

Ep #213: Your Nervous System and Substances



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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. My beauty, as emotional outsourcers, which we herein define as folks with codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing habits, along with, and I'm expanding our definition a bit in this very moment to include those of us who walk around the world dysregulated, living from the neck up.

We, the emotional outsourcers, often lose track of who we are, and we have unintentional unconscious behaviors in relation to others that we learned as survival skills, often from our family of origin or from childhood.

We don't realize how those old thoughts, feelings, actions are harming and hurting us until we wake up to the patterns in our lives that have kept us feeling stuck and spinning. Like we're doomed to always live in the pit of despair, reenacting and reenacting the old, lousy, painful pattern of relating.

Similarly, and just as unwittingly, we may have unintentional unconscious relationships with certain substances, and may not realize how they're negatively affecting us, our sense of self-identity, and even our relationships in the world.

So today, I want to talk about the work I've been doing around what I'm calling substances of dysregulation, in my own life. The central new thought I've been working on is this: I'm no longer available to be dysregulated by substances. Oof, it's a powerful statement. And it's been magical to work with it. To bring it into the fabric of who I am. To make it a potent part of my psyche and how I do.

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So, let's get to know it and see if it resonates as a new thought you might want to include in your own thought work, and bring into your body, and see where it lands, how it resonates through somatic practice. But first up, my nerds, let's define terms.

What is dysregulation? Well, our magnificent nervous systems are responsible for managing our safety, energy, mood, and so much else in our body via the vagus nerve, the 10th cranial nerve.

When the nervous system senses that we are unsafe, via neuroception, which is our brain's subconscious threat detector, then our autonomic or automatic nervous system fires up. And the sympathetic leg of the autonomic nervous system, which is our fight or flight response gets activated during emergencies, stress.

It prepares us to fight a lion or flight from a lion. It gets us up and running full of adrenaline, norepinephrine, and eventually cortisol, our stress hormone. Eventually, the rest and digest parasympathetic nervous system; that's where both dorsal, which can be freeze but can also be rest, and ventral vagal, the safe and social part of the nervous system; those are both part of parasympathetic.

After a certain amount of sympathetic, once we feel safe, we've escaped the lions, the parasympathetic kicks in and returns the body to its calmer resting state. The goal in life is for these two systems to be in harmony. For there to be a balance between ventral vagal, totally just safe, social, here, all as well. And a little bit of sympathetic to get us going, come back. And then a little bit of dorsal because there's no savasana without dorsal, there's no rest without a little bit of dorsal.

So, when our nervous system is regulated, we are able to go into a nervous system state other than ventral vagal and come back; go and come back, go and come back. And that ability to be flexible and to move through the

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nervous system states can be disrupted by stress; distress, trauma, chronic stress if not acute stress, not having adequate social support, marginalization, micro and macro aggressions, unresolved past issues in our lives, growing up in families full of emotional outsourcers, on and on.

And so, our body can begin to react to the world around us as though the house is on fire, when it's really just that somebody lit up match. Our body can activate or trigger way too much fight or flight without the capacity to bring in enough ventral vagal, rest, and calm to balance it out. And that's when our nervous system becomes dysregulated.

Now, way back in the day, on the savanna of life, the only time we would get so wicked activated was when there was an actual, literal lion. But alas, these days it can be a text message from your mom or your boss needs to talk or any of the daily stressors of life can lead to these moments of dysregulation. So, that's what dysregulation is in your nervous system.

Enter substances of dysregulation. Which is the term I came up with to talk about those substances that take us out of ventral vagal and jack us up into sympathetic activation or collapse us into dorsal shutdown. I like this term because it makes it clear how individual this is, and that there's no judgment involved.

At least, not on my end, in the term, because I'm never out here to demonize any substance or choice you make in your life. Rather, I'm here to invite us all into more awareness and intentionality. It's also important to be clear that a substance that dysregulates me, might be totally fine for you, and vice versa.

