

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection



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With Your Host

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Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

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. Today, I want to begin a conversation about an incredibly important topic. And this is something I think about a lot. I've done a lot of work around in my own life. It is a perennial theme in *Anchored*, my six-month program, because it is really so core to the human experience and that topic is belonging.

The human psyche is constantly seeking two things, belonging and significance, towards the goal of sourcing safety in this world. And here on *Feminist Wellness*, the nervous system is one of the most important foundational things that we talk about, that we relate to, that we think about; because your girl is a nerd. And I'm a nerd for the nervous system.

So today, I want to begin a conversation about belonging. My intention is not for this to be a series, we'll see what happens. But rather to be something that we come to, move away from; let it integrate, let it marinate, let it work its way into our experience of self in the world and come back.

Today's offering is also inspired by one of my favorite activists, writers, thinkers, Adrienne Maree Brown. I was reading some of her work the other day, and came across this. She writes, "We must become scholars of belonging. Belonging doesn't begin with other people accepting us. It begins with our acceptance of ourselves. Of the particular life and skin each one of us was born into, and the work that that particular birth entails." So powerful.

Today, we're going to sit a little with the beauty and the challenges we often face as human beings. In particular, as emotional outsourcers around

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

belonging. How we foster it, and what to do when we struggle to feel like we really belong.

So, let's start with what we mean when we talk about belonging. A sense of belonging, of connection, is a human need. And yeah, you heard me right, my love, *need* not want. And if you're a long-term listener, you know, your girl is really careful with her language. Right? Right.

We need to feel like we are accepted members of a group, which lets our nervous systems relax into felt safety. It could be a friend group or a friend family, a book club, activist community, spiritual or religious community, affinity group, a group at work. A group around shared interests, like a sports team, if you're into sports ball things.

Whatever the group is, when we feel like we belong, it goes beyond just knowing names and faces. When we feel true, deep belonging, our connection with others is centered in interdependence.

Feeling acceptance and support from members of the group. And giving that same acceptance and support back to them from a sense of reciprocity and mutuality as the ethos of the connection. Those two are the cornerstones of interdependence.

I want to flag, because we're going to be coming back to some thought work, that I said, we have to *feel* like we are accepted as members of a group. And so, what makes us feel that way? You know it, our thoughts. So, that's a little of foreshadowing my darlings, and we'll be coming back to our thoughts in just a few.

But first, a nerd alert; and this one's a new vocab one. Here it comes, the need to belong is considered an intrinsic motivation for humans, in the

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

world of social psychology. Isn't that a cool term? Intrinsic human motivation.

What that means, before I just like geek out on the feeling of the word for way too long. What it means that this belonging is not something extra or a luxury. It's something that is a true human need. And that is, to feel connected, respected, cared for, accompanied, as necessary for our mental health and wellbeing.

Because as humans, our nervous systems truly do need to co regulate with one another. We need to be able to regulate ourselves; to balance our nervous system alone. And we definitely need one another. I will say this, being able to tough it out and do hard things totally alone, listen, it's not without its merits, and it's useful sometimes.

And, without knowing we have places and people or creatures with whom we can feel belonging, at the end of the day it's a sub-optimal setup for us humans. That is, we are able to do hard things, challenging things, more easily, when we know we will be held should we fall. And that's a really important thing to know.

It's an antidote to the white settler, colonialist mindset that so many of us were raised in, that tells us that we do need to go it alone. That somehow, some kind of laudable, moralistically superior way of managing the world and our experience of it. That rugged individualism b.s., is b. s.

I also think it's super important to point out that we need one another, as human mammals and biological truth, because it flies in the face of one of the greatest myths in the popular conversation about codependency. You know, that one that says that needing others is a problem.

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

Because I'm not having it with that one. Because that can fall into some really not great sort of black and white thinking about how humans should relate. The issue is not that we need one another. In our codependent thinking it's that we put others and their wants and needs ahead of ourselves. Because we are outsourcing our sense of self validation and worth to them.

Needing others on its own isn't a sign of codependent thinking, it means you're a mammal. And putting your everything onto others instead of being in a balanced, reciprocal relationship with others, asking or insisting that others create your emotional experience, putting your full focus on them and not inside yourself. These are some signs that your mindset may just be codependent by nature.

But needing others, wanting connection with other humans and mammals, my darling, no, no, no. That's not codependent, that's mammalian, my mammal. Come on now.

