

Ep #208: Fawn Response and Healthy Anger



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 my love, and I hope this finds you doing so well. Apropos of absolutely nothing, I was doing a podcast interview yesterday on someone else's show and they asked me what the thing is that's lighting me up right now. They said a book, a TV show, something I'm studying. And from the depths of my heart, what came to me is love.

Love is what's lighting me up right now. Everything I do in my life is driven by my love for you, for me, for humanity, for all of our relations, for all of existence, for life. I'm feeling particularly grateful to be alive, to be a human, to live the life I get to live. And this wasn't always the case. I've been through some dark, dark nights and right now, I'm reveling in gratitude. I'm reveling in love. So I just wanted to share that no matter where you're at, no matter how dark or dismal things seem, no matter how disconnected from yourself, from joy, from love, you may feel right now, there is light at the end of the proverbial tunnel.

I may not have believed it myself when things felt really dire, but I know that hearing it was always supportive and that there was some part of me that heard it, that took it in, that was able to hold on to hope that life would get so much better if I just continued to focus on growing, on healing, on living into being the person I know I am here to be, which is a vessel of love in this world. So that's what's up for me.

Onto another completely different topic though, not really. So we've been talking about anger for a few weeks, and I truly, truly believe that the sort of healthy, sacred anger that leads us to say, "This is not right, this will not stand. I'm not here for this. I'm not into this. I won't cosign this. I'm not available for this. This has to stop. I am angry." That that too is a form of

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love because it guides us to set right what is not right in this world. It guides us towards ever more justice.

So many of us, unfortunately, were taught that anger is bad, unattractive, unbecoming, something to hide away or fear, that it's best not to express or even allow ourselves to feel our healthy anger, and as we've discussed the last few weeks, our healthy, sacred anger is a natural, protective human sympathetic fight-or-flight response from our nervous system meant to keep us safe and out of harm's way. Your anger, like mine, is sacred and deserves to be processed through our bodies and released, and today, we're going to talk about one of the ways we learn to hold that anger in, to deny it, the fawn response in the nervous system.

We'll explore together what fawn looks and feels like, why we may have developed this habit of fawning in the face of nervous system overload, and next week, we'll explore some of the ways you can identify it within yourself and of course, the remedies. What we can do about it as adults so that we can reconnect with our sacred anger and find a more integrated, connected way to respond when our boundaries have been disrespected.

Let us begin way back on the Savannah of evolution. So back then, if you came into contact with a big scary thing like a lion, tiger, or in fact, a bear. All together now, oh my. Your autonomic nervous system, that automatic limbic system driven part of us that reacts before our brains can respond, would flip into sympathetic activation and would quickly assess the situation and your capacity, and so you'd fight if you were capable and were strong of fist and foot or you'd book it out of the air in the flight response.

If you know there was no way you're going to win against the beast before you, or if your nervous system believed there was a chance that that predator wouldn't eat you if you looked dead, then freeze or dorsal vagal is the state you would go to. Your body shuts down to help you survive, to cope through the terrifying moment. Your body floods with endogenous

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opioids, meaning your pain response is limited and you're numbed out to yourself, not just pain but your emotions.

In our modern lives, our nervous system gets activated to protect us all the time. When we experience a boundary violation, when someone crosses the line with us like a parent who body shames us, a coworker who calls us out in front of colleagues, a partner who dismisses our concerns. Our nervous system responds in order to try to protect us, to call attention to the injustice or slight so we can do something about it.

And most of us don't start screaming or punching in the boardroom. Many of us have learned, as we discussed in the last few weeks, to not do what our biological impulses tell us to do. We don't fight, we don't flight, and sometimes, we don't even freeze. Instead, because of our socialization and conditioning, we hold on to our nervous system reaction. We hold it at bay, we tamp it down, and we stay on the polite side of things.

And that response, that nervous system activation lingers on in our bodies and in our adult lives can show up as anxiety and worry, as restlessness, as ruminating about the past or future, checking out, getting lost, doom, scrolling, going blank mid-convo, on and on in these cycles of somatic self-disconnection until we find a way to let those energies free in healthy ways. I'm not saying to scream in the boardroom or to punch your partner when they say something you don't like, but we do need to find a way to let those energies to complete the circuit.

