

Ep #203: Getting Anchored: Inner Child Science



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. This week, I am beyond delighted to share Episode 153 with you once more. I was thinking a lot about our inner children, which is the topic of Episode 153: Inner Child Science, a lot, because it's been coming up in Anchored, my 6-month program.

It is so incredibly important and healing to get to know our inner children. Those little energies within us that drive the bus, until they learn to trust that whole, adult, healthy, capable us, can in fact, drive the bus of our own lives. And so, they work really, really hard to try to keep us safe and happy... Well, not always happy, but at least, safe, right?... However they know best.

And when we can cultivate a really loving, beautiful relationship with our inner children, in my experience and the experience of hundreds of clients of mine who've come through Anchored, life just gets more and more better. So, I wanted to take a moment to nerd out on the topic with you some, today. And, you'll know we'll dive in even deeper on future shows.

Hope you enjoy it. It's going to be a good one.

I was on a call with a client from Anchored, my six-month program the other day. And she told me that she was really struggling with the whole concept of inner child work because she felt like it was just a tool to - and I quote her - blame our parents for the way we are, and to thereby shirk responsibility for ourselves.

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So I wanted to talk about this because if she's thinking it, then some of you may be thinking it too. So in this episode, I'll start out as my nerds love to do, by defining terms. Expanding on episodes 25 and 26 about inner child work to get quite a bit nerdier for you.

We'll talk about what inner child work is and why I think it can be incredibly useful. We'll talk about what inner adult work, which is part and parcel of inner child work is, and then we'll talk about what inner child work isn't. Namely, simply blaming your parents and calling it a day.

Alright, let's dive in. I'm going to nerd so hard. Are you ready? Nerd alert, my darlings. Let's start with defining terms. So inner child work is basically working with our limbic system. In evolutionary terms - and I'm going to try to keep this complex topic so simply, my darlings.

The limbic system is one of the oldest parts of our brains. And the brains of fishes, amphibians, reptiles, and other mammals. While there is some controversy around exactly which brain structures are part of the limbic system because it wouldn't be science without differing opinions, most would agree that the limbic is comprised of the amygdala, hippocampus, thalamus, hypothalamus, basal ganglia, and the cingulate gyrus.

The limbic system does the most basic and vital things for us with the goal of keeping us alive, which is very polite of it, if you do ask me. Well, within our framework of nice and kind, it's very, very much kind.

And the limbic is focused on both behaviors and emotional responses around feeding, reproduction, caring for our babies and young, and it's the boss of telling us when to get the hell out of dodge, a.k.a our fight or flight responses.

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Because the limbic system is so keenly focused on survival, it can go into hyperdrive when it think there's a life threat situation, which used to be lion attacks, or marauders on the horizon. But these days, it's more likely to get activated if, for example, you're in an intense processing conversation with your partner and you say something vulnerable and they roll their eyes.

Your adult brain may be like, "Oh my God, they just rolled their eyes. It's not like actually a life threat." But your limbic system may believe otherwise. And you may go from like, two out of 10 annoyed to 473 out of 10 pissed off and defensive.

Your body may react like your actual life is being threatened. Thanks, limbic system. So when we're talking about inner child work, we're talking about those responses that come straight out of limbic-ville.

And the goal of inner child work in my life and with my clients in Anchored is to get to know your automatic, habitual responses more. And to thereby create a map of how your limbic system, how your body reacts in a whole host of situations.

So you can create a new and more supportive relationship with yourself and with the many beautiful and complex parts of you. So you can write a new life story, a new way to respond to the world that serves you as an adult and allows you to manage your mind around how you perceive the world.

So you can respond instead of reacting to the people, places, and experiences of life. So you can down-regulate from thinking everything's a lion, into recognizing what's really just a tabby cat. So let's talk about some of the hints that inner child work could be useful for you.

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I mean, first of all, it could simply be because you want to connect more with play, with simple pleasure, with joy and vibrancy in your life. Or it could be because your life feels challenging and you want more tools for managing your reactions.

Like if you have a chronic or recurrent painful patterns in your relationships with romantic partners, with friends, with coworkers, family members, strangers even. Perhaps you get activated in your nervous system, also known as triggered easily and/or have intense or outsized emotional experiences or reactions that keep you feeling like you are the effect of your emotions and not the other way around.

