

Ep #366: How Projection Is Quietly Destroying Your Relationships (And What to Do About It)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

B a Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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

Ep #366: How Projection Is Quietly Destroying Your Relationships (And What to Do About It)

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. So, this week, I want to talk to you about something that's probably effing up a significant number of your relationships. And you probably don't even know you're doing it. I had no idea I was doing it until a friend pointed it out, explained it to me, gave me so many examples, like, "Do you realize you're doing it like here, Bea, and here, and here, and here?" And I was like, "No."

I had no idea. And this thing that we do that really puts a lot of barriers between us and our relationships is projection. And if you've got codependent, perfectionist, or people-pleasing habits, that which we call emotional outsourcing around here, then you are probably doing this multiple times a week or even multiple times a day. And dollars to doughnuts, it's making your life a lot harder than it needs to be, and it might even be causing you a lot of misery and exhaustion, because it's heavy.

So here's what I want you to understand. Projection is when your body has a feeling. So fear, anger, sadness, need, whatever. And instead of recognizing that feeling as yours, you take it and you project it, like projecting a movie onto a wall, you stick it onto someone else. And then you react to them as if they're the ones having that feeling about you.

So, for example, your partner seems quiet and suddenly you are certain that they're furious with you. A friend sends a short text and you know, you just know that she's done with you. It's over. Your boss walks past your desk without saying hi and you're convinced you are about to be fired.

So here's the really tricky part. When you're in it, when you're doing it, it doesn't feel like you're making it up. It feels really true. Your chest is tight, your stomach's in knots, your whole body is screaming, "This is real." Or

Ep #366: How Projection Is Quietly Destroying Your Relationships (And What to Do About It)

you're completely numb, and this is real. Your nervous system is giving you all the evidence you need that, yep, for surezies. I mean, they are definitely mad, definitely pulling away, definitely disappointed in you, definitely judging you.

And here's what I want to offer. What if they're not? And what if that's your fear and you just, out of habit, put it on them? So let's talk about how this works. And once you can see it and you realize you're doing it, that's when everything can start to change, right?

So I want to start with the biggest one I hear the most in Anchored: they're mad at you. And this one is huge. It's the most common projection I see with my clients year after year after year in Anchored. So, someone's energy feels off, and you are immediately certain that they're angry with you. And I mean anyone: your partner, mom, best friend, coworker, the barista who's usually chatty, but today just handed you your coffee without the normal small talk. They might even have smiled, but they didn't ask about your day, right?

Your partner comes home from work and goes straight to the bedroom to change. They're not smiling, they're not talking. And you don't know that they've had problem poops all day. Your body immediately starts screaming, "They're mad! What did I do? Did I forget something? Did I say something wrong this morning? Are they about to start a fight?" And you just start spinning out.

Right? So now you're following them around the house trying to fix it. You're asking, "Are you okay? Are you okay?" in that voice that really means, "Please tell me you're not mad at me." But moreover, "Please tell me I'm not doomed." Right? You're being extra nice, extra helpful, maybe a little resentful that you have to do this, but also that's the story in your head, "I have to do this." Or maybe you go in the other direction. You get cold, you get distant yourself. "Well, fine then." Right? Protecting yourself from the

Ep #366: How Projection Is Quietly Destroying Your Relationships (And What to Do About It)

anger you are so sure is coming. And then they look at you confused and say, "What? No, I'm fine. I'm just tired. I had bad poops today."

And you feel this wave of relief mixed with embarrassment, mixed with a weird kind of anger, because, "Well, how was I supposed to know?" Or the person at the coffee shop. Usually they chat with you, ask about your day, make a comment about the weather, notice something in your outfit. Today, they just took your order, perfectly fine though, right? Like very polite, "Thanks for your order," made your drink, handed it over, but not the same level of connection. And you leave feeling terrible, replaying every interaction you've ever had with them over years, wondering what you did, wondering, "Was I rude last time without realizing it? Should I go to a different coffee shop now? Like, should I abandon the relationship?"

What's happening here is that you are carrying anger or irritation or frustration, maybe at yourself, maybe just free roaming in your system from something else entirely. Instead of feeling it as yours, you automatically go to, "Someone must be angry," and then it scans the environment for evidence. And of course, when you scan for evidence, what are you going to do? You're going to find it. Because when you're looking for angry, you'll see it everywhere. Right? A neutral face becomes a mad face. Tired becomes angry, distracted becomes furious, on and on.

This projection keeps you from being able to just let people have their own experience. Your partner gets to be tired without it meaning something about you. The barista gets to have a rough morning without you needing to take it on, figure out what you did wrong, or fix it for them. But when you're projecting, everyone's mood becomes all about you. And that's exhausting. I mean, that is exhausting, well, for everyone involved.