So, when we have a robust sense of belonging, we feel motivated to participate in our community, to be of service to others, to give from our overflow, which can be emotional, time, financial, or energetic giving. When we feel belonging and embodied, meaning in the body not just in the mind, in an embodied, reliable, deep way we're able to connect with and give to the world from abundance.

Instead of from the codependent, obligation-driven giving, as a way to try to feel valuable, worthy, and lovable that used to exhaust us and leave us resentful as we rolled around in our comfy martyrdom. It feels damn good, my tender ravioli, to give without strings attached. And helps us remember that we can be a part of something. That we matter and others do, too. That we can be of service to others, which is a gift to ourselves.

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

In being of service we find another layer of belonging, as we remember that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. Something more important than our own daily problems and issues, and isn't that magical? When people experience belonging, they tend to experience less anxiety, depression, hopelessness, loneliness. And tend to turn to buffers like substances of abuse, less and less.

People who self-describe as feeling like they belong in a group tend to be healthier and happier than those who don't. Now, if you're struggling with feeling like you belong, this is the point in the podcast when I want to invite you to pause and to remember that you get to write a new future for yourself. Starting right now, in this very moment.

You, yes you. Codependent, perfectionist, people-pleasing habit having you can live a life filled with a sense of belonging, connection, and healthy attachment. Let me tell you about Sara. She's a coaching client of mine who recently finished up Anchored, my six-month somatic and thought work coaching course.

Sara came to me after a friend suggested coaching to get her out of a rut of loneliness and stuckness after her divorce. Sara had been raised in a codependent mind at home, with a mother who was deeply unhappy in her marriage, and a father who was kind of distant. So, her mom looked to Sara, her oldest born, to meet her emotional needs.

She learned from a young age that it was her job to keep everyone around her happy, and so she completely lost touch with herself. Chameleoning, shapeshifting became her norm. And so, she became the version of her who gave until it hurt. Who was outwardly focused to the point where she barely recognized herself.

She was no longer Sara, the autonomous person who has opinions and boundaries and preferences and things she wants to do in her own life for

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

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

her. Not based on anyone else's preference. Instead, she was the family happiness machine, consumed with doing whatever it took to keep the peace and shore up her mother's emotional health.

While she was, in some ways, the emotional glue of the family, she told me time after time in *Anchored*, that she never felt like she belong. She felt apart from the family. Like a ghost floating along doing so much extra for everyone, but not feeling present, or any sense of deep connection because she wasn't living as her authentic self. It makes sense, right?

Of course, a shapeshifter doesn't feel like she belongs, which false self would be the one fitting in and belonging, right? When Sara finally moved out of her family home and into a new social world in college, those old habits kicked right in there too.

In romantic relationships, she always tended her partner's needs above her own, like she had learned to do with her mom. Putting herself last and keeping her sole focus on the other person's comfort and wants, which, by the way, felt like needs to her. And made sure their emotional state was all cool, that their mood was good, that everything was cool for them, which left her resentful for sure.

With friends, she always wanted to keep the peace, which meant she withheld her opinions; never rock the boat. Because her childhood experience had taught her that conflict was bad and to be avoided at all costs, like the way her parents did in barely talking. So, she tolerated situations, with friends and dates, that she would tell her sisters to run from.

She made excuses for people's lousy behavior, and kept on giving them chance after chance after chance. Even when they had showed her clearly that she was not a priority for them. Or, that they didn't respect or honor her; wouldn't keep their promises to her.

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

She spent so much energy trying to ensure that all social interactions were positive that she had little-to-nothing left in the tank for real connection, and real belonging, which involved real vulnerability. Which she had no real idea about how to even begin to engage in.

Needless to say, years after years of this sent Sara into a downward spiral. Feeling both deeply needed by her partner and friends, and like an empty shell of a person, with little self-awareness and even less of a sense of belonging with others. Which was exhausting, confusing, and at its core felt really unsafe in her nervous system.

When Sara finally came to Anchored, she had lost so much of her sense of self and felt completely cut off from her body. She was living from the neck up, while her body's screams for attention continued to be ignored. She had disconnected from her authentic self so long ago; it was like she couldn't even remember how to connect with her.

So, we did what we do in Anchored. We started slowly and gently. Undulating, titrating; these are nervous system tools. And focused our somatic parts and inner child work on supporting her and reconnecting with who she used to be, under all her learned and conditioned ways of operating, so that she could uncover who she is beneath it all. And she could decide who she wanted to be in her own life going forward. Like we talked about in Episode 178, "Your Future Self".

