it's what worked for me.

So understanding that what we carry in our bodies may come out during meditation, we get to approach it with gentleness. It's also interesting to note the researchers at Brown and University of California note in their paper that - and I will quote here, "While factors like the meditator's practice intensity, psychiatric history, or trauma history, and quality of supervision is important, these factors appeared to play a role for only some meditators. In many cases, challenging experiences could not be attributed to just those factors. The results also challenge other common causal attributions such as the assumption that meditation-related difficulties only happened to individuals with a pre-existing condition, psychiatric or trauma history, who are on long or intensive retreats, who are poorly supervised, who are practicing incorrectly, or who have inadequate preparation."

I found that really fascinating. So if you don't have a trauma history but find that quiet seated meditation just isn't right for you, you're not alone, and that's all okay. To be clear, meditation is fantastic for a lot of people. And it's come to be a beautiful gift in my own life. And it's one I worked up to.

And if meditation doesn't work for you, if it doesn't bring you relief, or if you feel even more stressed or anxious while meditating or after, and if you want to bring more presence and mindfulness into your life, there are other ways to approach it.

And again, this practice not working for you in this moment of time doesn't mean anything about you. Not at all. It just means that you need an individualized slower approach should you want to develop a meditation or

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mindfulness practice and that's a beautiful thing, my kitten. A beautiful thing to recognize.

You get to honor you. Your wants, your needs, and how they present in your life. What a gift to give yourself, right? Versus just sticking to some story that there's some one right way to do it.

So let's dive into remedies. First, you could probably guess this if you're a long-time listener. Acceptance. We spend so much time creating suffering for ourselves by not accepting what's real for us. By wishing the facts were different. But they're not.

If your beautiful nervous system sees meditation as something that isn't for you today, in this moment, in this season of your life, your growth, well, then the sooner that you accept that that's what is, the more peace you can find for yourself, instead of wishing your mind, body was different.

Also, I think it's important to accept that there is a normal amount of discomfort that comes with meditation. It's not really like, puppies and rainbows and sunshine kind of jam. So a racing mind, feeling bored, having bodily discomforts, those are normal and expectable.

And generally speaking, again, generally speaking, I would recommend sitting through that kind of discomfort until you find comfort with it. But if you start having increased or persistent anxiety or panic related to meditation or going within, if your body is clearly saying no, then maybe it's not the modality for you in this moment, my love, and that too is a beautiful thing to accept.

Next, I will invite you to write down your expectations. Both of yourself while meditating and your expectations of meditation. For example, many people

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go into meditation with this internal expectation they don't even recognize that says this will be easy. I mean, it's just sitting quietly, what's the big deal?

Other people go in thinking I will be so blissful the second I sit to meditate and immediate after and always. Meditation will cure me. And I think I went in with some combo of those two, to be very real.

So I'll invite you to get clear on the narratives within you around meditation so you can begin to decide which ones you want to keep and which you want to let go. You don't know from here how meditation will feel or what you'll gain, so the more you can go into it with beginner's mind, meaning without expectations, the better.

The more expectations you bring into it, the more likely you are to be upset, disappointed, or to think something has gone drastically wrong in moments when it hasn't. The practice is what it is for you. Nothing more, nothing less.

Remember, the goal of meditation is not to control our minds, but rather to find stillness, quiet, calm, and to connect inward, to notice what is going on within ourselves in this present moment experience. Not to tell our minds to hush, not to be mean to ourselves, not to make any specific thought stop, but rather to get present to it all.

And the more gentleness we can bring, the more ease we allow in. From there, I'll invite you to start not by actually meditating, but by using techniques like orienting. And I have a free orienting resource on my website right at the top of victoriaalbina.com. You can get that downloaded right to your email. So you can use a practice like that to help you to get present to the environment instead of present within yourself if doing so is too much for your nervous system.

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Next, decide what grounding techniques you'll have on hand and at the ready before you start and practice them in calm moments. Not stressful ones. This is like what we do with the thought work protocol, where before we go into a potentially challenging experience, we pick our thoughts using our prefrontal cortex, ahead of time, and practice them until they feel like second nature.

I like grounding practices that bring my attention to my breath without trying to change it. Just noticing it. Another is running my hands under cold water if I feel frozen in that dorsal vagal we've talked about before, or under warm water if I'm having too much sympathetic activation in my body. Too much anxiety, or a racing feeling. And as I do so, simply noticing changes in my mind-body. How is my physiology responding to this choice I am making?

And finally, a super beautiful grounding practice for me is practicing being my watcher, which we talked about in episode three, like a thousand years ago, in moments when I'm not meditating. So noticing my thoughts and emotions without attaching to them or making meaning of them.

So I recommend starting out with things that are banal and non-threatening to your mind, body, inner children, nervous system. For example, here I am, I'm standing in the kitchen. I am making a sandwich. Let's check in with feelings. Well, I feel happy when I'm making a sandwich. I also feel hungry. I also feel excited.

