

Ep #135: Attachment and Nervous System Resourcing



Full Episode Transcript

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 realized the other day that it's been a minute since we talked about polyvagal theory, our nervous systems, and our mental and physical health here on the show, which is funny because I talk about this every single day with the folks in *Anchored*, my six-month program, which is deeply based in learning about and working with our nervous systems.

So I thought we would take a little detour, nerd out pretty hard, talk some science, and of course, focus on the solution, on the remedies. And our remedy for today is nervous system resourcing, which has been a literal lifesaver for me.

This episode is also a continuation from last week's show about catastrophizing, which is when your brain goes from zero to 100 towards the endless pit of despair when something activates your nervous system, to believe that doom is nigh.

So get ready for lots more nerding and lots of great remedies, my darling sweet tender raviolis. But first, I talk about the nervous system here and I designed *Anchored*, the deep foundation in our nervous system science because it's the missing link for so many of us when it comes to our mental and physical health, and understanding how our emotions impact our bodily wellness, how our minds and bodies communicate and are one.

I, for one, never would have thought that my codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing habits were part and parcel of my ongoing chronic 30-year struggle with irritable bowel syndrome, IBS, and small intestine

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bacterial overgrowth, SIBO, along with the intermittent depression and anxiety that come with having a - I don't want to say F'ed up but I do, having some challenges with the gut microbiome.

And this lens of the nervous system is such a powerful tool for grounding, centering, and healing ourselves in our minds and bodies so we can attend to our thinking and do thought work that works, thought work that sticks and isn't just about us pretending to tell new stories. Because remember, we don't do hashtag positive vibes only around here. We don't lie to ourselves.

We are truthful. And when we're doing our thought work, it is vital that we pick a new thought that resonates deeply in our bodies. So we can believe our new narratives in a deep way, a lasting way, a way that will lead to life-long changes.

If you're new to nervous system language, some of this may be confusing for you. I do have over on my Instagram, @victoriaalbinawellness, I give good gram. I have some videos about the nervous system and I'll be putting a lot more up because I love this stuff.

But you also may want to go back and listen to episodes 43, 48, and 59, where we talk in more detail about the autonomic nervous system and polyvagal theory, though it's sprinkled everywhere because I'm obsessed.

So our nervous systems are wired to protect us first and foremost from imminent danger, which is why we have the negativity bias that's built into us as humans. We are at the same time built for social connection and to assume that that thing moving in the corner actually will very much murder us at any moment, even when it turns out to be a fluff ball after we've jumped on to the couch screaming.

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This is the work of your fantastic amygdala, the fear center, and that lizard brain, your most ancient brain. And that lizard brain holds this belief that you need to be constantly vigilant or you soon shall perish.

So that's in all of us. And when we pair that with a history, a personal history, an ancestral history of walking on eggshells all the time, which is so typical of us externalizers, us codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing thinkers, because remember, when you're looking outside of yourself for your self-worth, you are constantly on guard for someone to say or show you that you're actually not worthy of love, care, and the air you breathe.

We are subtly or not so subtly expecting and sometimes creating drama or chaos, disappointment, or more suffering around every corner because it's what we're used to. So when you grow up either in chaos or in the rigidity of everything's fine perfectionism, and the story that we must be the good girl to be lovable or however the drive to live in codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing ways was taught to you through your socialization, your conditioning, your family blueprint, and inner child brilliance, all those stories that you grew up with became part of your psyche, became your framework for living until you learned thought work.

And they keep you externally focused, showing up to be who you think others want and need you to be instead of showing up as your actual authentic self in the world. And from that place of not thinking the real you is good enough or worthy of love or could ever be taken care of, you lose touch with your own capacity to support yourself in the deep ways we all need.

And because you, we, have spent so long believing that we need other nouns, people, places, and things to soothe us when we are upset, worked up, having a sad, hard, angry, whatever day, we spent a lifetime projecting

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our stress and discomfort out of ourselves. Both the creation of and the soothing of, which leaves us not believing that we can have our own backs.

