

Ep #185: Disorganized Attachment



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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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. The newest group of Anchored folks is well on their way. We are having an amazing time getting to know each other, hanging out, starting our dance parties, our group somatic practices and live coaching. It has been such a delight. I love getting to know you all, and getting to coach you is just a dream come true.

Welcome back to this mini-series on attachment. Two weeks ago, we talked about attachment in general; how changeable our attachment habits are. and we spent some time on anxious attachment. Last week, we discussed avoidant attachment. This week, we're talking about, what many in the psychological wellness world call the most complex of the attachment habits, which is disorganized attachment.

After we talk about that in some detail, I'll close this out by talking about some important notes about how we think about attachment. It is really important to me to say, upfront, this conversation, I'm going to say this again later, it's not a replacement for therapy. It's not a replacement for working one-on-one with a professional, who can help you to find some healing, which is so, so important. I just wanted to say that super-duper clearly; you know, safety first, always.

Let's dive in. Much like in avoidant and anxious attachment, the disorganized style tends to start in childhood, when a child isn't attuned to the way they need to be. Which can happen with loving parents who just don't have the skills and attunement to show up for their child the way they

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need to. Often, because of their own attachment style and what was modeled for them in childhood.

Our smart nervous systems, which take form in the first seven years of life, scan the family unit constantly. And smartly, decide things like: It's not safe to be me here, or my authentic self isn't lovable here, or my needs aren't honored so I just won't have any, or other people have a lot of needs and it's overwhelming to my nervous system, so I won't have needs. I can't handle it, I can't hang, I'm overwhelmed if other people have needs.

All of this, in an attempt to stay safe in our bodies. Disorganized attachment contains elements of both anxious and avoidant attachment, and is also known as fearful avoidant. It often comes about when one's caregivers, who are our primary source of safety as children, are not actually safe. When they're emotionally immature, inconsistent. Like when they run hot and cold; are loving and all about their kids sometimes. And sometimes, there's no attention, or even food in the house.

When caregivers are untrustworthy, and especially when one's parent figures are actually dangerous, when there is fear for one's physical or emotional safety, when there is abuse or trauma in the home, and when kiddos aren't met with the love and care we all need after traumatic events; including developmental trauma, which is a whole topic for another time.

A cycle starts where a child has a normal natural basic human need, such as being hungry; tired, in pain, upset, and that need isn't recognized or met. So, in response, understandably, they feel angry, more upset, rejected, abandoned, sad.

If they don't get relief or support or care from their caregivers, and the need remains unmet, then their smart child brain starts to tell the story that they are not okay. The world is not safe. Their caregivers, or adults in general, are not to be trusted. And, that makes sense as an explanation.

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If those things weren't true, then their caregiver would take care of them, right? Hurts to think about it. So, adults who have disorganized styles tend to have a very negative self-concept, born of this story that they weren't worthy of love as wee ones, or they would have gotten the care they needed.

Remember, my darling, that humans are born pretty much unable to take care of ourselves. We need our adults to meet our needs. When a kiddo, in all their brilliance, recognizes not only that their needs won't be met, but that their caregivers are actually dangerous or to be feared, then they may develop a disorganized attachment style. Which shows up as that fearful avoidant in adulthood, because of course they do.

Kids who grew up knowing their parents can't be trusted or are people to fear, find it super hard to trust people as adults, as a way to protect their own tenderoni underbellies. Adults with this style of relating are often inconsistent in their own behavior, and can unwittingly replicate the painful ways of relating they experienced in childhood.

As mammals, folks with disorganized attachment, of course, crave and need connection and closeness, just like the rest of us. That biological, deep, human need from their nervous system is met with a deep distrust of connection and tendency to run from it. Again, totally understandable.

Of course, they find it hard to self-soothe, to open up to others, to be vulnerable, to communicate directly, to trust others, to not fear intimacy or closeness, to have boundaries that are healthy and loving, and tend to overshare intimate details with strangers, also known as trauma dumping.

They find it challenging to create deep and lasting connections with friends or lovers, and they're always expecting things to go to hell in a handbasket, because that's always been the way so why would it be any different now.