Every time Sara and I did a somatic experiencing or other somatic practice together in Anchored, what always came up was this desire to feel like she truly belonged somewhere, anywhere. Having uncovered that, we could take some perfect little, teeny-tiny, kitten steps to move her in that direction.

Starting with helping her inner children and the parts of her that hadn't felt belonging to start to feel safe enough with her, so that she could feel a

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

sense of belonging internally. Which she then, learned how to ripple outward into the world. Pretty rad, right?

So, let's look more closely at the issues and the remedies. I also do want to say this clearly: As a nurse practitioner, public health nurse, I have a Master's in Public Health; wicked public health nerd over here. I want to say it clearly, that loneliness, disconnection, these are serious public health issues that call for deep systemic repair.

Humans living in isolation and disconnection suffer significant adverse health impacts that need address in so many ways. We need to increase accessibility to community, to connection. We need to bring back bus routes. We need to bring back intergenerational living, on and on and on.

So, from that broad base of really deeply believing that societal level change needs to happen. With all of that said, my focus today is sharing some remedies that we can each do internally, on a personal level, while we work collectively to build deeper social connection on a larger societal level.

Where are we going to start? Well, a great place to start around this is to check the tape that's playing in your head around belonging. You could call this a core belief. Where a belief is simply a thought that you've thought over and over and over and over so many times that it becomes what you believe about yourself in the world.

So often, folks living in codependent or perfectionist mindsets, people who are always looking outside of ourselves for approval and validation, hold on to core beliefs that don't serve us in general. Like we talked about in Episode 205.

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

And in particular, don't serve the human endeavor of belonging. So, my beauty, I want to start by talking about our thoughts. One of the biggest things that causes us to feel disconnected, lonely, apart, are our thoughts. And so, a great place to start to explore this issue is to check the tape that's playing in your head around belonging; your core belief, where beliefs are just the thoughts that you think over and over and over again.

Often, for us emotional outsourcers or folks living in codependent or perfectionist mindsets, we are folks who are always looking outside of ourselves for approval and validation. And so, we hold on to core beliefs, core stories, that don't serve us currently; because they did once. We talked about this in Episode 205.

And unwittingly, we can hold on to stories that really don't serve the human endeavor of belonging. Stories, like, "I just don't fit in. I don't connect with others." Thoughts that play over in our heads, over and over again, create our experience of life. That's just how it happens.

So, when those are the stories playing in your brain, that's what makes you feel disconnected and lonely. It's not whether you have friends or family or people around you. Because let me tell you, when I was neck deep in my emotional outsourcing, and was wicked dysregulated in my nervous system on the daily, I felt disconnected and lonely everywhere.

At a party with my dearest friends. Holding hands with my partner. And that's because the call was coming from inside the house. It was me, not the circumstance. Not who I was around or what we were doing that was causing my experience of feeling disconnection and like I didn't belong,

Because at the core of it, the issue was not that I was disconnected from others, it was that I was disconnected from myself. I didn't know how to truly be alone with myself. I stalked distraction constantly, and buffer after buffer, not realizing that that's what I was doing. All to not be with me

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

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

because it was scary to be alone with myself; uncomfortable and unnerving.

I didn't know what I would find. And I didn't have healthy models of people being with themselves without distraction to look to. And frankly, looking back, I didn't have the capacity in my nervous system to hold space for that kind of self-exploration and that level of presence.

And so, the most potent remedy I have found to feeling lonely or disconnected from others has been to look within. And to start by connecting with myself; with my mind, with my body, with my somatic presence. Engaging in conscious inquiry. Connecting with my spirit through movement, breathwork. Connecting with the whole of me through mindfulness and meditation.

And in so doing, I'm reminded that other people can't solve this problem for me. Osaya. That is, how often have you spent time with folks you love and felt great, only to feel that intense pull of loneliness the millisecond you leave the party, lock the door behind your dinner guests, or end the phone call?

I used to feel it every time I left connection with others because I was expecting them to solve my aloneness for me. To make me feel good about me. Which is just not possible. Only I can do that for me. And I was giving away my power in telling the story that others could help me feel connection. When the truth of it is, connection is an inside job.

So, let's zoom out and look at this through the lens of the nervous system. When we don't feel belonging within and go looking outside of us for it, that can be anxiety provoking, right? Because if I can't give it to myself, they have to give it to me. What if they don't give it to me? We're in ah-ha-ha-ha.