This is where nervous system resourcing comes in, to remind us just how powerful we are that we can show up in a deeply embodied way to honor ourselves, our inner children, our protector parts, to reparent ourselves and our nervous systems and can find that internal locus of safety and wellness.

And from there, we can learn how to reach out safely for co-regulation, for support from others. Let's pause my darling nerds to define some terms right quick. Regulation. So our nervous systems have three main states. This is the core of polyvagal theory.

In our autonomic nervous system, there's sympathetic, fight, flight, freakout. That is there's a lion on the horizon, it's coming to destroy me and the village, our bodies are filled with adrenaline, norepinephrine, eventually cortisol, and this shuts down all function in the body except that which the body seems vital. Heart, lungs, legs to run, fists to punch, heart, lung, heart, lung, heart, lungs.

Your vision gets kind of cloudy or narrow, and all you can think about is I'm so anxious, my heart is beating so fast, my palms are sweaty, and I want to bolt, I want to get out of here.

And then there's parasympathetic. So parasympathetic has two branches. Ventral vagal, which is the front body, and dorsal body, the back body. Ventral vagal is safe and social, secure, connected, tender, the way you feel with someone where you share unconditional love. And we're going to keep coming back to ventral vagal throughout our talk about nervous system resourcing.

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The other part of the parasympathetic nervous system is dorsal shutdown, and dorsal, I think of it, dorsal is the back body, so the dorsal fin on a dolphin, and I think of when you have exhausted all resources, you can't make friends, you can't connect with someone, and you can't outrun them or punch them, you'll collapse, play dead, and put your back against the door, dorsal, door of the cave, hoping that whatever scary thing is on the other side cannot actually get you.

Dorsal shutdown looks like depression, whereas sympathetic looks like anxiety. And there's complexity here but stay with me. Dorsal looks like just that shutdown, deer in the headlights, playing possum. I just can't anymore.

And there are combination states in between like high activation freeze, when you're checked out but revved up, which for me used to look like a buffering, cleaning tornado. I was checked out of my feelings, I was not present in my body, I was shut down in my body and yet I was moving around the house at about 473 miles an hour mindlessly doing, doing, doing.

So there's complexity here and we're going to keep it super simple for today. Sympathetic, fight, flight, activation, dorsal vagal, freeze, and ventral vagal, safe and secure.

So regulation is our capacity to support ourselves to move between these states. It is built into us as humans and it's also a set of skills that we can learn. So life will shunt us out of ventral vagal for our survival and that is a good and important thing. And our bodies, our thyroid, digestion, cognition, mood, adrenals, reproductive systems, those things all work best and we are most able to show up as our most anchored selves when we are in ventral vagal.

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Not in sympathetic, ready to run, and not in dorsal, totally collapsed. So regulation is that skill of bringing ourselves home to ourselves, of calming ourselves back to ventral vagal from sympathetic, bringing in some gentle activation energy to shift out of numbness towards ventral vagal.

This is regulating, like you do every time you're driving with the gas and the brakes on your car. More brake, less gas for sympathetic, more gas, less brake for dorsal.

Co-regulation is when we regulate our nervous system with another person, place, or thing, which has a calming effect on everyone involved. A ventral vagalizing effect, which please note that's not a real word in the literature. I literally just made ventral vagalizing up. It's a great term. It's official now.

And this effect of ventral vagalizing is a glorious perfect segue to this topic of nervous system resourcing because it's our goal when we're resourcing ourselves. Given that you're listening to a show about reclaiming your self-worth from externalizing habits like codependency, perfectionism, and people pleasing, it is vital to recognize that we need to anchor our healing work with resourcing.

Because this process is about you learning to show up for you, to validate and hold you, which most of us outsource to others for so long and it's vital that we experience ourselves as being able to ground and center us so that we can then learn how to co-regulate with others from the energy of wanting to connect with others.

Versus that old clawing, grasping, need for someone to calm us, someone hold me, someone tell me it's okay, someone tell me it'll all work out because we don't know how to do that for ourselves.

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Listen, I'm never about an individualistic framework to healing, but rather I see community as everything, as central, as vital. It's from a white settler colonialist framework that we've been taught that healing is an individual siloed experience. How patriarchal is that?

