Ep #342: Why I Don't Use the Term “Codependency”

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Béa Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Feminist Wellness with Béa Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Ep #342: Why I Don't Use the Term “Codependency”

This is *Feminist Wellness*, and I’m your host, Nurse Practitioner, somatics and nervous system nerd, and life coach Béa 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. There is a word that I want to invite us all to move away from. A word I've never really liked but is also on the cover of my first book because it's the word we're all using. Drum roll, please. It's codependent.

Before you shimmy away from this show thinking I'm about to tell you that those behaviors that add up to codependent experience simply don't exist, hold on. Hold up, hold up. They absolutely do. I know because I used to live really deep inside them. If you've been called codependent, if like me, you've called yourself that, if you recognize yourself in those patterns of people pleasing and emotional caretaking and losing yourself in other people's chaos, my beauty, I see you. Those experiences are real and valid, for sure. But the word itself, codependent, honey baby, please, it's got to go. I'm going to tell you why.

Let us start by time traveling back to the last century, by which I do mean the late 1970s and 80s. The term codependent crawled out of the 12-step movement and was specifically designed to describe partners and family members of people struggling with addiction. And it really came to prominence during the War on Drugs. And listen, I get why it felt necessary at the time for Lois, the wife of Bill W, the guy who came up with the 12 steps with AA, to make a group for her and her people. These folks needed language for their experience. We all do. They needed someone to say, "Hey, what's happening to you matters too."

But here's where it gets messy. This word was born inside the disease model of addiction and specifically during the height of the War on Drugs. Think about the cultural context here. We were in full-blown "addiction is a moral failing" mode. Criminalization was ramping up, and the solution to substance use was punishment, not compassion. So in that framework,

codependent wasn't just a description. It became a diagnosis. Suddenly you weren't just someone trying to survive a difficult relationship, you were someone with a condition, something broken that needed fixing. And conveniently, your brokenness was part of the problem.

Then came the concept of enabling, initially meant to be educational. Hey, these behaviors might not be helping in the way you think they are. But over time, that word grew fangs. It became a moral cudgel that created an impossible bind for families. Think about what enabling actually does. It makes any act of care suspect. Give your struggling adult child money for groceries, you're enabling. Don't give them money and they go hungry, you're being cruel. Let them stay on your couch when they're homeless, enabling, enabling. Turn them away and something terrible happens, now you're heartless.

The framework sets up families to fail no matter what they choose, and you can apply that to romantic relationships, friendships, work situations, any situation of relating. Even worse, it shifts the entire focus away from the complex realities of substance use and addiction, the genetics, the trauma histories, the lack of accessible treatment, the stigma that prevents people from seeking help, the systemic issues like poverty and housing instability that make recovery nearly impossible. Instead, it puts a spotlight on whether mom gave her son $20 for gas. It's victim blaming disguised as therapeutic insight.

Instead of addressing why someone struggling with substance use cannot access quality treatment or why our society criminalizes mental health crises, or why trauma goes untreated for generations, we scrutinize whether the family members are loving folks the right way. It weaponizes love itself, turning natural protective instincts into evidence of pathology. And guess who got beat over the head with this cudgel most often? Women.

Here's what happened. Women, especially wives, mothers, daughters, were doing exactly what patriarchy had trained them, us, to do from birth:

keep the peace, put others first, read the room before you read yourself to the point where you can't even read yourself and you actually have no self. Smooth rough edges for everyone else, be accommodating, be selfless, be the emotional shock absorber for the whole family, the whole friend circle, the whole system. Then, when women showed up in adulthood doing exactly that, suddenly, it was pathological. Suddenly, their care was codependent, their love was enabling, their inclination to nurture became evidence of their brokenness.

It's the ultimate gaslighting, honestly. The same culture that celebrates mothers for being so selfless, being there no matter what. The same system that teaches girls to be caretakers from jump will diagnose them as codependent when they become, well, caretakers. This pattern extends far beyond gender. People from marginalized communities learn hypervigilance as a true survival skill and then get labeled as "too sensitive" or "codependent" for reading rooms and managing others' comfort, for speaking up with micro and macroaggressions.

Trauma survivors develop finely tuned threat detection systems and then get told they're anxious or controlling for staying alert to danger, when danger has been present. The codependent framework takes behaviors that make perfect sense in context and strips away that context entirely. It individualizes problems that are often, if not always, systemic. It puts the focus on changing yourself because you're broken, instead of acknowledging the conditions that shape these survival strategies in the first place.