And it's not just about anger and are they mad at me. Projection shows up in all kinds of ways, like when you're trying to connect with someone and suddenly, you're certain they don't actually care about you. So you're telling your friend about something hard. Maybe it's work stuff, health stuff, maybe

Ep #366: How Projection Is Quietly Destroying Your Relationships (And What to Do About It)

something going on in your family. You're telling your friend about something hard. Maybe it's work stuff, maybe it's health stuff, maybe something going on in your family. And she responds by telling you about something similar that happened to her.

"Oh my God, I totally get it. When my boss did that thing, remember that thing last year? I was so..." and she's off. She's telling her story. And immediately you feel it, right? This sinking, this familiar ache in your chest, and the story starts, immediately in your brain. "She doesn't actually care. She just wanted to talk about herself. I'm not important to her. God, I never am. I'm never important to anyone. I take such good care of the people in my world, but when I need help, no one's there for me." Right? And your brain just starts telling these old stories.

You might finish the conversation, but you are not really there anymore. Lights are on, but nobody's home. You, your presence, your awareness, your consciousness, you've pulled back. You're already storing this up as more evidence that she's selfish, like everyone else, that your friendship is one-sided, like all your relationships, that you always show up for her, but she never shows up for you. And that dichotomous, that all-or-nothing, never-always, I want your Spidey senses to go up like, "I'm doing a thing," when that happens.

So what if what you're actually feeling in that moment is your own totally valid need and want and desire to be seen, to be held, to have someone just witness your pain without making it about anything else or fixing it or whatever. Like what if that need is so big and so tenderoni and so old that when it doesn't get met perfectly, part of you decides that person doesn't care at all and goes to that extreme to try to protect you.

Meanwhile, your friend might actually be trying to connect with you. She might think that sharing her experience is loving. That's how you show someone you understand, not just tell them, right? It shows them they're not alone. She might have no idea you need something different. But

Ep #366: How Projection Is Quietly Destroying Your Relationships (And What to Do About It)

you've already decided what her response means, and you've made it mean she doesn't love you. So now you don't ask for what you actually need. You just pull away. And the friendship gets more distant and you feel more alone.

Maybe it's not about anger or care, maybe it's about competence. So this one shows up a lot at home and also at work, and it can absolutely wreck your confidence and your career in a work setting. So you send your boss a report or a proposal or a memo or just an email updating her on a project. She writes back, "Thanks. Can you revise the second section and resend?" That's it. No, "Great work," or, "Thanks so much," or any of the reassurance that some part of you is desperately scanning for.

And immediately, before you have any idea what's happening, you spiral. "She hates it. She thinks I don't know what I'm doing. I'm going to get fired. Everyone's going to see I don't actually belong here." Your body is full up with shame like an overstuffed ravioli before you've even opened the document to look at what actually needs revising. Now, you're working until 2:00 a.m. trying to make it perfect. Or you're frozen, you can't even look at it, paralyzed by the absolute certainty that exists in your head and your head alone, that no matter what you do, it won't be good enough. You're walking on eggshells in every meeting, reading into every comment she makes, every expression on her face, collecting evidence that, "Yes, indeed, she's disappointed in you. Why, yes, you are failing once again because you fail at everything. You've always been a failure and—" off to the races.

What you're projecting here isn't that your boss thinks you're incompetent. You're projecting your own belief that you're not good enough, your own internalized voice that says you have to be perfect or you're worthless, your own fear that one day everyone's going to figure out you don't know what you're doing. You're a complete schmuck. And here's what makes this one

Ep #366: How Projection Is Quietly Destroying Your Relationships (And What to Do About It)

especially painful. Capitalism and patriarchy love this projection. I mean, like gremlins with pizza after dark, they feed on it.

When you're busy trying to prove your worth and scanning authority figures for their approval over your internal knowing, you're not resting, you're not negotiating for what you deserve, you're not taking up space, you're not embodied, present in your body, you're compliant and easy to exploit. But your boss might have just needed a revision. Like that might be the whole story. The projection is what's turning a neutral request into a referendum on your entire worth as a human.

And then there's the projection that hits closest to home, the one that can completely destabilize your most important relationships. You are certain someone is leaving you. So you send your partner a text, doesn't matter what, could be, "What do you want for dinner?" or, "I love you," or just something funny you saw. An hour has go by. Your body starts humming with panic. Your chest gets tight, you can't focus on anything else.

"They're pulling away. This is how it starts. They're losing interest. They're done with me. I knew this would happen. I knew this was too good to be true." And then what's that under-under-under story? "I am inherently unlovable." Maybe you send another text trying to sound casual, but really you're checking to see if they're still there. Maybe you go cold, already protecting yourself from the abandonment you are so sure is coming. Maybe you've written and deleted five different messages, each one trying to find the exact right tone that will make them somehow magically come back to you. They finally text, "Sorry, babe. Phone died. Be home soon. Love you with a string of hearts."