For example, caffeine, we're going to talk all about how much it messes me up, in a hot minute. I've known several people who can drink coffee, literally, like in bed and then can fall asleep immediately. Never a jitter or an

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anxious moment to be had when they chug espresso. That's largely genetic.

So, my substances of dysregulation may not be the same as yours, and vice versa; that's that. And, and, and, and I will also say, because nerd alert, nerd alert, nerd alert, there's many a study about stimulants and depressants, like the caffeine end of it or the alcohol end of it, that show that these substances do in fact, have often not insignificant impacts on the nervous system of most living things. Generally speaking, lead us to not think as well or clearly, have altered moods and sleep cycles, on and on.

Alcohol in particular, you might feel like you're sleeping better after having a cocktail, but your sleep architecture, the amount of REM and deep sleep, beta, theta, etc. is messed up by the alcohol. And so, the take-home is this as we enter into this conversation, you know you best, you do what's best for you. And as always, I'm out here being, "Hey, babe, let's get curious. Let's be compassionate with ourselves and let's get curious."

I'm going to share my personal example here today, in the hopes that it is supportive for you. And your experience will vary because you are not Maria Victoria Albina Corvedo, that's me, and you have your own lived experience.

So, the crux of this work around substances of dysregulation for me has been around caffeine. I have ADHD, and typical of folks with a verified squirrel mind, I sure do love a stimulant. Caffeine, for many years, made me feel more focused. And now, on the other side of it, meaning not drinking it, I've come to see the complexity of how it was working in my body.

Alcohol, I've always been pretty agnostic around it. I mean, I like the taste, but drinking to excess hasn't been chamativo, it hasn't called me, right? It's not my jam. When I've been dating people who drank to excess, I would

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sometimes keep up with them. There was one person I dated in Boston who, oof we drank a lot. But on my own, it's not a substance that I tend to overuse.

Sugar had it's hooks in me for a hot minute. But wow, my real substance of abuse and dysregulation has always been delicious stimulant beverages. And also, side note, oh my god, I'm so glad I never tried cocaine because wow, I would have loved it.

I feel like there was a tiny angel on my shoulder keeping me away from that one, for sures. That would have been a dark, dark rabbit hole I would have fallen down had I Tangoed with cocaine. And remember, I'm the Argentine in the room, so I get to talk about tangoing. Oh, my goodness, I'm ridiculous.

Anyway, if have you been listening to this show for a while, you may recall that I weaned myself off of yerba maté, the drink of my people, about a year ago and wow, what a difference that made. I decided to come off of maté, largely because I was not in right relationship with it.

As an herbalist, as someone who works with plants in deep and powerful ways, it is incredibly important to me to come correct to the plants that I'm imbibing, that I'm taking in, that I'm in relationship with. As an animist. the plants are truly my relations. I see them as sentient, powerful, amazing creatures with energies and personalities of their own.

I was drinking maté like coffee. Which I will say, coffee is a beautiful plant that should be respected too, but I was drinking it the way I drank coffee in college, just chugging and chugging and chugging it.

One day, I was working with my mentor Ayan, and he noticed that my energy was bouncy, fragmented, unbalanced and even chaotic. Not first

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thing in the morning, not when we just started the day's work. But when I got to chugging maté, my energetic field would get all kinds of crinkly and kapow on the edges. And he was right.

I was not treating that sacred teacher plant... And by the way, her botanical name is *Ilex paraguariensis*, and I grow several of her here, in my house. I wasn't treating her with the respect and honor she deserves. I was using her as a drug; unintentionally, unconsciously.

And the secondary impact in my body was not cute. I was indeed energetically jittery. My thoughts could get racy and too fast to handle. Hyper focused and then quickly losing my focus. And I didn't feel like I was able to reconnect with my focus without more maté. It became a crutch for me, something I was indeed dependent on.

And beyond that, once I was able to step into being my own watcher around my caffeine use, I started to see the anxiety and worry it would provoke in me, the spininess. And this is challenging to admit, but luckily, it's just you and me here. So, no bigs, right? Hoo, too much caffeine makes me mean; I know, me!