Those intense reactions can keep us feeling defensive, always questioned, like everything is the Spanish Inquisition. Like we're constantly being attacked, scolded, or when we feel like folks are out to get us, judged, ignored, neglected, fearful that we'll be abandoned.

Feeling like you just don't fit in, all of these can be so common for us. Coming from our codependent thought habits, which tell us that we're not worthy of love if others don't validate us. So we, our inner children and our limbic systems are on high alert, also known as hypervigilance, for any signs that we aren't being valued or validated because we link that in our minds with a true threat to our lives, even when it's so far from the truth.

Inner child work can be supportive in helping you to get anchored in yourself, in ventral vagal, which is the safe and social part of our nervous system. The place where we are the most grounded, the most secure, and feel the most safe being in connection with ourselves and others.

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The concept of inner child work has been around since the 70s and it was popularized in the 90s by John Bradshaw and his book, *Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child*.

And some key takeaways, both from Bradshaw's work and my own inner child work over the years are, one, that our emotions are information from our bodies sent via our nervous system. And we can be in communication with our emotions, so we can recognize that they're not always a fixed truth.

That is, we can - and here's my language on this - we can recognize love and honor the information from our nervous system and we can shift and change our relationship to that energy, to that emotional state so we can change the way we feel.

Two, Bradshaw talks about how we can be the author of our own life. And one of the pathways in is coming into relationship with our inner children through our limbic and nervous systems.

That is to say we don't have to stay stuck in our childhood experiences and we can honor what was. What I'll add in there is that the ways our nervous system has been patterned is not just secondary to our family of origin and our early childhood experiences there.

Part and parcel of the story that our nervous system tells is based in our conditioning, our socialization, our experiences learning how to survive in bodies that may have been marginalized.

To take it back to a really simple, quick example of a story in which we were taught one thing is true, is a fact, is something we should react to in our nervous system and we can shift it is the issue of creepy crawlers.

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So I grew up with a father who is - God, I love Jorje. He is deeply uncomfortable with bugs, spiders, anything of the creepy realm. And in turn, growing up with those messages, I built up a quality dose of arachnophobia.

And it is a thing that I have chosen to do a lot of work on on the cognitive, somatic, nervous system, limbic, inner child, all those levels. So it's not like I'm thrilled and delighted when there's one in my home. Oh my God, and if one touches me, that's the final frontier of this work.

I don't like it. But I don't freak out about it the same way that I used to. That is to say I don't get as activated in my nervous system because I've done all this work on it. So I'm mostly able to respond instead of react to our eight-legged relations.

I can show up as my adult self and not the child who is taught this is a thing to fear. And we can apply this same work from this really silly sweet example to whatever story we were taught about ourselves as children.

About what it means to be a good boy or a good girl, the stories we were taught about you have to be a boy or a girl, the stories we were taught about our potential, about who we are, what we're capable of, the stories about our worth, our value, those stories are not the end of our stories.

We don't have to stay stuck in our childhood experiences and we can honor what was. Three, duality. We can experience happiness, purpose, drive, while at the same time holding space for deep sadness, grief, and sorrow in our bodies.

So we don't have to run away from feeling sad because the sad doesn't erase the glad, the happy, the pleasure, the joy. We can in fact hold space

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for both. And an inner child, inner adult work gives us a framework for doing that.

So inner child work involves getting into conversation with the young person we once were from an understanding that that energy formed within you and your limbic system, those cassette tapes in your brain carry your unhealed wounds, your unmet needs, as well as your joy, play, spontaneity, dreams.

And we can use tools like meditation, visualization, writing, storytelling, play, to get in contact with our inner children. As we get to know our inner children and note that I'm not saying inner child because there are so many of them within us. We can reparent them, which means we show up as our version of the most loving, supportive adult we need to take care of our little ones that need our love and care.

Here's an important place to pause and to say that recently in Anchored, we were talking about this concept. It's a big part of what we do. And someone in the program was sharing that she really just cannot connect in with the concept of a human being her parent.

Because the whole concept of human parents is very painful for her, very triggering. So I asked her who she does feel safe with, who she does feel comforted by, who she does feel like really gets her and shows up for her with unconditional love and she didn't skip a beat.

She said, "Dog." And I said a specific dog? And she said, sure, but all of them. The concept of dog, dogs, those magical, amazing beasts are the vessel of love, the embodiment of love and care and support for her.

