

Ep #347: Healing Unmet Needs and Attachment Patterns



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With Your Host

Búa Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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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. Perfect little lamb chop. There's a reason you repeat the same painful patterns. The ones you can't explain, can't seem to stop. There's a reason. Because you're a smart cookie. You don't just do dumb stuff for no dumb darn reason, right? Right.

So, what if you say yes when you mean no, and it's not just people-pleasing. It's your body believing that your actual survival depends on never disappointing anyone. What if you choose partners who are emotionally unavailable, then work overtime trying to earn their love because your attachment system learned that love is something you have to chase, not something you deserve.

What if you work until you're depleted, give until you're empty, perform until you're exhausted because somewhere along the way, your worth got tangled up with your productivity. What if you avoid conflict until you explode because you learned that anger is dangerous? Either it pushed people away when you were small, or it brought retaliation or just grumpiness you couldn't handle.

What if you apologize for taking up space, for having opinions, for existing too loudly, for being too quiet, because the message you internalized is that you are fundamentally way too much, but also not enough, all at once. What if you start projects but abandon them right before success because achievement might mean visibility, and visibility feels dangerous when being seen often meant being criticized.

What if you check your phone the moment you wake up, reaching for external validation and distraction for your life before you've even taken a breath because you're searching for evidence that you matter in a world

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that taught you your needs were invisible or a problem. What if you stay perpetually busy because stillness brings up feelings you are not equipped to handle? The grief, the rage, the bone-deep loneliness that you've been outrunning since childhood.

What if you give advice, but never ask for help? I'm good, thanks. Thank you so much. Because your attachment system learned that needing support means being a burden, and being a burden means being abandoned.

What if you attract the same type of person over and over? Different faces, same emotional unavailability, because you're trying to master an old wound. If you can finally get this person to love you the way you needed to be loved, then maybe you can retroactively heal the original injury.

What if you feel guilty for having needs because those needs were once met with irritation, dismissal, punishment? So your body learned that wanting anything is inherently selfish and that's really bad. What if you over-explain because you learned that your perspective was only valid if you could justify it perfectly? What if you can't receive compliments because praise feels foreign when you were shaped by criticism?

What if you feel responsible for other people's emotions because you were parentified early, made to manage the adults around you instead of being held and managed yourself, which we go into in tons of detail in chapter 2 of End Emotional Outsourcing.

What if you assume you're the problem when relationships go wrong because that's what children do? When caregivers are inconsistent or harmful, a child's brain can't comprehend that the adults are flawed. So it decides that the child must be the problem. I mean, obviously, right? That's a survival mechanism. But it becomes a relational prison in adulthood.

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What if you apologize for existing, feel guilty for wanting more, shrink yourself to fit into spaces that were never designed for your fullness? You give until you're empty, then wonder why you're resentful, not understanding that resentment is what happens when you betray your own needs repeatedly, like you were taught to.

You know you deserve better but keep accepting less because you were programmed to expect crumbs and to be so grateful for them. What if you know these habits are not serving you, but you just can't seem to stop? Oh, then my love, you sure are in the right place. And I hear you and I see you, my darling. You are so very, very not alone in any of this.

If you feel trapped in these cycles, here's what's actually happening that can be so helpful to know and to understand in a deeper way. My sweet little teddy bear, most of what we do isn't about the present moment. It's about unfinished business from when we were small and utterly dependent on caregivers who couldn't or wouldn't meet our fundamental needs for safety, attunement, belonging.

Your body is an exquisite recording device. It doesn't just remember what happened. It remembers how it felt when you cried and no one came, when your emotions, be they happiness, sadness, anger, were too big for the adults around you. When love came with conditions you could never quite meet. It remembers the terror of rejection, the desperation of trying to earn affection, the collapse that comes from chronically unmet needs.

When a child's needs for co-regulation, emotional safety, and unconditional positive regard go unmet, something profound happens in the developing brain. The neural pathways that should wire for trust, self-worth, and secure attachment instead wire for vigilance, shame, and survival. All of that because science.

Dr. Allan Schore's research shows us that the right brain, which develops through the first two years of life, is shaped entirely through relational

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experiences. So when caregivers are attuned and responsive and regulating, the child learns that the world is safe, that their emotions are manageable, are okay, are not like something that's going to kill somebody, and that relationships are and can continue to be a source of comfort.

But when caregivers are inconsistent, emotionally immature, overwhelmed, or emotionally unavailable, the developing brain adapts by becoming hypervigilant to threat and learning to manage overwhelming emotions alone, creating that "I am a rock, I am an island" story.