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A lack of coherence around social engagement or interactions with others is a hallmark of this disorganized attachment style. Much like how a kid, who develops this style, never knew what they were going to get from their caregivers, you often don't know what you're going to get from the adult with this style of relating.

These folks don't just avoid intimacy and connection, like an avoidant attachment. They fear it, like in this really deep bodily somatic way, because the people they looked to for safety as children, were actually unsafe, or to be feared. They expect rejection or abandonment, which is different from fearing it. In their minds, in their bodies, it's just what is and will be for them.

The literature shows that folks with this attachment style, often experienced depression, are more likely to be folks with substance use concerns, or borderline personality disorder. We can problematize the whole psychiatric diagnostic complex later. And for now, I'm just going to leave the borderline thing here, or this is going to be super disjointed, and a 473-hour long show.

If this is resonating with you, as you, or someone you love, I want to pause to send you so much compassion, love, and care. It can be really challenging to live from this attachment style. I want to say it clearly; you can heal, you can shift this, you can develop more secure ways of moving through the world.

While I'm a coach, I'm a nurse practitioner first. I recognize that there are times when coaching is not the answer, not the first answer, it can be the second and this is one of them. This is when working with a trauma therapist is vital.

While someone with this style of attachment can absolutely benefit from coaching, just about everyone can, it's vital to start by working with a very

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skilled and experienced trauma therapist first. Then, coaching can come in later. Once there's more stability, and security there.

If this description is sounding like someone you know, I'm sending you tons of compassion and care too, because it can be challenging to be with someone who has this blueprint for living, because they can be unpredictable, suspicious, confusing, and even frightening.

And, as we're talking about all of these attachment styles, what's really helpful is both to identify yourself and your habits, and those of the people you love. So you can understand what's going on for them, can bring them the compassion. I think I've said that word 2,000 times in this short bit of episode. But compassion is so key, acceptance, love, curiosity, care. So that you can show up for yourself and for the people you love, from a more understanding place.

So, my darling, what are some remedies here? Well, A, number one; trauma therapy. Just going to say that twice, because trauma therapy. What follows are some ideas of things that could be helpful, and 0.0% of them are replacement for therapy. Okay?

B, number two; nervous system mapping and regulation. Like the valve on a pipe regulates how much water is let in and out of that system, regulating your nervous system means balancing the internal valve, right? I generally talk about it like a car, how much gas, and how much break? The sympathetic activation, or fight-or-flight, and the dorsal, or shutdown, disconnected, freeze response, are the gas and the break here.

When we can map our nervous system and we can learn to regulate ourselves, then we can befriend, thank, and honor all of our nervous system responses. And, can give our bodies the space they need to be able to come back into ventral with and for ourselves. Where ventral is the safe and social, calm and collected, present part of the nervous system.

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The more you can understand what's going on in your individual nervous system, in a moment where you feel like you've stepped out of presence; you're anxious, you're worried, you're stressed, you're suspicious, you're checked-out, you're shut off to yourself and the people you love. The more you can understand when and where, and how that's happening.

When, in your menstrual cycle? When, before or after meals? In what settings? With what people? What was said? How was your sleep? Have you been eating enough? Have you been eating too much?

Like, once you can start to really get a clear map, the more you can regulate your nervous system, and can start to build secure attachment with yourself first, by showing you that you have your back. This is key, for all of the insecure attachment styles. Learning to regulate, befriend, and soothe your nervous system is a vital, vital first step in healing.

Next. Folks with this style don't trust anyone, which again, makes sense. Learning to trust is key for healing from a disorganized attachment. So, if this is you, I'll invite you to consider starting to build trust, where it's easiest. The following may sound trite or dumb or whatever, but if you have a fundamental distrust of everyone and everything, starting this small may be necessary.

I will invite you to start with water. Decide that you are going to trust the faucet in your bathroom, to provide you with water; clean, safe water of different temperatures. I'll invite you to say it out loud or in your mind, "Faucet, I am deciding to trust you to provide cold water, warm water, hot water." Decide that you are putting trust in this thing as a way to show your body that you can, and that you'll get what you want. You'll get what you need.

