

## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

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. So, we've spent the last few weeks talking about and exploring sacred, healthy anger. And its, well, less sacred, less healthy cousin, aggression.

Anger is a natural response when our boundaries have been breached, when we've been treated in a way that disrespects our dignity or safety. We may feel that rising heat of anger in our bodies and our nervous system sounding the alarm bell within that says, "This is not okay. Head for safety. Eliminate the threat or be eliminated."

Anger is a gift from our bodies, 1,000%. And the more we can learn to recognize it, honor it, befriend it, and allow it to be safely voiced and expressed, the better our lives, relationships, communities, and the world will be. And yet so many of us, especially those of us raised as girls and socialized as women, we're taught that our anger response, oof, so many shades of "not okay."

That it's unladylike, unattractive, unacceptable, and in so many words, just straight-up wrong and something we need to stuff down. So, we don't express it because that, oof, that would make us shrill, a bitch, intolerable, would make someone else uncomfortable. You know, what with us being dramatic or having big feelings.

This socialized and conditioned imperative to shut down our feelings, to people-pleasing, caretake others can lead us to live our lives from the mixed nervous system state known as "fawn," which we talked about last week.

## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

And if you're new to the show, welcome. Bienvenue. Muy bienvenida. You're going to want to listen in to last week's show before diving into this one, so you know what in the heck we're talking about with all of this fawn stuff. Okay?

Since last week, we talked a lot about the science of fawn, and I'll give you the quick TL;DR. Fawn is a mixed nervous system state, and so what that means is that it's part sympathetic activation, fight or flight. Part dorsal, which is that shutdown, freeze response. You're super anxious, you're worried, but you're also frozen inside to your emotions, your wants, your needs.

You're being pulled energetically, within your own body and your own nervous system, in two different directions. So, your focus is on keeping others happy as a way to attempt to source safety. That's the wicked quick 101 Science of fawn. You're awash in adrenaline, but you're also in this acetylcholine state. It's super uncomfortable. It doesn't feel great, and the outcomes are not awesome. So that's the science. I mean, "it doesn't feel great," that's not science; that's my opinion.

But anyway, this week, I wanted to get super practical. We're going to start with some of the more common signs that we're moving into fawn as a strategy. As a response from our stress, distress, and trauma so you can start to ask yourself, is this me? Do I do this? Do I identify with this strategy or not?

And remember, if you don't identify with it personally, in your own body, it's really worthwhile for you to be here and to learn about it. Because maybe your cousin does; your best friend, your kid, your coworker, your direct report, your boss, your partner, or your sister. Somebody in your life fawns.

One of the things that I love to do and one of the reasons I do this show is not just so we can understand ourselves better, but so we can understand

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

each other in a deeper, more loving way and can give each other so much more care.

So first, over apologizing, aka taking on the world's problems ahead of time just in case, just in case it was me. Is it my fault? Are you mad at me? Yep, that's funny, all right. A very common sign of the fawning response in the nervous system is the tendency to apologize and pre-apologize and over apologize, for everything, all of the time. Or, at least, wicked frequently, right? Whether you've done wrong or not. And mostly, when not, to be real.

Like we talked about in Episode 74, "The Dangers of False Pre-Apologies," which was such a good one. So many of us, especially those of us who come from emotionally outsourcing homes where codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing habits rule, have been taught directly and indirectly that everyone else's comfort, discomfort, happiness, or upset are our responsibility to manage.

So, if someone isn't thrilled with the restaurant you picked or the restaurant they picked, if you have a hair out a line, if someone's not happy with the weather, anything, everything, apologize for it. Make it your fault in some way. Pre-apologize even.

When people come over for a free dinner you spent all afternoon cooking, please do make sure that they know you're so sorry you live in your house; less they judge you for, you know, living in your house. You know that moment when you hide the socks and hide the laundry bin? Because if people come over, they can't possibly know that evil truth, which is that you live where you live. You know what I'm talking about, right?

And if someone is upset because of something in their own life, even when it's due to their own "eff" up, we take that on, too. "Oh man, I should have done more to save him from feeling the consequences of his own life decisions." That's what our brains say, from our survival skills and our

[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

brilliant fawning habits. And oh my god, that is a lot for one person to shoulder.

When we do this, when we fall into the fawning-fueled habit of constantly apologizing, we are training and retraining ourselves to believe this false story that somehow, we are, in fact, responsible for everyone and everything around us. The pinnacle of codependent thinking, right?