And I am all about coming back to the collective and we need to learn how to come correct. As externalizers, we don't know how to do that yet until we learn how to come back to ourselves. We need to individualize, to get solid in us because most of us have never really done that. So we start there and then flow outward.

Nerd alert, my darlings. Studies show that approximately 80% to 85% of the way our brains detect safety or threat is run entirely by that magnificent vagus nerve. And here, my nerdy nerds, it is using afferent motor neurons. And so those nerves effectively monitor the state of our internal organs and use the vagus to send messages to our brain that then create the downstream experience of fight, flight, freeze, and calm.

And remember, tensed up muscles, tensed up organs are not getting the blood flow and lymphatic flow they need. So as you tense up, your vagus nerve is like, okay, I clocked that, and sends that message up to the brain, she's in trouble.

So our bodies may then remain in that high alert amped up state, or that collapse state based on the somatic or bodily tension patterns our bodies have historically known. So if you've always clenched your jaw or held your shoulders up to your ears as a kid when a parent was scolding you or a teacher was mad at you, you likely do that now when a partner, a boss, a friend says those dreaded words, "We need to talk."

Your body then reacts like it always has, even though you're an adult and you're likely completely safe in this actual moment. That tense posture in

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your soma, in your body maintains the feeling and the story going from your organs, your muscles, right up that vagus nerve into your brain that there is something threatening that you need to be on alert to. Kind of wild, right?

All that nerdity talk is to say that when we have lived with stress, distress, or trauma in our lives, our bodies respond to things in the present moment, the here and now as though we were still in the past. We anxiously attach or avoidantly don't attach to new dates like they're our dad. We accept crumbs of love and care now in relationship because that's what we grew up used to. Or we get activated in our nervous system when we're actually triggered by something now that reminds our mind-body of something in the past and this activation happens at the level of mind and body at the same time.

And this will stay the way it's always been until you learn the tools we talk about each week here on *Feminist Wellness*; thought work paired with somatics. So you can learn to regulate and resource yourself in the moment you most need you.

Resourcing is a gorgeous tool for regulating or bringing yourself back into alignment with your glimmers, which we talked about in episode 62, and are the opposite of triggers.

So triggers shunt us from wherever are right up into sympathetic or dorsal. They activate our system. Glimmers are the things that bring us back to ventral vagal. When we connect with our nervous system resources, we are inviting our mind-body to attune to our glimmers, to sensations, however small of safety, of okay-ness, of goodness, and alright-ness and I'll survive this-ness.

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This is the work of showing our nervous systems that we can experience stress and can come back to calm. Like the ebb and flow of the ocean tides. Stress, resource, anchor in self, stress, resource, anchor in self.

Effectively, you're doing the work of showing yourself that you can actually have your own back in real time and it's so powerful. It shows us mind and body that we don't actually stay stuck in the extremes of experience in emotion, which I know is something I deeply feared during my deep, dark depressions.

My brain would worry that if I let myself truly cry it out, I would get stuck in the pit of despair, would die cold and alone on the mountain top, that all would in fact and it felt like a fact, all would be lost. Resourcing helps us to see that we really are the ones we've been waiting for when it comes to regulating our nervous system.

We really can bring ourselves right on home, which then helps us to start living in our whole bodies, and not just from the neck up. And that shows us thereby that it's safe to feel all of our feelings because we know we have the tools to ground ourselves, to come to believe that we do actually have a resilient nervous system and can move back and forth between action and calm, alertness and rest. A process that us nervous system nerds call pendulation. Moving between emotions, sensations, feeling and experiencing the edges, the extremes, and bringing ourselves on home.

As always, I am a huge fan of kitten-paw sized steps here. A process known officially as titration, meaning start low and go slow. My nurses out there know all about it. Effectively, it means not to jump in the deep end when you are trying on these practices, these remedies.

Don't start - I mean, you're an adult, do whatever you want, but I don't recommend that you start with a very traumatic or stressful thought to see if

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you can resource your way out of it. No, my tender ravioli, no. I'd recommend you practice resourcing with small things first. Minor inconveniences really, and can then take it from there.