And here's another fundamental problem. The label has been medicalized without being medical. People talk about codependency like it's a chronic illness, like there's some biomarker in your blood that proves you have it, like your brain is fundamentally defective in some measurable way. But my beauty, codependency isn't a disease. There's no lab test for it, no pathology living in your cells, no genetic mutation that makes you naturally codependent.

Ep #342: Why I Don't Use the Term “Codependency”

What there is, is learned behavior, adaptive strategies, survival patterns that your brilliant nervous system developed to keep you safe in whatever environment you grew up in. Now, this is where the real science actually gets interesting. So nerd alert. Those patterns people call codependent, they're what I call emotional outsourcing. Survival strategies your nervous system learned to navigate relationships where your safety and belonging felt conditional.

If your early environment taught you that love, love came with strings attached, well, then what were you to do but manage someone else's moods in order to avoid conflict, anticipate needs before they were spoken, keep everyone happy? Your body logged that information as essential, vital survival code.

This isn't stored as conscious memory. It lives in what we call procedural memory, the automatic, body-level how of your life. Your amygdala, the emotion center, fear and threat center in the brain, learns to detect the earliest signs of someone's irritation. Your hippocampus supplies the context. Last time mom got that tone, things got bad fast, better fix it. Your basal ganglia run the automatic response. Smile, agree, make it better. Your vagus nerve carries the emotional temperature of the room. This is your nervous system being brilliant, not broken. It adapted perfectly to the conditions you were in.

The problem isn't that you learned these patterns. The problem is when you keep running them in contexts where they no longer serve you. Let me tell you about my client Jessica. She came to me exhausted after years of being told she was codependent because she couldn't stop over-functioning in her romantic relationships. Therapists had labeled her attachment style as anxious, told her she was too much, advised her to practice stepping back and letting her partners take more of the responsibility around the house and for what was going on in their shared life. Jessica tried really hard. She tried everything they suggested. She

read books about secure attachment, she practiced not texting first, she forced herself to wait before offering help or solutions.

But every time her partner seemed stressed or distant or just not responding how she expected, her body would flood with panic. Her chest would constrict like someone was tightening a vise around her ribs. Her hands would start to tremble and sweat, and she'd find herself frantically planning the perfect date, cooking his favorite meal, or researching solutions to whatever problem he'd mentioned. Doing cartwheels to try to make him feel better, all before she'd even consciously decided to do anything at all. The therapy she'd received treated all of this as neediness and pathologized it. It was just evidence of her codependency anyway, proof that she had unhealthy attachment patterns that needed to be managed and controlled.

But when we looked at Jessica's history through a nervous system lens, a somatic or body-based lens, a compassionate and loving lens, a different story emerged. Jessica had grown up watching her parents' marriage teeter on the edge of collapse daily. They lived in the same house but were not in the same marriage. She learned that relationships were fragile ecosystems that required constant, careful tending to survive. When her mom would get that glassy, distant look after another fight, Jessica would appear with perfectly brewed tea and gentle questions about her day. When her dad came home radiating tension from work, Jessica would greet him with a spotless kitchen and her latest straight A report card. Anything to soften his edges before he and her mom started snapping at each other again and again and again.

Her nervous system absorbed the message, "Love is one careless moment away from shattering. I am valuable when I'm preventing disasters. Relationships survive when I anticipate every need and smooth every rough edge before anyone even notices it's there." This wasn't some problematic attachment defect we could call codependency. No, this was a

brilliant child learning to keep love alive and safety present through sheer force of hypervigilant effort.

Once Jessica understood this, everything shifted. Instead of shaming herself for caring too much, she could appreciate how exhaustingly hard her younger self had worked to hold her family together. Instead of trying to suppress her protective instincts, she could learn to channel them consciously. Instead of forcing herself to step back, she could practice staying present with herself, embodied with herself while loving others.

And all of this is exactly why I don't use the term codependent. Because language shapes reality. When you call yourself a codependent person, you're not just describing behavior, you're claiming an identity rooted in pathology. You're saying, "I am fundamentally flawed," instead of, "I learned some strategies that worked then but don't work now. Let me learn some new ones." When I work with my clients, I use my new term, emotional outsourcing, instead because that's what's actually happening. You've learned to source your sense of worth, safety, and identity from outside yourself.