And listen, it may have really felt like this was true when we were little; I know it did for me. We may have understandably believed that if we didn't keep the peace at home, the wheels would actually fall off the bus that was the family.

But as adults interacting with other adults, we get to notice this pattern of thought and behavior and nervous system reaction to life. So, we can see it for what it is, an artifact of an old story, an old survival skill that simply isn't true anymore. We can name it, the fawn response. So that we can get a little distance from it and can make different choices for ourselves. It's not me, it's my nervous system going into fawn.

Two, another key indicator of chronic fawning, is struggling in a real and deep way to express how we think and feel. Now, when it comes to expressing our thoughts and feels, we all may do the common courtesy move of saying, "I'm totally fine, thanks. How are you?" When the person behind the counter at the bodega or some polite coworker asks us, "How are you doing? And we say that, "Oh, I'm fine. How are you?" Even when we're so not fine.

And that may be from a choice to protect our own privacy, to keep the social wheels moving along, and that's okay if it's an intentional choice that you're making. You don't owe anyone all the details of your life and your struggles.

## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

And there's a difference between choosing to be selective with the information you share about how you feel, and feeling unable to share how you really think or feel because you are out of touch with your own internal emotional ecosystem, your own internal reality.

You go blank into the dorsal freeze nervous system moment when you are asked about or try to connect with your emotions or feelings. When we have developed a chronic fawn habit, we've made everyone else's emotions, feelings, lives, and concerns, A-1 in our own lives.

And in that process, we can actually lose touch with our own thoughts and feelings along the way. Because they, them, everyone else, everything else, are your focus, so hard that you pushed you down. Down, down until you forgot what it feels like in your own body and mind.

Take a moment and let sink in. If it feels like you don't know what you feel, what you think, what you want or prefer, it may be because you really can't access that information. Because your nervous system is in fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. The four nervous system moments when we aren't in ventral vagal.

And it's only in ventral vagal, the safe and social part of the nervous system, where we have access to these kinds of things. Things like knowing ourselves. And after being the chameleon and shapeshifter for so long, it's like we've lost touch with the colors of our original spots and stripes if you know what I mean.

So, it's not because you actually, for reals actually, don't know. On some deeper level, of course, you know yourself and your everything. It might just be that there are layers of stress, distress, trauma, or a nervous system reaction, like fight-flight, freeze, or fawn, obscuring your view inward.

## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

Number three, “Oh my God, you are so hilarious.” Many of us who are in the habit of fawning may also have the habit of throwing around flattery. Saying and doing whatever we can to try to make others feel good. To prop them up, to unwittingly and seriously, so not on purpose, control them. Manipulate them into liking us, because that feels so much safer in our nervous system than not making sure that absolutely everyone adores us.

Now, our flattery may be empty and hollow, but we still offer it up. Because it makes us feel safe to attempt to keep the people around us feeling good and feeling good about us. Right? Because it's a two-parter. In people pleasing, we want them to think and feel goodly about us. In fawning, we also need to control them and their emotions, because if they feel good about themselves, then they're safer, right? They're less likely to attack us or abandon us or reject us.

So, remembering that fawn is a strategy, and a habit formed in childhood when our survival and well-being depended on our grownups taking care of us, gives us so much more space for love here. Because if we grew up with adults whose caring concern was contingent, when we weren't guaranteed that we would be appropriately responded to and cared for, we learned to do and say whatever we could to keep our caregivers happy.

And flattery was often one way to do that. So was lavishing attention. So was putting ourselves out and doing way too much for others. So was putting our wants, needs, and desires at the end of the road, and making sure we let them know, “We're doing this for you. Because you are so important.”

We carry that habit, that habit of being not exactly radically honest, to be real, forward into adulthood. And we keep on telling people whatever it is we think they need to hear so that they might find us lovable.

## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

My darling, my perfect little squash blossom, I could go on and on. Oh, there are so many other signs of fawning. And the take-home thread through of these examples of fawn on parade is this; fawning is the pinnacle of emotional outsourcing.

Your energy, focus, everything is on the other. We put everyone else's needs and wants before our own. We do that because it feels like the right thing to do. And chronic fawning can leave us exhausted, burnt out, living in this super inauthentic way.

Unable to make change in our own lives, because what *are* our own lives anyway? Super endlessly resentful, and just completely detached from self, presence, and awareness. Being right here, right now, in the one and only moment, were ever [inaudible].