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

That can activate some sympathetic fight-or-flight. And we can find ourselves fawning; Episode 208. Appeasing others to try to gain belonging as a false version of ourselves.

When we are primed with the narratives in our mind that say we don't fit in, can't be accepted because of how flawed or lacking we are deep down; and P.S., for most of us, that was never a conscious narrative. For me, it was just the sub-sub-sub-sub-subterranean, subconscious narrative, right?

Then, we move towards dorsal. And we disconnect from ourselves *more* in those moments when someone else just cannot do enough to make us feel good and connected. So, we go dorsal, and that just leaves us, you guessed it, feeling evermore disconnection and out of belonging.

And that keeps us from reaching out to others and trying to connect, from a belief that we can't create the feeling of belonging for ourselves. Spoiler alert, we can. And that keeps us spinning in sympathetic or dorsal experience as we repeat and rebelieve the negative, painful self-talk that keeps us from being comfortable alone with ourselves.

We're uncomfortable being alone with ourselves because we aren't kind to ourselves. We're barely even nice or polite to ourselves. And from that story about ourselves as someone lacking, we assume that others are rejecting us. Because we're rejecting ourselves when we say we're not good company, even for ourselves.

We project that onto others, which leads us to not connect with them. Which makes us feel lonely and disconnected around others because of the story we tell about ourselves, and thus about them. Oh, my goodness, rinse and repeat. It's an endless hamster wheel of ouch, ouch, ouch, that keeps us from believing we're capable of belonging.

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

So, the remedy comes in shifting your thoughts and beliefs. Then, of course, matching that shift somatically in your body. Regulating your nervous system so that you can create a deeper, more intimate bond with yourself from that regulation in ventral vagal. You can remind yourself that feeling belonging and connection with others comes from your own thoughts.

And the thoughts that are available to you are available from your nervous system state. If you're jacked up in sympathetic, you have access to anxious thoughts. If you're shut down in dorsal, you have access to freeze, disconnect, thoughts.

So, be mindful of your nervous system and what you're putting in, what you're creating, how you're regulating. Be mindful of what you're thinking and repeating to yourself, and how it feels in your body when you think thoughts that alienate you from others and from yourself.

If you have thoughts like, "I am lonely. I don't have connection. No one wants to be around me. No one likes me. I am isolated," you will just make more of that come true when you continue to play those cassettes on repeat.

And, you won't like being around yourself because you're making those neural pathways, of those thoughts, so much stronger in your mind every time you let them repeat. Which brings in the importance of being our own watcher. Being our own witness, and learning to turn down the volume on those painful, harmful thoughts.

Which that is the role of a trained and experienced coach, like myself. To help you to see those thoughts that you cannot see, because they're the soup you're swimming in. And, I will help you. A good, dedicated, experienced coach, our job is to help you to poke holes in the stories that say that you suck. And to turn down the volume on those painful thoughts.

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

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

Then from there, once you've decided you're no longer going to believe and repeat the thoughts that harm you, you can remind yourself that connecting inward is the most powerful tool to support you and your nervous system in feeling safer and more resourced. To be able to reach outward. To connect with others and to be open to that connection.

Because remember, you can be a gal at a party of a million people and feel deeply and profoundly disconnected. Remember back to Episode 135, "Attachment and Nervous System Resourcing". There, we learned that we can lean on our internal nervous system resources to feel more connected with ourselves, and to create more secure internal connection.

Which helps us to feel belonging within. That bolsters us as we reach out to connect from that energy of self-love. Which in its turn, allows us to be more vulnerable, real, and open with others, which fosters deeper connection. And, you guessed it, showing up in a more real and true way as our authentic self, which creates more real and true belonging. That's pretty rad, right?

When we start to do more work on ourselves, on who we are, where we've come from, what we value, and who we want to be in the world, we can start to unpack and challenge our core beliefs from our emotional outsourcing.

Sara held a core belief that she could only be happy if the people around her were happy and fulfilled. Which, of course, makes sense from her childhood; and oh, my goodness it's a lot to put on one person. It's also impossible, and not anyone's job. But come on, we get it, right?

So, by looking back at her childhood, and doing some really powerful reparenting work in Anchored, Sara came to see how those old stories, that were once brilliant survival skills in her childhood, were now fully not serving her, in the least.