Then, turn the tap on and experience, not just in your mind but in your body, by putting your hand under that running water, as long as it's not very

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hot, that it's safe to trust. That the tap will show up the way the faucet claims to. That it's safe for you to trust anything in this world.

You can do this with any utility, turning the lights on. Or, any appliance in your home; turn the microwave on. Show your inner child what happens when you actively decide to trust these things to do what they say they will. And, you can use that as a springboard towards trusting sentient creatures.

You can also start by deciding to try out... And listen to my language here, right? We're creating a lot of spaciousness; potentially be right for you, potentially work, potentially not. I'm just proffering options, and you can see what resonates and what doesn't.

So, you can start by deciding to practice trying to trust a pet or another animal, either the ones that live with you or pets in your neighborhood. If you don't live with an animal, you probably no one lives near you. You can see what it's like to connect with a dog; to make contact with them, and to trust them not to bite you. And of course, if the dog isn't your dog check in with their human first, to confirm that that is an unlikely scenario, okay?

When you can practice allowing yourself to begin, to experience trusting trustworthy creatures this way, and you can be super intentional about it. Deciding, saying, "I'm actively choosing to trust this animal, as a way to build up a capacity in my nervous system to eventually trust humans."

From there, you can work towards building trust with humans. Again, as an intentional and thoughtful process. I can trust that the crossing guard in front of the school will generally wave, be kind, say, "Hello. Good morning. Good afternoon," because she always has. So, reframing it from being a given, to being a choice you're making to trust her to be who she has shown you to be, most of the time. Of course, doing all of this with your therapist guidance and blessing, okay?

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From this style, there is a deep fear of speaking your truth, so you bottle it up hard, until you explode. This is a place where journaling and self-talk can be super helpful, because oftentimes folks get super out of touch with how they feel. This extends well beyond the disorganized attachment. However, so many of us are out of touch with how we feel in any given moment, particularly moments of stress.

If you don't know how you're feeling, how can you possibly expect yourself to express those feelings? Doing daily emotions-focused journaling... So, this is less; Dear Diary, today, I went to the mall with my friends and we got Orange Julius™. And Meghan got her ears pierced at Claire's™. And more; I felt angry when... I felt sad when... I felt happy and grateful when...

So, engaging with daily emotions-focused journaling, daily mindfulness, and remember, meditation doesn't work for everyone. But it does work wonders for many of us. Meditation, if it works for you. It works wonderfully, for me; it's been a life changer.

Or, another mindfulness practice, like thoughtfully connecting with your feet as you walk, that could be helpful. As well as telling yourself how you feel throughout the day, like actively naming it; it's called "affect labeling". I'm going to do a whole show about this. But it's an evidence-based modality, affect labeling, for getting to know how you feel, by simply labeling it.

And, these are some small ways that increase your self-connection incrementally, and they can help you to start feeling safer, in knowing what you're feeling and expressing it to yourself. From there... We're going to take little, teeny, tiny kitten steps on this, not big baby foot size steps, kitten steps. From expressing it to yourself, then you can start to tell your plants, your animals, your crystals, the Earth, the squirrel out the window, how you feel, and can start to build trust that that can be safe.

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And from there, you can practice telling a human. Being really thoughtful, of course, about who that human is, right? Picking someone who you have a level of trust and faith in, that they're going to show up in a loving way. Slowly, but surely. Okay?

Something common in folks across the neurodiversity spectrum; what's up my ADHD dears? As well as in folks with disorganized attachment, is rejection sensitivity. Which means that our brains and bodies see signs of rejection that may, but likely don't actually, exist. And is to say, like, someone raises an eyebrow, and all of a sudden, you're like; Oh, my God, he hates me.

Knowing this has been so helpful in my own life. Because when my body says, "I'm being rejected," I can remember that my brain's first reaction to seemingly otherwise meaningless gestures, or eyebrow movements, or words from others, I can remember that my brain's likely overreacting.

I say that with love, right? I honor all the fields in my body. And I know that rejection sensitivity is a real thing, and I have a degree of it. I can lovingly honor that reaction without believing it. From there, I can step into a more balanced and loving place, to actually evaluate the situation.

Instead of just believing that old hypervigilance, that leads to misinterpreting and overreacting to things like facial expressions, gestures, moods, tones of voice, word choice. And I can find compassion for myself and others, and can ground myself in my nervous system.