So, what's the remedy? How do we heal from the damage of living in a chronic fawn response and reclaim our right to healthy sacred anger? Well, first, we pause. And remember that we're not broken or defective or anything other than clever, crafty, and smart.

We've developed a habit, one that helped us feel safe as a child. So, the work, as an adult, is to retrain our nervous system, our minds, and to work with our bodies so we can live in a different way. And the first and most important thing is to pause and to give yourself some credit for getting you through.

Starting with your itty bitty inner child, who so brilliantly read the room and did their absolute best, given the circumstances of your childhood. From that vital first work of befriending our fawning parts, celebrating them even, I recommend working with your nervous system, through your nervous system.



## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

By working with your body instead of just trying to think your way out of this one because, to be real, it's unlikely to work, my love. Fawn is a nervous system state. It lives in the body, aka the soma, so we heal it with somatic work. Where soma, again, means "body" in Greek. And somatic means "working with the body." Returning to the body in its wholeness for the healing of mind, body, and spirit through the portal of presence with self.

Physiologically when we fall into fawn, we are externally focused and fully engrossed in the needs of others. So, we disconnect from our feelings. Disconnect from our bodily sensations, our biological impulses, our own needs. We literally go numb. So many people living with the after-effects of fawning; we can feel like we're living in a fog.

With somatic work, particularly the somatic experiencing work I do with my clients in Anchored, we remember how to reconnect with and be present in our bodies. We support our nervous systems in coming back to a healthier place, through the exercises and practices we do daily to retrain ourselves.

A person who goes so easily into fawning is generally living in this mix I mentioned previously, of sympathetic fight or flight, and dorsal, which is the freeze setting in our nervous system. And this sympathetic dorsal-vagal combo deal is known as high activation freeze, functional freeze, or somatic self-disconnection. A more primitive strategy that gets the sympathetic nervous system fight or flight all revved up, while blocking our inward connection via dorsal energy.

Remember, this is just exactly the nervous system response we need to survive an emergency. And in our day-to-day lives when we're just mammaling along, this heightened but also checked-out state truly doesn't serve us, and can lead to exhaustion and burnout. It's not a fun place to live. Says yours truly, who lived there for like, oh, I don't know, the first 30+ years of my life.

## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

Learning how to calm and heal your nervous system, those are two different things, is vital for overcoming this habitual way of encountering life, which is what somatic practices afford us. By creating and allowing us safer spaces and healthier outlets through which to process all that stuffed-down energy. Which not only helps us work through and rewire fawn, it can get us closer to accessing and learning to accept and appreciate our healthy anger.

When we have our nervous system in a healthier, more regulatable place, we can also more easily recognize when we're falling into old patterns of emotional outsourcing, codependency, and fawning. When it's just like a little whisper of the old pattern versus a big old screaming match between you and your inner critic. And in so doing, we can learn to intervene on our own behalf before we live from habit for even another minute longer.

When we do that, by being gentle with ourselves, by bringing in our three C's; compassion, curiosity, and care. We can also use one of my favorite tools, "Of course, I did," which we learned in Episode 133. And this, this is such a great tool.

We say to ourselves, once we recognize what we're doing, we pause. We breathe compassion, curiosity, and care. And then, "Of course, I'm fawning again. Of course, I'm people-pleasing. Of course, I'm putting them first while seething in resentment about my own choices. Of course, I'm blaming others for my feelings," on and on, right?

Name what you're doing. "I was trained for years to react this way. This is a survival mechanism from my nervous system and my inner children. Of course, I'm reacting this way. This comes from self-love," right? So, we own it, say why we're doing it, right? We own what's actually up here. And instead of, "Ugh, what's wrong with me?" No, no, no, "Of course, I'm doing this. This is how I learned to survive."

## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

And from there, tell yourself out loud what you are doing and what you're going to do to not go down that old pathway. So, "Okay, I'm going to take a deep breath and a long slow out. Vic taught me that that helps me move into parasympathetic. We're going to do that."

Or, "I'm going to take a moment to get present into my body. And from my body, I'm going to make a different choice. I'm going to tune into my breathing, my intuition. I'm going to feel my feet on the floor. I'm going to honor myself and my emotions, my feelings, and my needs, instead of people pleasing that other person."

That inner wisdom that lives in each of us, within ventral vagal, is a powerful tool. And one that we can harness with somatic modalities, presence, mindfulness, and using smart thought work, which is what we just did, right? This is a version of thought work.