And if you're living with trauma in your history, with PTSD, CPTSD, I'd like to strongly encourage you to work with a trauma therapist to help you incorporate this skill. So my darlings, let's talk remedies.

First, we start with pausing. I know, I know, it sounds too simple to be helpful, but it's not. And I'd be remiss not to quote Viktor Frankl here who said, "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

Because when you pause before reacting, you remember that you do in fact have a prefrontal cortex, that executive function center in your mind from which you can make the next right decision for your life, can attune to your breath, and can take a moment to bring your awareness to sensations in your body that come up with whatever stimulus or circumstance is happening in the present moment and what it's bringing up for and with you.

When you do that, you allow the magic and the science in your body to proceed and the sensations in your body will often move towards completion of the protective responses that you weren't able to carry out in the past.

This brings my mind right back to episode 17 which is all about completing the stress response cycle, which is a large part of what we do in our somatic work in Anchored, and is a process your body knows exactly how to do when you give it the space to.

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I want to invite you to notice how your body already does this. You feel stress and your body wants to release it through movement, like a gazelle on the Sahara, attempting to outrun a lion. If she doesn't get snacked upon, she'll play dead. She'll go into dorsal when the lion walks away to go get her cubs, she'll stand up and she'll shake her whole body to release all that movement potential, that stress that was inside her.

So let's use a real life example. If you're having a thought that a circumstance is stressful, you will then have that emotion, stress. And you might have sensations like feeling agitated or tense in your body, fidgety.

So your brilliant body completes that protective response of discharging energy by playing with your hair, biting your lip or nails, crumpling your straw wrapper when you're anxious on a date, or you may feel a desire to run, literally or emotionally.

Think about it. When you were a kid and things were stressful, could you escape your home? Could you run fast and away? Could you hit or scream or criticize back? Mostly that's a no because we were small. So all that energy stayed inside us and when it gets activated again in your adult life, of course it wants to come out. Your body wants to release tension because tension keeps you out of ventral vagal and tension keeps your organs, your body really and your mind from working optimally.

So we notice. Bring in awareness. Pause, attune to your breath. If you can move and want to, let yourself. Take a moment to go to the loo and shake your hands and your arms and your legs and let that energy out before resuming your conversation.

Remember that you, my love, are a mammal. Let yourself be one. And that brings us to my favorite resource, which is to get support within ourselves from outside of ourselves. Stay with me.

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It can be so helpful when we feel revved up or shut down to connect with a person, place, thing, being, entity in the world like a person we love, a pet, a plant, Mother Nature, Pachamama herself, but that's not always possible in real life. And the skill here, well, there's two, is to be able to recognize that you don't always need someone outside of you to be able to regulate, and so that brings us to the next skill, which is to learn how to connect energetically in your mind and your body with that someone, someplace, something, that calms, grounds, and centers you on your own.

Not because it's bad to rely on other people, but because other people are other people. They have their own lives to live and sometimes we can't get the support we want and need from others the millisecond we need it. And so we get to learn how to really do that for ourselves.

So we can get to a place in our nervous system where we can then ask someone else to co-regulate with us, when that person is available. This is particularly important to learn when we're working on shifting from anxious and avoidant attachment in our romantic relationships towards more secure attachment, which we talked about in so much detail in episode 128.

When our attachment systems get activated, we lose touch with ourselves. We lose our grounding in reality. And we need to learn how to anchor ourselves in ourselves so we can connect with the people in our lives in a centered way.

So this kind of nervous system resourcing is about connecting in your mind's eye with someone who brings you back to center. Let's go through some examples. So back in the pre-rona times, I used to lead two and three-day long breathwork workshops in Manhattan and we talked a lot about inner child healing, reparenting, and nervous system support.

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And in talking about resourcing ourselves, a participant named Dr. Maya Angelou as the figure they would bring to mind and would have a conversation with when they felt dysregulated. They would close their eyes and would picture her and would ask her advice and support, would ask for a hug. And so she served as a resource in absentia for that human when they were in need.