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So while I have an inner adult, she has an inner dog, and that is a beautiful thing. So as we're talking, and I'm talking about inner parents, inner adults, if that's not resonating for you, let it be your inner whatever form feels loving, supporting.

So we can create a version of our inner child who has gotten what they need and feels more healed and less reactive, who is able to communicate, love, and play openly and freely, and who is not swirling in the same self-consciousness, shame, doubt, guilt, anger, grief, et cetera, that we may either have felt as children or numbed out to and escaped from.

When intense emotional reactions come up, when self-criticism or self-consciousness comes up, when the behaviors that were once helpful in childhood but are less helpful now, that are often called maladaptive behaviors come up, we can call on that healed inner child to stand by our side.

Along with our own most loving inner adult presence, so we can meet those challenges in a different way. So how does this whole thing work and how are we not just blaming our parents here for messing us up and creating all of these reactive little inner children within us?

Well, first, are you ready for your second nerd alert? My darling, get the safety goggles on, and for goodness sake, no open-toed shoes in the lab. Oh my goodness, who am I? I'm just an actual walking nerd alert, that's who.

I really slayed me with that no open-toes shoes in the lab. Anyway, come on back, brain. Check this science out, my darlings, it's so cool. So the limbic system processes many of our emotions but here's the wicked cool part. It doesn't actually have a firm grasp on reality.

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These survival-focused brain structures, particularly the amygdala or the fear center, function well below the level of conscious awareness. And they decide what's about to murder you and what's not based on your thoughts. Wow, right?

Your thoughts and your perception of the outside world through your nervous system, also known as exteroception. So any time you hear in, it's from inside of you, and ex is outside of you. So interoception is monitoring your organs, your nervous system inside. Exteroception is the world outside.

So as always, when we're talking about our chronic, habitual thinking, we know that our thoughts and our perceptions are filtered by our socialization, our conditioning, our survival skills, our family blueprint, which means that the meaning we give things in the world are perceptions. They're skewed by our thought habits long before they hit our limbic system.

And catch this. Your limbic system takes what you tell it and treats it like gospel. It just believes it. Not unlike a little kid might believe a beloved parent or teacher when they tell you that eight-leggeds, they're really out to get you.

Wow, right? So this is where thought work comes in. This is quite frankly the basis of thought work and why it works so magically. Because if you change the input, what you're feeding into your limbic system, you can change the output and your emotional reaction using your neocortex, which is where our unconscious thought resides.

And specifically, the prefrontal cortex we're always talking about here, which is part of the neocortex. And it's where we do our executive function,

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where we create new thoughts, no matter what you've habitually thought in the past.

And this is where your most loving, guiding, caring adult parent lives. So if your brain says, "You are such a failure, you didn't get that job," and that's the input you're delivering to your limbic system and your inner children, then of course your inner children are like, "Yeah, okay, sounds like that's a fact so I agree with it. I mean, it's like how we always got Bs in school, which was totally unacceptable at home. Okay, inner child reporting for duty, I will begin sending out those freak-out neurotransmitters throughout the animal now. Everybody pay attention. We didn't get a job, one thing went wrong, and we are an abject failure. Trigger depression series, trigger anxiety."

So your body reacts like you're being attacked because that's what your brain just told it to do. And the magic is this is where you can step in as your own most loving and emotionally mature adult to say hold on a second tiger, remember what Vic taught us in episodes 39 and 40?

Failure is only a bad thing if you let it stop you from moving forward. Failure only means that you tried and you didn't get the result you wanted. But you tried. And that's the most beautiful thing. And darling, you can try again using the information you learned from this beautiful failure instead of saying, "I failed, game over," which is when failure doesn't serve you.

No need to repeat those perfectionist cycles, my love. Failure is a normal part of growth. So you decide the thoughts you feed into your inner children, and they believe you. That's how thought work works. By changing the input, the T, the thought you think on purpose.

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Knowing that your brain will repeat the old stories, often we need to work with a thought for a while and combine it with somatics, body-based practices, which we've talked about a lot here and will of course be talking about a lot again and again because I love some somatics.

But we need to bring both in so we can engage our brains' amazing neuroplasticity to change those habitual input patterns for good. Pretty rad, right?

And what's so dope is that the limbic system doesn't know what's real. It doesn't know that the love, care, and support that you are creating in your own conscious brain is not any more real than the painful story that you used to put in.