Recognizing our old thoughts and coming into these moments prepared ahead of time with the new thought that you are deciding to think on purpose, right? Of course, I did. And when that moment arises, you've got it ready. You've got your new thought, your new nervous system state, your new action, your new response, and your new feeling. You've got it ready using the think-feel-act cycle. Isn't that amazing? So good.

Another way to address a chronic fawn response is to actively practice listening to and speaking your truth. Because remember, part of fawn, most of fawn, involves disconnection from ourselves. From our own truths about what we want and need. From who we are, what we feel, who we want to be around, and what we think is true.

And one of the ways we can rewire this is by asking ourselves, what is really true for us? What we really want in the moment and in life. And, as always, we take itty bitty, teeny tiny, kitten steps towards owning and

## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

speaking our truth. And if you're new to the show, we take kitten paw, little teeny tiny baby kitten paw-sized steps in this family.

We don't take baby steps; baby steps are enormous. Look at your own hand. A baby's foot is like the size of your palm. A kitten's paw is like, I don't know, like the size of dice, a cube of dice; it's teeny tiny.

What I'm saying is do not push your nervous system. Gently move it, yeah? Don't freak yourself out, there's no point. Don't try to do something huge and then fall on your face. Walk gently and slowly, itty bitty kitten paw-sized steps.

Slowly, and with attention to self, we can start to notice when our truth bubbles up to the surface, asking to be seen and heard. And then we can practice first, coming into ventral vagal, grounding ourselves in ourselves. And from that place of feeling safer within our own lived experience, we can practice speaking our truth. Putting words to the feelings, sensations, and intuition, to ourselves at first. Either verbally in our minds or in a journal.

Taking the leap to tell others how we feel can be scary. So. start small, my tender ravioli. Start by maybe telling a trusted friend, and then maybe a colleague you trust. And from there, start to build to more and more challenging people. Every step of the way, building your capacity and your nervous system to stay present with you, and out of fawn.

And if you're not game or it's not possible or wise to share your truth with certain people, please do not underestimate the power of writing a letter you never send. I highly recommend it as a practice to step further and further into your own truth. And to say the thing, even if it's not actually to the person, the energetic release of it can be so powerful.

## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

I'd love to leave you with some questions to start to ask yourself as you step out of fawn, and into beginning to believe that it's safe, smart, wise, and actually loving, for you to know yourself, to know your truth, and to begin to speak it.

So, my darling, my perfect little butterfly, what would you want to communicate to that parent or partner that hurt you? What would you want your ex-lover, your ex-spouse, or your ex-best friend to know? What do you wish you had said to that person, who had no idea how much you wanted to tell them your truth but were holding back out of fear?

“In hindsight, I would have told you that when you said what you said, I felt hurt because... I was so afraid when...” Here are some prompts that you can use to practice assessing and putting words to your truth, which may involve your healthy anger, and are powerful in helping you to step out of fawn. I phrase those all in the past, but they can be present tense too.

“What I really want to do is... I would like you to hear me when I say... I know I am strong because...”

By connecting to ourselves through somatic work and reconnecting with our deep and true feelings, including our anger, we can start to rewire and heal our nervous system. We can get out of the fawn response that put others center stage in the story of our lives. We can reclaim being the protagonist of this one sweet, perfect human journey that we're currently promised.

If you are ready to reclaim your own life, your mind, and your nervous system, you're ready to join us in Anchored. Anchored is my favorite place on earth. It is my small group, breathwork, life coaching, somatic, thought work-based community. It's a six-month coaching program. We start up again in just a few weeks, and there are still a couple of spots remaining.

## Ep #209: Overcoming Fawning

So, if you've been listening to the show for years, you're loving what you get here, you're ready to take it to the next level and actually get my coaching, my guidance, my care, to make these huge changes in your life that you've so wanted to make, and to reclaim your nervous system? Now is the time, baby. Why wait?

Why let another day of your life go to the fawn response? To not living in your sacred anger? To not speaking your truth? And to not maybe even knowing what your truth is? It would be an honor, a delight, and a privilege to have you join us in Anchored. Learn more, and apply now.

[VictoriaAlbina.com/anchored](http://VictoriaAlbina.com/anchored) and let's hop on a call.

Let's talk all about the program and make sure it's the right fit for you. I can't even wait to meet you, to talk with you, and to coach you in Anchored.

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 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](http://VictoriaAlbina.com/masterclass) to grab your seat now. See you there; it's going to be a good one!