I'm a very tender, tenderoni indeed, and too much caffeine, when I cross the line into being whoosh full up with adrenaline, mostly the cortisol, it gives me this bite, this spark, this edge where I'm a little sharp, and can be jabby and quick to grump and grumble, to be dissatisfied with life. And all of that? Hoo, that is just not me. It's not the me that I know and love.

All of this, that caffeine provokes, is a side of me that rarely, rarely comes out otherwise. Generally speaking, I'm very tender, soft, and sweet. Which doesn't mean I'm not firm, direct, and bold. I am all of those things. Just ask anyone in Anchored who's gotten my patent pending tough love tenderoni coaching; oh, I will be firm, directive and bold.

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The part of me that doesn't usually come up or out is the anxious, jangly, biting, mean part. And the thing that can bring that right up and out is caffeine. It rattles my nervous system in such a palpable way and takes me out of integrity with myself, which is one of the many things I couldn't see until I took a big step back from it.

Caffeine impacts our bodies much like speed does. It races up our hearts and minds, makes us jittery, makes our bodies believe that there is a lion chasing us. And not everyone feels the impact of caffeine the way I do, as a super sensitive animal. I didn't always feel the full impacts of caffeine on my body.

The more I learned how to regulate my nervous system and the more I practiced somatics or body-based modalities and learned how to be present and embodied in life, instead of living from the neck up and numbing from the neck down. The more I started to notice the impacts of caffeine on my energy, mood, and outlook on the world. And geez oh Pete, did I not like what I saw there.

And so, after coming to really begin to see these ways that caffeine was dysregulating me, I decided to take a break. To wean myself so slowly, and oh my goodness was I tired. It was like several weeks, maybe even a month, of just kind of really dragging ass. And wow, the renewed energy I feel off of caffeine is like kind of startling some days, it's pretty wild.

I also feel this kind of deepening into connection with self, that's come from stepping out of an adrenalized, adrenaline-based life. Broadly speaking, Yin is thought of in Chinese medicine... I'm just a person who's interested in Chinese medicine, this is not my area of expertise. So, if I get something wrong in the following, I hope you'll be patient with me. I share with love.

So, Yin is the inward, flowing, still, slower, creative, dark energy, that is referred to as the archetypical sacred feminine. In a way that has

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absolutely nothing to do with modern sex or gender or the binary or none of that, it's an ancient conceptualization. Meanwhile, Yang is the archetypical sacred masculine. Its energy moves out, is a faster, hotter, brighter, more oomph. While Yin is more shhhhh.

Before stepping away from caffeine, I didn't realize how much I craved the Yang quickness. And how much it was a buffer for me to feel that boom of Yang. I had no idea that I was telling the story that if I didn't feel that familiar pressure behind my eyes from too much caffeine, if I didn't feel racy and zippy and wheee, then I couldn't possibly get anything done. Isn't that wild?

I had no idea that thought was in there until I did a whole bunch of somatic centering and thought work around caffeine. Turns out I wanted coffee, maté, black tea; something outside of myself. Typical emotional outsourcing, right? To make me feel racy, so I could focus and produce, produce, produce. I was in a codependent relationship with caffeine. Wow. Right?

And it was intense for a few decades there. I mean, at the same time, come on, I did get a ton done and got lots of accolades, atta girls, certificates, degrees, etc. But at what cost to my mental and physical health? To my actual physical heart, my adrenal glands, my thyroid, my digestive and menstrual health?

Where things like ovulation are indeed wicked Yin at their core. At what cost to my mood and sense of self? Sure, I could write really fast and read fast and get it all done fast, but it wasn't worth it. Because at the end of the day, what do we have besides our health and our dignity? To go all hospice nurse on ya, I'll say, not much, my darlin. Not much.

Deciding to take caffeine mostly out of my life, has been the choice to create a more yin experience of life. Which has been super rewarding,

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super interesting, and challenging in a lot of ways after spending decades chasing Yang and living in a yang way; that racing energy and personality and identity.