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

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

She wanted to release this core belief and start building new ones around her intrinsic worth. About her value as a friend. About how magical her authentic self is. About how much she belongs, and deserves to feel that sense of belonging. We did that together, through somatic coaching and thought work.

Now, core beliefs take time to shift. I mean Anchored is six months because like, oh my god, we need six months, right? So, I want to remind you and encourage you to have patience. And of the importance of having guidance, with a loving coach like moi. How crucial and important that is here.

And of course, to take kitten steps, my love. If you're new to the show, we talk about kitten steps, because baby steps are like way too big when we're working with the nervous system. We need to take tiny, baby, kitten-sized steps.

Of course, we need to make sure that our new core beliefs, the replacement core beliefs, are honest reflections of how we feel. That is an incredibly vital part of doing thought work. Because affirmations only count as affirmations if they are true and believable and resonate as true in our bodies.

So, this is where we come to another crucial ingredient in today's remedy recipe, self-acceptance and self-love. So many of us know that experience of feeling alone in a crowded room. That loneliness usually has deeper roots in our sense of self-worth or lack thereof. As well as our thoughts, like we've been talking about.

And so, when we do somatic or body-based work, we get into deep and meaningful contact with ourselves. So, we can start to appreciate and love who we are, as unique and important individuals, and as part of the collective to which we all belong.

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

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

For some folks out there, their upbringings were filled with unconditional love and acceptance. Which sounds great! Which taught them to love and accept themselves, and perform and operate from secure attachment.

For the rest of us, our childhood experiences may have taught us that our value was contingent. And that getting full, viscerally felt love and acceptance depended on getting good grades, behaving a certain way, being a good girl, pretty girl, you-name-it girl or boy.

When we grow up uncertain of our worth, we carry that self-doubt into adulthood, along with the insecure attachment that was fostered by the lack of childhood attunement in our nervous system. The amazing news, is that we now get the chance as adults to challenge those painful and connection-blocking thought patterns and somatic vibrations.

We can start to explore who we are, and can grow in our self-love and acceptance as we get to know ourselves again, and can celebrate ourselves and what we value. Once we are better able to find our worth within ourselves, we can feel more at ease around others. More at home in ourselves. Which both helps keep loneliness at bay, and also makes us more likely to be the kind of at ease, honest, and accessible people that others want to be around. Which is, of course, an added bonus.

That is to say, my beauty, a key step in belonging is being the cake. Oh, that just hit me. It's all about bringing the cake, right? When we feel that disconnection it's because we're asking others to be our cake. We forgot that they're just icing. And if you're like, "What on earth is this woman talking about?" Episode 166 awaits you when this one's over, in just a little minute. Be the cake. It's the answer.

Oh, my darling, this work is challenging. And I want to give each and every one of you a big ole bear hug of love for being here today. For listening in, and making your own healing and growth a priority. Remember, in this

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

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

family we are patient and loving with ourselves, because healing takes time. Change is challenging because of our human brains, and change is possible.

Studies show that change happens and is sustainable and long-lasting when we heal in community. And so, I'd like to invite you to head over to VictoriaAlbina.com/Anchored to learn all about my powerful, amazing six-month community-based somatic-, thought work-, breathwork-based coaching program, Anchored.

It is my absolute favorite place. My favorite thing. It is the sweetest, kindest, most loving humans ever. It is a powerful group of women who are so dedicated to improving their lives. And to creating accountability, love, community, support, for everyone else in the program to do the same. It is hundreds of hours of time with me coaching, doing breathwork, connecting and it is powerful.

The change that comes out of Anchored is nothing short of mind-blowing. And I'm not sure how much longer I'm going to be running it. It may be something that I'm packing up pretty soon, as I shift gears towards more somatic-based practices and offerings.

So, if you are interested in the Anchored process; in overcoming codependent, perfectionist and people-pleasing thinking, now's your time. Head on over to VictoriaAlbina.com/Anchored and apply now. It costs nothing to apply. It just takes a few minutes. Put your name in the ring, and let's see what happens, right?

It would be a delight to talk with you, and to talk more about the program, and to welcome you to the Anchored family. It truly is the most beautiful family, indeed. All right, my loves, more to come on belonging.

Ep #211: Belonging and Connection

For now, take a look at those thoughts. Connect in with your body. Be patient, be loving, be kind. And ask yourself; How can I build more intimacy and more connection with me? What does that look like today?

Alright, my 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 gonna be a good one!