It gets activated and it needs to come down by going through. After years of holding it in, our brilliant mind-bodies have developed a fourth way. So fight, flight, freeze, 1, 2, 3. And the fourth way that we can seek to protect ourselves is the mixed nervous system state known as fawn. Mixed meaning, there is sympathetic activation, there's fight or flight, but there's also dorsal and it's a combo therein. A state beyond just putting up our nukes or running for the hills.

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Fawning is a strategy we can unconsciously learn to use to get ourselves out of situations our nervous system deems unsafe, dangerous or just plain uncomfortable. It's a people pleasing view of the world in which we feel safer when everyone likes us and things were super-duper nice, and if you don't know the difference between being kind and being nice, episode 132 is your next listen after this show.

Now there's nothing wrong with wanting people to like you. That's human, that's mammalian. It's really a delight to be liked. Come on, now. The concern in fawning as your go-to way of relating is that you come to care way more about keeping everyone else happy with you, everyone else liking you, than you care about taking care of yourself, than you care about showing up for you, than you care about having your own back and naming what's real and true, voicing your sacred anger.

Fawning shows up in a lot of people, and especially, for those of us raised as girls and living as women in the patriarchy and is a response that is extremely common amongst those of us with codependent, perfectionist, and people pleasing tendencies, which we refer to here as "emotional outsourcing," because we believe we need to suffer, to come last to put our truth, boundaries, preferences, desires and wants at the absolute bottom of the barrel in order to be worthy of being in a relationship with anyone.

So we appease them instead of being real, and this is so painful and harmful to our sense of self and our relationships. So I want to unpack this response today while noting that this isn't just a childhood reaction. We can learn to fawn at any point in our lifetimes and can carry this strategy through to our dying day if we don't learn how to put it down for good. So many of us spent years, if not decades, engaged in emotional outsourcing, looking outside of ourselves in order to feel okay.

We tried and may still try to manage our external environments as a way to source safety from others, which can come to light in stark colors as we

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start to work through our habitual thought patterns using thought work and the think, feel, act cycle I teach here. I want to share a story because stories help us to see ourselves and someone else's lived experience and they help us to know that we're not inherently broken.

Other people live this way, experience these things and other people find a way through. So I want to share the story of Anchored participant, Sylvia. She shared that from a young age, she took it upon herself to do everything in her power to try to keep her unhappy parents happy. Their relationship was fraught and they tended to use Sylvia as a go-between, a proxy for their arguments and they would say nasty things about the other parent to her to try to get her on their side in a painful move called triangulation.

Some of you out there may be like, "Oof. My mom used me as her therapist all the time." Or "Yeah, I have these friends who, when they're grumpy, they totally turn to me and tell me all about the other one as though I had anything to do with this." So Sylvia did the absolute bestest and most smartest thing she could do for her young self.

She made it her mission to keep her parents happy with her, to make them each think she was on their side, to make each of them see her as their ally in her attempt to keep the peace. And in so doing, she stuffed down her own feelings, her own sacred anger about what was going on in the household, how they were communicating with her about each other.

She stuffed it all down because when Sylvia was young and felt unsafe, unattuned to or not connected with in a way that worked for her and her nervous system, when her boundaries were not respected, her nervous system was faced with a choice, as all of ours are. She could let the full weight of what wasn't working hit her and could decompensate or she could find a way to cope. In theory, she could have fought back, yelled at her parents and told them to knock it off, behave, grow up, or she could have gotten in the direction of flight, found a way to be outside of the home

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as much as possible or hide away in her room, drown herself in books, read day and night or otherwise remove herself.

She also could have gone towards dorsal, the freeze or shut down part of the nervous system and could have dissociated from herself checked out of presence. This is when your body stays in the room, but the real, real you, nah, she's gone. She's so not there. No matter how helpful you're being, no matter how much small talk you're making, you are frozen to yourself and others as a way to protect your tenderoni underbelly.