So it takes in the story that you are loved, you are safe, you're okay, you're doing great, and it believes that to be just as real as any negative or painful story that used to be on repeat in your mind.

One of my favorite tools and one that we use in the Anchored program a lot is called a plot twist. This is based on our understanding from the research that memories are not verbatim. They're a reconstruction.

They're your brain trying to piece together what happened and make meaning out of it, and that's a huge part of what this human experience is. It's meaning-making.

And so every time something activates an old memory, a story, a time where you were criticized, you were judged, you were told you weren't enough, not good enough, whatever it may be, you're too fat, you're too thin, you're too loud, you're too quiet, you can use your amazing prefrontal cortex to give your limbic system a new ending to that story.

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How cool is that? You can literally just say I am going to shift the story. And stay with me here. I'm not saying lie to yourself. I'm not saying to be like, "He was mean to me, let me shift the story and that's okay," because that's some BS, right?

He was mean to you and that's not okay. I mean, that sucks and I'm sorry that happened. And you can put a new ending into the story within your own mind. He was mean to me, that was not okay, that was painful and that sucks and shouldn't have happened.

And I grew up and I learned how to be my own most loving adult parent and to give myself the validation, care, and love that I wanted and needed as a child. So you really can visualize or daydream a new experience. Because to your limbic system, it really doesn't matter.

So we can use active visualization and daydreaming on purpose. We can use storytelling to create a new narrative. Thought work effectively, to lay down more adaptive memories and experiences to lean into the strength that you gained.

We can use the science of how the brain works to help ourselves feel better in the now and the moving forward, understanding that the one job of our inner children is to be vigilant, to protect us, to make sure that that stick you see in the grass is just a stick and not a cobra coming to murder us.

So our inner children via the limbic system scan the social environment and compare that to the memories, attitude, thoughts, and ideas they hold about what a threat is, which may be quite different than what your rational mind, your prefrontal cortex adult mind thinks is a threat.

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When the inner child is strongly activated by what it perceives to be a threat cue, it can temporarily overtake the prefrontal cortex and can lead us into some pretty reactive behaviors that can often be quite drastic.

So shutting down, also known as going into dorsal, the dorsal part of the vagus nerve, which we've talked about here on the show. That's that freeze reaction, deer in the headlights.

Reactions like rejecting others before they can reject us, or abandon us, reacting with outsized anger or jealousy, going into defensive mode, feeling very hurt by something that your rational brain may say is not actually a big deal, but to your inner child is all due to your inner child worrying about survival in the moment.

Present moment harm because your inner children are not at all interested and consciously thinking about any kind of long-term consequences to its action. The inner child is the one that wants to storm out of the room, throw the lamp, let everyone know you just don't need them.

And these inner child programs are not reality based and are based in the previously protective thoughts that were inputted in your childhood. And the more you repeat them, the more your inner children believe that they are responding appropriately to life as an adult.

Thoughts like, "Why even start if I'm not going to do it perfectly? I'm going to be abandoned again, I'm going to fail, everyone is always mad at me, God, I mess everything up, everyone's going to think so poorly of me if I leave this relationship, everyone will say it's my fault again. If I set boundaries, they'll be so mad at me and I just can't handle that. It's better to disappoint myself than others. Taking care of myself is selfish and that's bad."

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Whatever those strong thoughts that you're putting into your brain are going to come out as strong feelings, which leads to reactions and behaviors that may not be aligned with your integrity, with who and how you want to be in the world as an adult.

And that's why we do inner child work. So we can start to create new ways of being. So now that we've totally nerded out, let's go back to what my client Margaret was saying about her objections to inner child work.

So she was really seeing and again, I quote, "Inner child work as blaming our parents for everything that's wrong with us." I do want to do a show soon about the anger we hold towards our parents or caregivers for our childhood experiences because that's a really important issue.

So know that that's coming up soon. And for now, what I'll say is this; first of all, there's nothing wrong with us, with you, or with me. Sure, we have codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing behaviors. Sure, we have conditioned reactions in our minds based on previous inputs.

But my beauty, my darling, my tender ravioli, thinking there is something wrong with you for the way you react is like saying there's something wrong with a newborn because they can't do calculus.