If you are relating to disorganized attachment, or if you're on the neurodiversity spectrum, or someone you love is meeting any of those criteria, knowing about rejection sensitivity and being really thoughtful about it, can be really helpful.

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What's key here, is remembering that your body is doing this because it loves you. It wants to keep you from getting hurt again, which at its core is so lovely of it. And the bummer is, it ends up sabotaging your day, your relationships so much. But the intent is loving, and the more I remember that, the more compassion, curiosity, and care I can have towards myself.

I really want to live a life, and strive to live a life, where I let the three C's; compassion, curiosity, and care guide me. This is where nervous system regulation comes in again. So, you can honor your reaction, and can respond from ventral vagal. Tons more on nervous system basics, and primers on what these words mean in Episode 174 and so many others, because the nervous system is completely my jam. Okay, and also my jelly, let's be real. I'm such a goober, and I love that about me.

I also, find it super helpful to remember the things that lead a kiddo to have secure attachment; feeling safe, attuned to, listened to, being comforted, being valued for who we are unconditionally, and not just for what we do. For many of us, touch.

And so, this is your homework, regardless of your attachment style. To ask yourself; what are the things that make me feel safe, attuned to, listened to, comforted, valued? If you come up, like, "That's cool," and potentially pretty expectable, in that case then, I'd ask a friend or loved one, who has a more secure way of relating, what helps them to feel these things in the world.

Then, the second part of the homework begins. Which is to start to give yourself the gift of listening to yourself, comforting yourself, valuing you. List out the things you value about you. Attune to you, which means listening in to your body, your intuition, and learning to trust it. To create safety for yourself, which for me, includes healthy, self-loving, boundaries.

Part of that process is learning to interrupt your internal negative narrator. That brain gremlin that tells you; that you suck, you're no good, you're a

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loser, etc. Now, my goal isn't to turn that voice off, I don't know that that's completely possible, but rather, to learn to turn the volume down on it. To let that voice, know that you appreciate what it's trying to do for you, but you don't believe it anymore.

This is when I would recommend having a written-out list of the thoughts you're choosing to believe, instead of those brain gremlin voices. So, for example, instead of, "I'm total garbage," you might counter with, and listen carefully, my love, "There are some things about me that are not terrible." Do you see how that's just like, a quarter of a percent more better? Right? Again, we don't lie to ourselves in this family. We don't BS ourselves. We don't, "Like, positive hashtags only." Like blah, no.

Instead, we work incrementally, because we work with the nervous system. "There are some things, or there is one thing, about me that, in this moment, I can believe is not completely terrible." From there, you can slowly work your way towards believing that you're wonderful, because you are. But slowly. This is a process known as "bridge thoughts", that we practice a lot in Anchored. It's super powerful, for sure.

I want to pause here, my love. There is so much we can do to support ourselves, and to work towards a more secure way of relating, regardless of where we're coming from. I want to clearly say this: Shifting towards a more secure attachment style, is so much more about the journey than it is some kind of 'everything's roses, and daisies, and puppies who don't bite' destination.

Because having a secure attachment style is not a thing you have. It's a way of living and relating. It's an ebb and a flow. It's about building more secure internal attachment. And then, practicing that; showing up from there, with one safe creature or person, and then another, and then another.

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It's not about waving some magic wand over your head and all of a sudden, you're secure everywhere. Because there will be times when your nervous system and inner children are on board, for you showing up more securely, and times when they are not. That's okay. Normal and expectable. Remember, compassion, curiosity, care.

Stepping into more secure attachment is the process of maturing into ourselves, and out of our childhood wounding. And it takes time, attention, love and care. So, we can step out of our habitual, protective, defensive ways of being, and into a deeper and deepening knowledge that we have our own backs. So, we don't need to be guarded against pain or rejection, because we know we will always have our own backs.

We'll give ourselves the grace, by recognizing that healing is never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever linear, which we talked about in Episode 80. And committing to doing this work and regulating your nervous system, even just listening to this show, means you're on the path to healing.