Dr. Angelou would remind them that they are not currently in their stressful childhood. They are an adult, and they can take care of themselves. They can hold themselves through all the feelings, they've done it before and they are doing it right now. Nothing to catastrophize about here, right?

I myself often resource by talking to my plants or to a tree outside my window, to the stars, the moon, the sun, the rain, all of creation can be a resource. And connecting with nature this way reminds us that we are nature. We are creation.

We are interdependent with the trees and the plants and the wind and we depend on one another's respiration for survival and that is a beautiful thing. When I was a little girl and I was upset, I would snuggle my pet rabbit. He was pretty much my bestest friend.

And while I didn't have the words then for the complexity of my feelings, because I was a child, I knew that spending time with him would calm me, so I did it. I would pet him and would tell him what was on my heart, my body knew to do that because bodies are amazing and brilliant.

In my adult life, long after my sweet bunny has gone back to Pachamama, I would use the memory of him as a resource. A benevolent, loving, unconditionally amazing energy that I would talk to and would pet in my mind's eye, closing my eyes and seeing him in my lap, feeling his fur in my

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fingers, connecting with that beautiful love we had. Letting that wash over and soothe me.

Let's use an attachment example next. Let's say you're newly dating someone and you're aware of your historical habit of anxious attachment and you find yourself starting to get activated, wanting more contact than your date is giving you, feeling like this deep longing and missing for them after like, an hour after your date ends, starting to feel like you need them.

That is a great time to pause and to go inward before you get ramped up into sympathetic or drop down into that dorsal no one wants me place. That's when you can connect with the energy of someone you feel purely positive about, to invite them in to support you in that moment.

Maybe it's a tia, an abuela, a teacher who really believed in you, your coach or therapist, and you can picture that person soothing you, reminding you to get present with your body, to orient to time and place, to be here now. You can talk to them and listen to their response, and you can practice receiving their support and love and care to remind yourself that it's okay to ask for help, which I know is a thing that can often feel super challenging for most of us externalizers.

And in so doing, you can feel their love permeate you. Reminding you that you have your own back no matter what happens with this date. Same goes for avoidant attachment. When you feel that drive to push away, you can bring yourself back to a place of deep love, maybe a field that you love, maybe a waterfall at the end of a beautiful hike, maybe downtown Hong Kong.

It really doesn't matter what the place is, who the person is, what the moment or experience is where you feel peaceful. Just connect with it. Bring yourself back to that deep love and allow that connection to soothe

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your mind, body, and spirit by giving your nervous system something to hold on to, something to ground with.

So the work of building nervous system resourcing for our nervous system is to connect with whatever energy, person, place, or thing that brings us into ventral vagal. A glimmer we can communicate with, talk to, be present with.

And listen, it may sound silly to talk to your long dead grandma or a poet you've never met or to get support from a plant, and to that I'll say, okay, fine, let it be silly. But just do it. Let the world show up for you. Let you show up for you.

Get and be present for yourself in whatever way you can so that your nervous system knows it is safe to trust you, that you are the most loving and reliable parent you could ever have, the most accepting one too. And from there, you can start to widen your idea of what you can handle in your nervous system and you can experience yourself as being able to come home to you. And that is one of the most beautiful gifts possible in this life, to know that you can anchor yourself deeply in you.

My darling, if you're loving the show and everything you're learning, last call to join us for Anchored, my six-month program where we dive into and get really practical about using these kinds of resources and so much more to really and truly know that we are our most loving parent, to really deeply support and nurture and care for our inner children, to soothe our attachment systems and step into greater security there, to become real mavens and marvels at using thought work so we can shift our story in our minds and our bodies.

By the time this show airs, it will be for real your last chance to apply for this round of Anchored. So if you've been wanting to join us, the time is

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literally right now. Like today, like don't delay. Head on over to victoriaalbina.com/anchored to learn more and to join us now.

Alright my darlings, this has been a fun one. You know I love nerding out. Let's do what we do. If you feel so moved to put a gentle hand on your heart, your belly, wherever your body calls you, I'll invite you to do so now.

Attune to your beautiful breath, remember that too is a resource. Our breath is a beautiful resource. 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 darling. Know that you are deeply resourced and I will 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.