And I'm serious here. I really want you to invite you to start with a quotidian day-to-day bullshit. Not something deep or intense. For example, I am choosing to relax and I will watch TV while I do so. I feel calm while I watch this show.

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Once these kinds of practices of getting really mindful with the easy, easy thing, I am putting on cozy socks and that makes me feel warm and happy. When all of that feels accessible, that's when you know that it may be time to start bringing your awareness to other emotions in your body like disappointment, worry, concern.

As we do this kind of work, titration of your mindfulness process is vital. And for many of us, starting with somatic, bodily, or movement-based meditations can be an easier way in. And I'll be talking more about somatic in the coming weeks because it has been such a game-changer for me. So again, make sure you're subscribed to the show so you don't miss a thing.

In my six-month program, I teach a walking meditation very early on. The focus, the place where you are putting your awareness is on your feet touching the floor and getting present to your feet. Not on diving deep inside into the still and potentially scary recesses of your mind, body, and history.

Practices that are meditating like qi gong or tai chi, running, lifting weights may be helpful alternatives to ease you in. Guided meditations like the ones I share for free on my website may also be an easier way to gently introduce yourself to meditation.

There isn't much quiet time on those recordings for a very nerdy reason. Because science. With the hopes that you'll feel supported and accompanied, and so you can be in ventral vagal with me throughout the experience.

Those all could be way too big an ask for your tender perfect self right now, and again, that's totally okay. Because what's key here is listening to your body's cues and honoring them always. An option I love for myself to raise

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my mindfulness, and it's meditative in its way is to put a hand gently on my heart or on my belly and to take one slow breath. That's it. That's the whole meditation.

And then the next day or the next week, consider upping it to two breaths. Then three mindful breaths. In a few weeks, four, nice and slow. Pay attention to what your body tells you. Remind yourself that you are consenting to this. You have chosen this awareness. That's always so helpful for me when I start to feel that little race in my heart.

The goal here is a deeper connection with you. And that is never something to force or push, but rather to ease into should you choose to. In my own life, meditation has become a massive gift that helps me to get to know myself. It helps me center, ground, and come home to me.

And I've learned so much about myself as I practice quieting my mind and tuning in. And it wasn't always this way. I was like Talia for so long and felt like meditation just - and I say this lovingly - just freaked me out. My monkey mind used to scream during meditation. And now it chatters like monkeys do, and I'm able to meet it with love and care.

Not to shame or judge it, but just to say, "Oh monkey mind, I see you, I love you, thank you. Hey babe, it's quiet time now, thank you, okay." My body used to get so uncomfortable, so squirmy, and it just felt not okay to be in my body in shavasana, the quiet lying down part of yoga, which makes sense.

For any of us who have grown up with codependency, perfectionism, people pleasing, grew up feeling like we were walking on eggshells, constantly criticized, or just not getting what we wanted and needed as

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children, dearmouring, allowing our bodies to relax can make our bodies feel unsafe.

So there is a period of time where every time I went to yoga, I would just cry and cry throughout the whole practice, but particularly in shavasana. And in hindsight, it was an important release in a really stressful moment of my life when I didn't have many other resources, but wow, did it feel terrible at the time.

And while now I'm glad I kept at it and built those internal muscles to sit with the discomfort, in hindsight, I was pushing myself. I was telling this story that I was supposed to be doing this, that I had to keep going back to somehow, I don't know, prove that I was healing, prove that I wanted to heal.

I definitely could have been a lot gentler. Oh well. Lessons learned, right, my love? No sense beating ourselves up for beating ourselves up in the past. And so that brings us to our final remedy. The researchers at Brown and at the University of California also found that those meditators who had a challenging experience and had someone to talk to about it, someone to integrate and process it with reported greater satisfaction with meditation overall, and less distress after those particular sessions.

So if this is you, maybe joining a meditation group, a sangar, some kind of meditation community, or working with a teacher one on one to get started could be a beautiful way in if this is a practice you want to incorporate. And my love, listen, if you try all these things, all these little inroads to mindfulness and meditation and if none of that is right for you, then that's great information to have.

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I'll invite you to consider working with a somatic therapist if you want to learn new skills for connecting with yourself and your body. It may be a beautiful idea for you. Simple practices like getting mindful while drinking a cup of tea, or taking a shower, or putting lotion on your paws may be a more self-loving way to ease into mindfulness.

It is all perfect and I will invite you to let your body's impulses, your body's signals be your guide. There is no greater path to self-love than by building self-trust. The trust that you will 110% of the time have your own back. That you know what is right and good for you and you honor that above what anyone else thinks is important or useful or good to do.

Codependency is about sourcing our sense of self-worth from others, and pushing yourself to meditation when your body says no just because someone told you that meditation is awesome is continuing that painful pattern. And you no longer need to do that, my love.

Instead, you get to listen to yourself and to honor what you hear. Thank you for listening, my beauty. I hope that this was supportive for you today. Let's put a little gentle hand on our hearts and do what we do. 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 with 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.