And I couldn't be happier that I've replaced my day with more meditation, more yoga, more journaling, more slow walks, more feeling peaceful in my mind, body, and spirit, instead of jacked up and twitchy, on external go-go-go juice. And the funny thing is, I actually have better focus now. I have better sleep, I have better energy, I have better mood. I don't do things that are outside of my integrity, like be a meanie-pants. I just feel better overall.

And when I do sit down to write, there's this different drive to it that actually is more effective and more efficient than when I was on all of that caffeine. Fascinating right?

It was only by doing the work to come back into my body, to get somatically present with and in myself, that I started to really not just see but feel how much certain substances for me, again mostly caffeine but also kind of sugar and alcohol, effed me up, dysregulate my nervous system, take me out of my bodily dignity, and just make me feel like crap-ola.

Again, I didn't feel the effects of caffeine in a way I noticed, for years; scratch that, decades. I'm South American, I've been drinking coffee since I could reach the kitchen table. My darling, I just thought my anxiety, worry, sometimes insomnia, intermittent depression, and meanie-pants fits were just part of my personality. I thought it was me.

And that's been the biggest gift of all here. Recognizing that the me I seem to be on stimulants, is not actually me. The automatic, unintentional thoughts and feelings that arise in my mind and body, like the anxiety and racing of caffeine, especially coffee, the swirling that comes from that sympathetic activation, those are not the truest expression of me. My

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calmer, more grounded, more centered self, that's me. That's Maria, Victoria Albina Corvedo.

The one who's kind, gentle, direct, bold, and balanced; [inaudible]; that's me. I'm not anxious without caffeine. Except, I mean, I'm a human, right? If I saw a lion in the backyard, I will get anxious. It's normal. But I don't get anxious outside of a time, a place, and a circumstance that actually makes sense. I sleep like llama, nestled into a soft patch of new spring grass at the base of Aconcagua, the highest point in the Andes between Argentina and Chile. That is to say, I sleep really well.

Oh, my darlings, I like who I am so much better without the buffer of substances that regulate me. And so, I proclaim, I am no longer available to be in a codependent relationship with substances. I am no longer available for substances to dysregulate me. Because let's be real, life gets lifey and dysregulating all on its own, am I right? I'm not out here inviting in the old struggle bus, the old trigger truck, just for funsies and to feel a little zip in my step for a few hours.

Nah, I'm here to manage my own nervous system without substances throwing me off kilter. And that includes caffeine, sugar in excess or on its own. Because I eat sugar, just sparingly and only after vegetables, protein, and fat. That includes alcohol, which I'll have on rare occasion, but not really much at all. Because, again, why dysregulate myself and leave presence?

Your list may be different, and is likely somewhat the same because these are some top tier dysregulators for mammals, because science. And so, if this has piqued your interest. If you are curious about the role of substances in your own life, I'll invite you into the following inquiry. Here are some questions to ponder and ask yourself.

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Who are you without your substances of dysregulation, your buffering substance of choice? How do you show up in the world with those substances and without them? What are your mood, energy, personality, productivity levels, and sleep, really like without these substances? Are you actually anxious, worried, nervous, or depressed? Or is it the impact of, or the aftermath of, a substance? Are you actually a person with nervous system regulation issues? Or once again, is it the substances?

No one knows the answer to these questions other than you. And you might not even know the answers, yet. I know I didn't. And so, I'll invite you to get curious about the role of alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, sugar, etc. in your life.

If you want to see what life is like without them, consider trying it out. See if you might pull a community around you. Anchored is a community program, because studies show that we make change and change is sustainable when we do it in community. Right? So, see if you have a friend who might want to step away from caffeine with you.

And that language, for me, was really important. I have never quit anything in my life. I'll say, like, I have not quit smoking, I just don't identify as a smoker so it's not a thing I do. I haven't quit caffeine, it's just not a part of who I am. I don't drink caffeine on the regular, it's not who I am.