That's just silly, my darling. That little baby doesn't have the inputs it needs to create the outputs you want from it. And that's just that. There's nothing wrong with you because you have certain reaction patterns because you get defensive or take things personally from your codependent habits.

And you also get to take responsibility for continuing to feed your inner children, your limbic system, the same old painful thoughts that are keeping you stuck. The sooner you can come to believe that you are at your core

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perfect, whole, worthy of love and care, the more easily you can start to change your life by learning to manage your mind with thought work, because science.

So back to the parent blaming part. There is a wild difference between recognizing where we weren't met, where we were actively hurt, where we were neglected or passively hurt, where we didn't get what we needed and where our inner children are holding hurt, and simply blaming our parents and sort of dropping it right there.

Well, it's all their fault and I'm not working on it is not one of our mottos in Anchored, let me tell you what. And holding space for and acknowledging our hurt can mean holding folks responsible for what happened in the past for sure.

And growth comes from stepping into acceptance that the past is the past. It impacted us and we get to be real and honor the pain that got us to where we are now, while not deciding that it's game over because something happened decades ago.

In codependent thinking, we are always focused on everyone else, their feelings, their actions, their behaviors, their needs, while also feeling like everyone and everything's victim.

While never discounting actual harms, we get to rewrite our relationship to the past. We get to recognize that we have the ability, the capacity, the choice to create a different present moment for and with our inner children, and we get to create a different future by relating to our past in a different way, by leaning in on our strengths.

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We can put new data points into our limbic system using our prefrontal cortex. We get to feel all the feels around our childhood experiences so we can process them through our bodies and release them. And we don't have to focus on our anger at anyone else or making anyone else the person to blame in order to move forward.

Because my love, it doesn't keep us moving forward. It keeps us stuck in the past, focused on others. Instead of focusing on ourselves in the present and the future we can and will create for ourselves.

The remedy I will share with you, my perfect darling sweet lamb chop is this; to create time and space in your life, and it truly can be one minute a day. I hear you, busy parents working full time, homeschooling. One minute.

It can be while you're peeing, while you're in the shower, while you're loading the dishwasher. A few moments each day to get in touch with your inner children and to create a really solid connection with the concept of your most loving adult.

I do this through meditation and mindfulness. And you know I love giving presents. I have a free meditation that guides you through this available right at the top of my website at victoriaalbina.com. And I'll encourage you to go download it.

I mean, the price is right, right? In that meditation, I walk you through how to get in touch with your inner children and to start creating that experience of knowing who they are. I love to get in touch with my inner children through play, through dance and movement, through somatic practices, by talking to myself in the same tenderoni voice I talk to you all in.

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And I do this connecting inward work before I'm upset. I do it when I am anchored in ventral vagal, when I feel cool, when I feel good, when everything's chill in the world. So I can turn to these practices when I'm activated in sympathetic, fight or flight, or when I'm starting to shut down, check out, dissociate in dorsal freeze, that deer in the headlights part of the parasympathetic nervous system where we don't have access to words or thoughts and we're just frozen.

I connect with my little me's all day long, those tiny Maria Victorias running around inside me so I can continue to build a strong connection with them and to give them love and care towards the goal of creating that helped inner child archetype within who can help and support the others when there's a disturbance in the force.

And I can show up for myself as my own most loving adult to regulate my nervous system, to do the nervous system resourcing work we talked about in episode 138. And I do all of that so that I can continue to take responsibility for me and my adult responses right now in the present moment and for my future.

So I can choose the thoughts that I want to actively, intentionally, consciously, purposefully choose to feed into my limbic system. So I'm no longer blaming anyone at all for my present day thoughts, feels, actions, and results. And instead, I have a best friend's relationship with my inner children.

And together, hand in hand, I am taking back my power to write the story of my own life. I hope this episode has been supportive for you, both in the nerdy way and the change-your-life way. Really getting to know my inner children has been nothing short of magical for me.

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And I get to tap into my inner adult to show up here and to do this show for you each and every week, to go live on Instagram, @victoriaalbinawellness, to do webinars and info sessions, to be present with you because I'm present with and for me and my inner children.

And I don't let six-year-olds drive the bus of my life anymore. Though goodness knows they used to.

Alright my beauties, let's do what we do. Gentle hand on your heart, if that feels supportive. Closing your beautiful eyes, if that feels safe, and you're not driving. Take some slow breaths in, long breath out with me. 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 gonna be a good one!