Finally, regardless of your habitual or historical attachment style, I'll caution us not to globalize or catastrophize. To be thoughtful to not over ascribe everything in life to your attachment style. This holds true to whatever corner of psychology, in the psychological literature, you're currently investigating.

Our brains do this thing where we learn about anything, and we get really excited about that thing because we believe it's the one and only key to our salvation. And then, we can get a little obsessional about it, right? Then, we project that onto everything. We're like; oh, everything is my attachment. Which like, a lot of things probably are, but sometimes not everything is.

For example, if you've been dating someone and you have this texting, you know, you've got a little rapport, you're texting frequently; it's got a cadence to it. And all of a sudden, they aren't responding to your text the way they

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usually do. That gasp inside you, may not just be an anxious attachment showing up, maybe something has shifted for them and you're seeing the reality of that. Maybe it's not just you, but they're actually pulling away.

So too, with an avoidant habit. Like, if someone who you're dating or you're in a relationship with, all of the sudden is voicing tons more wants and needs, is asking a lot more of you than they ever have, is making demands or setting ultimatums. Maybe your reaction isn't just coming from an avoidant attachment, maybe something has shifted in them or in the relationship.

So yes, our attachment style matters a lot. Learning about it, working with it, moving towards secure attachment is super-duper important. And, I just want to caution us to not go into black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking. Like we talked about in Episode 147, not to always take the burden on ourselves or to blame ourselves, right? Because the work here is about balance.

It's about asking what part of this is coming from me? What part of this is actually external? Or, is actually coming from another person? What is actually mine to own? Because remember, from our codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing thinking, we take on way too much in this life, as our problem; our fault, our doing, ours to fix.

We get to break that habit by pausing, slowing it down. Which is what somatic or body-based practices are amazing at, for helping us to slow down our unintentional habitual reactions. So, we can get curious about our thoughts, our feels, and can ask smart questions about what the “what” is? What part of this is my habitual reaction from my attachment? And what part is an actual change in how this person is showing up?

We get to step out of that habit and to find balance. And to say, “Part of this is me, and how I habitually respond or react. Part of this may be my

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dysregulation in my nervous system, in this moment. But I'm not taking all of it on without evaluating it. I am not going to ascribe everything to my attachment style carte blanche. Instead, I'm going to be thoughtful. I'm going to be measured. I'm going to really take a thoughtful look at what the "what" is, before just laying down some blanket statement saying that it's all me."

Because that doesn't serve you or your relationships. And, keeps us stuck in that cycle of thinking there is something inherently wrong with or broken about us. That, that is where thought work comes in beautifully. To help us to really see our own habitual thoughts, to start to gain more intimacy. And from there, self-trust can grow and blossom. That's a beautiful thing, indeed.

Thanks for listening to this episode, and this mini-series on attachment theory. There is so much more to say, because attachment impacts, well, pretty much every corner of our lives in some way, right? In our relationships, for sure. What is life, but relationships? So, more to do.

I'll do a show soon where I share some secure attachment scripts. Because knowing what to say is super important, especially when that wasn't modeled for us in childhood. Well, why don't we just say childhood? I think it's cuter than childhood.

So, if you aren't subscribed to the show, I highly recommend you do so. So, that the episodes download right to your phone each week, without you having to remember to do a darn thing on a Thursday morning. Isn't that convenient?

While we're on the subject, if you are enjoying the show, I'd be so grateful if you could take a moment to write a written review of the show. Give her the old five stars, subscribe, and share on your social media. And, be sure to

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tag me because it's so fun. It's so fun. I give good 'Gram over @VictoriaAlbina Wellness.

Finally, we have started enrolling for the November cohort of Anchored; my six-month coaching, and nervous system, and somatics, and breathwork program, which is very exciting, indeed. You can learn more and can apply at VictoriaAlbina.com/anchored. The application itself asks some deep questions that can be really helpful to go through, so why not apply? You have literally nothing to lose. I'd love to have you join me there.

Anchored is my absolute favoritist place on earth. It's the most incredible community of loving, wonderful, beautiful souls. And, we do really deep and powerful work. I'd love to share all of that with you.

All right, my darling, my perfect love. Let's do what we do. A gentle hand on your heart, should you feel so moved. 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!