That was important for me, because the “quitting language”, A #1, meant I could go back, and I didn't want to leave that open as a possibility for myself. And B #2, it was really framed as something I was giving up, and I've given up a lot in my life in ways that have felt quite crappy.

So, I'm not out here trying to do that anymore. Instead, I'm living into a new identity, and I'm declaring what that does and doesn't involve. So, you finesse, you wordsmith the language that works for you and rock it out. Do

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it on your own if that's right for you. But consider doing it with a friend or loved one.

And now, we will pause for nurse practitioner science real talk. My beauty, please do not stop drinking caffeine cold turkey; the headache and the constipation, oh my god. Titrate down. So, if you're drinking, let's say, four cups of coffee a day, go down to three cups. From three, two weeks later, to two. And start really cutting down until you're having one cup of half-caf. And then three quarters decaf. Then all decaf for like a week or two.

But really let the process take weeks, it is worth it. My favorite tip, in the last week, fully off of caffeine including off of decaf, keep coffee beans in your pocket. And if you get that caffeine withdrawal headache, or a little fogginess, you can suck on one of the coffee beans for just a few seconds. That will give you enough caffeine to sort of stop the headache and bring you back from that fogginess. It can really help. Isn't that cute?

When we come off of stimulants, so nicotine, caffeine, and other stimulants, that will reduce the amount your body is in sympathetic activation. And so, your bowels won't think you're being chased by a lion. And they won't constantly shove your food through and just evacuate quickly, which is what stimulants make your body do.

So, you're going to absorb your food better, your nutrients better. That's amazing, and if you don't plan for it, you're likely to get constipated coming off stimulants. That is a reason, I remember this from my primary care days, people would start smoking or drinking coffee again because they couldn't poop and that feels friggin' terrible.

Please increase your water like wild, consider a fiber supplement if that's appropriate for you medically, and talk to your healthcare team to see if taking around 300 mg or so of magnesium citrate, and two to four grams or more, if your body can handle it, of vitamin C a day. If that could be right for

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you as a way to help keep your bowels moving. And I'll put a link to my favorite place to get supplements in the show notes.

That's not a sponsored ad thing, it's just, as a functional medicine provider, I had to send my patients somewhere to get supplements and I like Fullscript. They're a Canadian pharmacy and they are dope.

On a very serious note about alcohol, if you are having more than four to six alcoholic beverages a night, most nights, or feel dependent on alcohol to get through your day, if you are drinking within 30 minutes of waking up, then stopping it cold turkey is unlikely to be safe for you.

So, I want to really encourage you to talk to your licensed medical care team before stopping alcohol, so you can work together to build the safest quit plan for you.

Finally, wrapping up I'll say this, I'm not out here with some abstinence as the high-holy, bestest choice, kind of b.s. Harm reduction is everything, and it's something I truly and deeply believe in. I personally couldn't see how caffeine was harming me until I stopped it. Now, I don't use it unconsciously or unintentionally anymore. When I use it, I use it thoughtfully and on purpose, like the drug that it is.

If I get off a red-eye, I might have some caffeine. And that is not a problem, again, it's a choice from presence. I just don't abuse it anymore. And that works so well for my life, my sense of self, my world. I'll invite you to get curious about your own relationship to potentially dysregulating substances. To see what the "what" is for you so you can decide what you are available for and what you're simply not.

Thank you for joining me, my love. If you are loving the show, I would be so delighted if you could head over to Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen

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to *Feminist Wellness*, give it a five-star review and a written review. What that does, is it helps to lift *Feminist Wellness* up in the ratings. And so, that means that on search, more people are going to be offered the show when they search for codependency, perfectionism, people pleasing, feminism, etc.

So, you really can play a really important role in helping me help more people, by getting them this free resource that I spend so much time working on. Thank you, in advance, for giving the show a five-star review and a written rating. I really, really, really appreciate it. And extra bonus points if you screenshot the show and share it to your social media; tag me @VictoriaAlbinaWellness.

Alright, my beauty, 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!