This creates what researchers call insecure attachment styles, which we talked all about in episodes 129, 135, 184, and 185. It's an important topic around here. But those clinical terms, they're great, but they don't capture the lived reality.

So what it actually means is that you learn to expect relationships to be sources of anxiety rather than comfort. You learn that your feels, too much. Your needs, inconvenient. Love is inherently conditional and must be earned through performance. Tap dancing instead of just being you.

For those of us with histories of unmet needs, the threshold for threat detection is set incredibly low. A slight change in someone's tone, a delayed text response, a moment of conflict, these can trigger the same response as a life-threatening emergency. Your body is still trying to protect the vulnerable child who learned that emotional or physical abandonment could happen at any moment.

The research is devastating and also super validating all at once. The adverse childhood experiences or ACEs study shows that childhood emotional neglect predicts higher rates of depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, autoimmune disorders, and even early death. Wowzers. I mean, your body remembers.

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Beauty, unmet needs don't just like poof disappear. They become the unconscious blueprint for how we move through the world. And so, here you are, decades later, living out those early adaptations and most of the time having no idea you're doing it.

Take the woman who can't seem to set boundaries at work. On the surface, it looks like people-pleasing. But when we look deeper, we see someone who learned early that disappointing authority figures meant losing safety. Perhaps her caregivers withdrew love when she didn't comply. Maybe if you weren't quiet at dinner, Mom would give you the silent treatment for hours. Or when you said no to hugging Uncle Jerry, Dad called you difficult. Or asking for your basic needs to be met got you labeled demanding. That kind of thing.

Or maybe they were so overwhelmed that her needs felt like additional burdens. Right? So when you ask for help with homework, Mom would do that like heavy sigh and would say something like, "Well, I'm already doing everything around here." Or if you got sick, you'd hear, "Great. With all I do around here, now I have to deal with this too."

Her adult body still believes that saying no could result in abandonment. So her mouth says, "Yeah, sure, fine," even when her gut screams, "No." Consider the man who keeps choosing emotionally unavailable partners. Friends tell him he's self-sabotaging, but that misses the profound intelligence of what his body is doing. His attachment system is trying to resolve an old wound by recreating the original conditions and hoping for a different outcome. Maybe love looked like Mom only paying attention when you were hurt or sick or in trouble. Or Dad was emotionally available one day, completely shut down the next.

If he can finally get someone who's been withholding to fully love him, gosh, what a win, right? Then maybe he can retroactively heal that sweet little boy who never felt good enough for consistent, loving, condition-free attention. This is an attempt at mastery. Available love doesn't match his

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early template. When someone is readily available and affectionate, it doesn't register as real love because it doesn't require the familiar dance of earning and proving and striving for love.

These patterns, writ large, represent what I call emotional outsourcing, the unconscious strategy of looking outside of ourselves for the safety, worth, and belonging that should have been our birthright. When love came with conditions, when our emotions were too much for our caregivers to handle, when our needs were met with inconsistency or irritation, our developing systems learned to become externally referenced, to not look at us, to look at them.

Perfectionism becomes an attempt to earn love through flawless performance. People-pleasing becomes a strategy to avoid the devastating experience of rejection. Overworking becomes a way to prove worth. Over-giving, a bid for belonging. If I'm indispensable, maybe I won't be discarded.

But here's what makes this particularly insidious. These strategies often do work in the short term. The perfectionist does get praise. The people-pleaser does avoid immediate conflict. The over-worker does receive recognition. But the cost is profound. A life lived in service to everyone else's needs while your own remain chronically unmet, just like they were when you were small.

The numbing behaviors, compulsive eating, drinking, scrolling, shopping, working, exercising, what we call buffers, they are not failures of willpower. They are attempts at self-soothing by a body that never learned ways to regulate overwhelming emotions that actually serve you.

When no one taught you how to be with difficult feels, when your emotions were met with dismissal or overwhelm, your body is so smart, it learns to find other ways to escape the intensity of your inner world. This is where shame becomes so destructive. It gets a whole chapter in the book.

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When we don't understand the deeper logic of our patterns, we conclude that we're broken, weak, or fundamentally flawed because what else are we going to do? But shame is just more of the same medicine that created the wound in the first place. Shame says, again, that who you are is unacceptable. Your needs are too much. You should be different than you are. Yikes.

The pathway to healing runs directly through understanding rather than judgment. When you can see that your patterns are intelligent adaptations to impossible circumstances, when you can recognize that you're still trying to get needs met that should have been met decades ago, my darling, something can soften. The self-attack can quiet, and space can open for something new.