Because of a mixture of circumstances, personality, mirror-neuron activity, which my nerves is the monkey see, monkey do part of the brain that leads us to emulate our grownups and others around us to take on their way of getting through life as the bestest way because it's what we see all day, plus some of those mysterious elements that make up the human experience. Through all of that, little Sylvia learned to fawn, just like her mom and hers and hers did before her.

The solution that made the most sense and felt the most acceptable to her nervous system at the time was to do whatever she could to keep her adults happy with her, to ignore or overlook the massively inappropriate position they'd put her in. And so she learned to control herself by shoving down her feelings. She made herself lovable, likable, indispensable, really. Made herself everyone's ally, everyone of course, except herself.

And this is what the fawn response does. Sets us squarely on the emotional outsourcing mindset path in which we value keeping everyone happy except for us. Sylvia was disconnected from herself, protective anger, and lost contact with that part of herself. She witnessed both so much aggression as passive aggression and active lashing out with mean names and cutting words and some healthy anger in her home, and you can listen to healthy anger, part two to learn more about the difference between anger and aggression.

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She got the two confused, her healthy anger to her read as just more aggressive energy that she didn't want to introduce into an already lashing out, aggressive family system. So instead, her nervous system took a different approach. Sylvia learned to attempt to control others to feel better in herself, to seek safety from others because she lost that self-connection.

What young people and those of us re-parenting ourselves need our caring adults who can give us attention and love so that we can learn what it looks, sounds, and feels like to care and be cared for. Our adults show us how to be human in their words and action and what we need to do to be safe by regulating their nervous systems and co-regulating ours, which means helping us to calm or soothe ourselves sometimes and can hold a safe container for us to have the big emotions in a safe way at other times.

And that combination shows our nervous systems. That feelings, emotions, including anger, can be safe, and that we have the capacity to come back to ventral vagal, the safe and social part of the nervous system where we're present in our bodies and our minds when we're connected with ourselves and the world. When our caregivers model support through challenging times for us or when they themselves go through challenges and show resilience, we learn that stress is temporary, that this too shall pass kind of jam, and that gets written into our nervous system as our operating system and into our bodies as an ability to manage the highs of sympathetic activation and the lows of dorsal shut down, and to find our way back to ventral vagal.

In that process of self-regulation and co-regulation with safe adults and others, we learn that we are strong when we acknowledge process and move through our feelings with support and love when we process our emotions through our bodies and release them in loving ways. That modeling sets us up to be solid friends and partners, as well as loving custodians of our own mental and emotional landscape and to be a force for deep and lasting good in the world.

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However, in Sylvia's case, and I know for many of you listening, her experience was of parents that were too wrapped up in their own emotional drama and emotional immaturity, which we talked about in episode 167, to make space for her as a child. They made their love conditional, on getting the good grades, on achievements, on weight, on manners, on not rocking the already rocky boat. Not adding her feelings to the steaming hot stew of emotional dysregulation, that was her family of origin.

While she and we may have had all the basics covered, had food and shelter, a warm bed and afterschool classes to go to, overall, when our adults are not attuned to us, aren't managing their own nervous systems or showing up to co-regulate ours, it makes for an emotionally unsafe space in which to grow up. And that energy lingers on in our bodies and minds into adulthood, and we all react differently to these experiences, like we talked about in episode 199 about trauma.

Trauma isn't the thing that happened, it's our response to the thing. Some children raised by emotionally, immature, withholding, checked out, controlling, dysregulated or abusive parents become explosive and aggressive. Others withdraw and become cut off from their emotions. They get frozen within us, locked away from us because we don't know how to handle them. Enter the fawn response in which children and eventually adults who are hyper aware of their familial distress, appoint themselves guardian of the household's emotional landscape.

They feel compelled to take care of their parents' emotional needs because no one else is. This habit of being the fixer, the peacemaker, the peacekeeper kid, the martyr, the savior, the saint, the one whose nervous system goes right into fun, abandoning ourselves and our own emotional needs in order to take care of others, this is people pleasing to the nth degree. Taking the run-of-the-mill patriarchal expectation that women engage in all the caregiving and putting it on steroids, and we can develop this fawning response at any point in life if it's what's needed to get through.