And you feel relief, sure. Yeah, for sure, but this strange resentment as well. And maybe a lingering feeling of, "But what if next time it's real? Huh? What if? Right? What if one of these times they really are pulling away and I miss it?" What you're projecting here isn't that your partner's unreliable or losing interest. You're projecting your own terror that love can disappear

Ep #366: How Projection Is Quietly Destroying Your Relationships (And What to Do About It)

without warning, that you have to stay vigilant or you will be abandoned, that silence on their part equals danger, that certainty, even painful certainty, is safer than the vulnerable not knowing of just waiting, just trusting, just believing in your love.

Do you see the pattern now? In every single one of these examples, there's a feeling in you: fear, need, anger, grief, shame, worry, and some painful old story. Instead of staying with the feeling and recognizing it as yours, you go to the story and throw it outward onto someone else. And then you react to your own fear and your own narrative as if it's the truth about them and how they feel. Right? And the devastating thing is that you're not responding to what's actually happening in the present moment. You're responding to an old alarm system, "Alert, alert, danger, Will Robinson," that learned a very long time ago that guessing was safer than waiting, that certainty was better than vulnerability, that if you could figure out what other people were thinking and feeling, you could stay safer. And listen, listen, listen, that system made perfect sense. I mean, kitten, come on, it worked. It kept you alive.

The problem is it's just not working anymore. Now it's just making you miserable. Because here's what projection costs you. It costs you reality. You're responding to your story instead of to what's actually happening. It costs you intimacy because you can't be close to someone when you're constantly reacting to feelings that they are not even having. It costs you repair because you can't fix something that didn't actually break. It costs you ease because you're always scanning, always bracing, always preparing for disasters that just aren't coming. They're just not coming.

And maybe most importantly, it costs you your own authority. When you're living in reaction to your nervous system's best guesses about what other people are thinking and feeling, when you're listening to old tapes that come from somewhere, it's someone else's voice. In all of that, you're not

Ep #366: How Projection Is Quietly Destroying Your Relationships (And What to Do About It)

trusting you. And you're not present, you're not intentional, you're living from default. You're not actually in your life.

So what does it look like when you're not doing this anymore? Well, it's slower. There's more space between sensation and story. You feel your chest tighten and instead of immediately deciding what that means about someone else, you pause. You get curious. "What's happening in me right now? What am I actually feeling? What do I need?" You might notice the story starting, "They're mad at me, they don't care, they're leaving," and you notice it. "Wait, is that true? Or is that old fear talking? Hm." You might ask, "Hey, I'm noticing you seem quiet. What's going on?" from a place and thus a tone of genuine curiosity instead of panic. You might say, "I'm feeling scared right now and I'm not sure why," instead of, "You're abandoning me."

You might tell your friend, "When I'm sharing something hard, what helps me most is just being heard. Can we try that?" instead of deciding that she's selfish and pulling away. And we talked about that tool of emotional conversational consent way back in the day in episodes 27 and 28.

Relationships get so much simpler when you stop projecting. Not easier in some fantasy way where nobody ever has conflict, but simpler, more honest, more real because you're dealing with what's real. You're saying what you mean. You're asking instead of assuming. And you're repairing faster and in a more real and earnest way because you're working with actual problems instead of projected and invented ones.

When you are real and not working from projection, you feel less alone because you're actually in contact with yourself. And from there, from that grounded place where you can feel your own feelings and name your own needs, you can actually be in contact, real contact with other people in a real way, in the here and now, not spinning in a childhood fear story, and definitely not the exhausted performance of trying to manage everyone's mood and read everyone's mind.

Ep #366: How Projection Is Quietly Destroying Your Relationships (And What to Do About It)

So that's what we're moving towards. That's this work of ending emotional outsourcing, relationships where you trust yourself enough to stay present, where you can let people have their own experience without making it about you, where you're responding to the human in front of you instead of to your fear, where you get to run towards the things you love instead of constantly running away from a bear. This is the work we do in Anchored. This is what I talk about in my book. Right?

In Anchored, we don't just talk about projection, we work with your nervous system at the level where this pattern lives. So your body can tolerate the uncertainty of not knowing. So feelings can stay in your body instead of getting evacuated onto other people. So you can actually be present in the moment that you are actually in. This is the work I do in all of my courses because you don't have to keep exhausting yourself by managing problems that don't exist. You don't have to keep fighting with people who aren't fighting with you. You get to be here, like really here with yourself and with the people you love, actually met, actually present, actually free.

That's what's possible. And I'd be honored, grateful, and delighted to help you get to there. Thanks for listening, my love. Your homework, should you choose to accept it, is to keep a little eagle eye out for any time you might be projecting in the next week. When you notice it, put a little gentle hand on your heart, give yourself a little love, orient your nervous system, feel your feet on the ground, and come back to the present moment. 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. Talk to you soon. Ciao, ciao.