And just like you learned to do that, you can learn to source those things from within. I've seen it in hundreds of clients and in my own life. The shift in language creates a shift in possibility. Instead of managing a chronic condition or living inside some oppressive identity, you're building new capacity. Instead of recovering from a disease, you're reclaiming your center. Instead of being broken, you're just being human, learning, growing, changing, shifting.

Here's what happens when you understand these patterns as nervous system adaptations instead of character defects. Well, you realize they can change. Your brain has this incredible capacity called neuroplasticity that we talk about here all the time. The same way you learned to outsource your emotional regulation, you can learn to self-regulate and co-regulate with safe others. The same way you learned to make others' needs more important than your own, you can learn to hold both.

Ep #342: Why I Don't Use the Term “Codependency”

Beauty, beauty, beauty, you can't shame yourself into this change. Shame activates the same survival patterns you're trying to shift. When you're in shame, your nervous system goes into protective mode: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. Those aren't states where learning and growth can happen. This is why the codependent label is so counterproductive. It keeps people stuck in shame about their natural capacity for care. It makes them wrong for patterns that once kept them alive and should be celebrated first and foremost for all they've done for you.

So what actually helps? Real change happens when you understand your patterns with compassion. When you can look at your people pleasing and say, "Of course you learned to do this. It made perfect sense in the context you were in. In fact, it was brilliant." When you can see your hypervigilance about others' moods as evidence of your nervous system's intelligence, not your pathology, change can happen. From that place of understanding, you can start to build new options.

This means learning to notice when you're emotionally outsourcing. It means practicing staying in your body when other people are dysregulated and not leaping into their emotional field trying to save them from having feelings. It means building a relationship with your own needs, desires, wants, limits, boundaries, not as selfish acts, but as essential skills for sustainable connection, as resentment prevention.

Here's what this looks like in practice. You notice your chest tightening when your partner seems irritated, and instead of immediately jumping into fix-it mode, you take three deep breaths, orient your nervous system, find your feet, find the ground, and ask yourself, what do I need? You feel the urge to take over a project because someone else is struggling and you pause to consider. How can I be supportive without taking responsibility for their experience? How can I meet them with love? My beauty, it's understanding that you can care deeply about someone without taking responsibility for their emotional state.

Ep #342: Why I Don't Use the Term “Codependency”

You can love someone fiercely without making their problems yours to solve. You can be supportive without being someone's whole support system. Here's what I propose instead of the codependent model: radical self-compassion paired with nervous system and somatic or body-based education. Instead of, "I'm codependent," try, "I learned to manage relationships through emotional outsourcing, and I can learn different strategies." Instead of, "I'm enabling," or, "I'm an enabler," try, "I'm responding from old patterns and I can practice responding from choicefulness." Instead of, "I have a disease," or, "I am defective," try, "I have learned behaviors, and I can learn new ones."

These shifts in language, they're not just about semantics. They're truly transformational. They move you from being a victim of your own pathology to being the agent of your own growth. They honor your survival intelligence while opening space for your evolution. My beauty, this work takes patience. It takes practice, and what doesn't help us move forward is pathologizing yourself, being meanie pants to you, or carrying shame about your natural human capacity for care and your brilliant survival skill.

So if you've been carrying the codependent label, I want you to know there is nothing wrong with you. Your care is not pathological. Your patterns made sense in the context they developed in, and you have the capacity to evolve them now in ways that better serve adult you. My beauty, you don't need to recover from codependency because you don't have a disease and you're not codependent. You need to understand your nervous system, honor your history, reestablish presence in your own body, and build new skills for navigating relationships from a place of choice rather than compulsion or obligation.

If you want the complete roadmap for understanding exactly how these patterns formed in your nervous system and your mind and the step-by-step process for building new capacity for relationships without losing yourself, that's exactly what I walk you through in my new book. I give you the tools for identifying your specific emotional outsourcing patterns and

habits, understand their brilliant origins, and practice new ways of being in relationship that honor both your care for others and your own needs. My beauty, that's the work. That's the path, and that's what I'm here to support you in. Not as someone broken who needs fixing, but as someone whole who's ready to grow.

My beauty, I hope you will join me in pre-ordering End Emotional Outsourcing. You can grab your copy at BeatrizAlbina.com/book and get some free presents there. Thank you for joining me, 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 our world. Be well, my darling. I'll talk to you soon. Ciao.

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you want to learn more all about somatics, what the heck that word means, and why it matters for your life, head on over to BeatrizAlbina.com/somaticswebinar for a free webinar all about it. Have a beautiful day, my darling, and I'll see you next week. Ciao.