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Back to little Sylvia. In order to survive, she felt she had to disconnect from her emotions, desires, needs, wants, in order to make space for her parents. There just wasn't room for her. If she added her feelings to the mix, she worried she might invite more negation of her feelings ala "suck it up, buttercup." Aggression in the form of blame for complicating things. "Ugh. Sylvia, why are you so sensitive?" "Sylvia, why are you always so upset?" Sylvia, Sylvia, Sylvia.

And so, checking out and going into fawn was a really smart move for her. But unfortunately, when we fawn, our emotions and the nervous system energy behind them don't just go away because we turn away from them and don't feel them. All of that healthy and sacred anger has to go somewhere, and more often than not, it gets focused inward and can lead us to be self-critical to a fault and engage in emotional or physical self-harm.

It can prime us for codependent, perfectionist and people pleasing habits and can be a root cause of depression or anxiety, insomnia, a whole host of somatic pain and digestive symptoms through adulthood. And this is what happened to Sylvia. When she didn't process this childhood hurt, again, because she didn't have the tools, no shame or blame needed, and instead turned her healthy anger inward, she ended up in chronic emotional outsourcing, which, for her, showed up as this fawn response.

This desire to appease others and really convince them to like her, when she wasn't liking herself. Now in Anchored, she's getting a chance to revisit this aspect of her in inner world, not just the ways in which care and love and support were not offered during childhood, but also how that early wounding still comes up for her now she gets to revisit her relationship with anger and open herself up to experiencing that feeling, that sacred anger that is her safeguard, her protector.

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One way to express the self-love and love of others and is at its core, resentment prevention. Through the Anchored process, the process of coming home to herself and her authenticity of mapping and regulating her nervous system, Sylvia is learning how to meet the world and those she loves from her embodied autonomy. To be real in a totally new way and to live from a regulated, balanced nervous system and not from chronic, habitual fawning. Pretty inspiring, I say.

Sylvia's story is emblematic of the what can happen when we put our focus back on ourselves, when we step out of this conditioned, socialized, learned way of interacting with the world, with ourselves, with our emotions, and turn that spotlight on our heads that's always looked to others to validate us, to prove that we're worthy of love, to make us feel safe. When we turn that spotlight back on ourselves and say, "I matter. My truth matters. What is happening within me, within my nervous system is worthy of expression."

I'm going to pause here. It's kind of a lot, right? It's a good lot. And next week, we're going to talk about some of the key signs of fawning to help you understand if it's you, if this is something you are doing. And of course, I will be sharing remedies to help you step out of this painful habit so you can live a life you love.

If you are ready to put fawn in the rear view mirror, my beloved, you're going to want to join us for Anchored. Anchored is my six-month online coaching community. It is a program where we come together to reclaim our nervous systems, to regulate ourselves in ways we've probably never felt before, to get in touch with and learn to express our healthy, sacred anger, our joy, our excitement, our everything.

Because when you're holding down one emotion, you're holding them all down in some way, my love. And you deserve to live from the fullest, most

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expansive expression of you. Your emotions, your wants, your needs, your desires. You don't have to fawn anymore. Let me show you how.

In Anchored, we take a holistic root cause-based approach to our healing. We bring in thought work to work with our minds, somatic or body-based practices, to work with our nervous systems. We work with our inner children, with the energetic parts of us, and we do breath work because it's amazing and delightful and pretty freaking cool.

If you are ready to take your healing to the next step, you are going to want to join us. Head on over to victoriaalbena.com/anchored to learn about this amazing community, this incredible collective. It's my favorite place in the whole wide world, and I can't wait for you to join us.

All right, my love. Let's do what we do. Gentle hand on your heart should you feel so moved and remember, you are safe, you are held, you 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 overwhelming 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 victoriaalbena.com/masterclass to grab your seat now. See you there. It's going to be a good one.