And here's the good news. Those unmet needs can still be tended to. As we've talked about so many times, your beautiful brain remains plastic and moldable and changeable throughout your life. The same adaptations that allowed you to survive difficult circumstances can help you create new patterns based on safety rather than survival. But this work requires more than insight. Understanding why you do what you do is necessary but not sufficient.

Healing happens through corrective experiences, moments when your body gets to experience something different than what it learned to expect. More on our remedies in just a moment. Beauty, healing happens through corrective experiences, moments when your body gets to experience something different than what it learned to expect.

It starts with developing what I call pattern literacy, the ability to recognize when you're being run by old programming rather than responding from your adult self. When you notice yourself scrolling mindlessly, saying yes when you mean no, choosing the same painful dynamics, you get to pause and ask, "What am I really needing right now? What is this behavior trying to do for me?"

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Usually underneath the surface behavior is a legitimate need for connection, soothing, recognition, safety. Darling, the behavior isn't the problem. It's an attempt at meeting the need. But because it's based on childhood strategies, it often creates more of what it's trying to solve. I mean, kids, right?

The next step is learning to give yourself what you're seeking. If you're scrolling for connection, what could genuine connection look like? If you're people-pleasing for belonging, how could you create belonging that doesn't require that you betray yourself? If you're overworking for worth, what would help you feel valuable without having to earn it?

Learning to set boundaries becomes a practice in reparenting. Each time you say no to something that doesn't serve you, you're showing your inner child that their needs actually matter, that they don't have to earn love through compliance, through doing what the grown-ups want them to do and be.

Each time you ask for support instead of only giving it, you're teaching your body that you are worthy of care. And perhaps most importantly, you need experiences of secure attachment with others who can help regulate you. This might be a therapist or a coach like myself, trained in somatics or attachment-based approaches, a close friend who can stay present with your emotions without trying to fix them, a community like the one we have in Anchored, or a partner who can offer comfort without making your needs about them, or of course, a tender, loving pet.

Co-regulation, the process of one body helping another to find calm, is what you needed as a child and what you still need as an adult. Every time someone witnesses your pain without trying to manage or minimize it, sits with your anxiety without rushing to solve it, or celebrates your joy without making it about them in any way, your body gets evidence that relationships can be different than what you learned to expect.

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My sweet, tender little buttercup, this work is not linear and it is not fast, like we talked about way back in episode 80. The patterns you're working to change took years to develop and served really vital, important protective functions. There will be setbacks, moments when you fall back into old strategies, times when the new ways of being feel foreign or terrifying or too much.

But with each small act of self-compassion, each boundary honored, each need acknowledged rather than dismissed, you're laying down new neural pathways. You're teaching your body that safety is possible, that your needs matter, that you don't have to earn love through performance.

My darling, the goal isn't to never struggle again. That's not human. It's to struggle from a place of worth rather than shame. To recognize your patterns without being defined by them and to gradually increase your capacity to be with yourself and the full range of your human experience.

So much of what we do is about unmet needs and so much of our healing is about finally, tenderly, courageously meeting them. Not as the small child who had no choice but to adapt, but as the adult who can choose to create the safety and love that was always your sacred birthright.

Before we close, let's give your body a direct experience of this different kind of care. Join me in a somatic practice if it feels safe to do so. I want to invite you to take a slow, deep breath and settle into your body wherever you are. But obviously not if you're driving heavy machinery.

Let your eyes soften and find something in your environment to look at that feels neutral or even pleasant. Connect with the texture of fabric, the color of a wall, the play of light and shadow.

Notice that you are supported right now. It's a fact. Feel the chair beneath you, the ground under your feet. And remember that the earth, Pachamama, is beneath it all.

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Take a slow deep breath in. And let your next exhale be longer than your inhale. And if it feels good and safe and okay, place one hand on your heart and one on your belly.

Say these words to yourself, should you choose to, and let them land within you. I am learning to believe that my needs matter, that my needs are real, that it's okay for me to have needs. I am learning to care for myself the way I always deserved to be cared for.

Notice any relaxation that moves through you. Notice any resistance that comes up. That's just your body's way of protecting you from hope that felt dangerous when you were small. I get it.

Breathe with whatever arises. Listen, kitten, you don't have to believe these words just yet. Come on now. You just have to be willing to let your body hear them. Kitten steps.

Darling, this is how healing happens. Not through forcing change, but through offering your body new experiences of safety. One breath, one boundary, one moment of tenderness at a time. The patterns that once protected you can gradually transform into ways of being that actually serve the life you're here to live. And you get to step into all of it and to claim that life for yourself and to meet those unmet needs for you, for the life you're stepping into.

Thank you for joining me here today. 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. Ciao, talk to you soon.