

Ep #377: The Story of Overwhelm



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With Your Host

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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. So, today I want to start with something that might land a little like sideways at first. Have you ever considered that when you're saying, "I'm so overwhelmed," and you mean it—you really mean it, you're overwhelmed—you might not just be stating the facts. Maybe, just maybe, underneath that proclamation, something else is happening, that "I'm so overwhelmed" might be doing double duty, naming a feeling and at the very same time, perchance, shielding you from having to look any deeper.

I know, I know, stay with me. And just by the way, I'm not here to BS your nervous system or your experience of life. Overwhelm is real. It lives in the body in ways that are physiologically, measurably, uncomfortable. You know that cocktail: the racing thoughts, the jaw that will not unclench no matter how many times you notice it, the compulsive need to send just one more email before you can even think about stopping. All of that mixed with a—well, it's a very particular dorsal vagal shutdown flavor: the fog, the blankness, the bone-deep fatigue, the "I literally cannot even" of it all. No *doy más* in Spanish. Your gas pedal and your brake both slammed to the floor at the same time. Stuck, fried, completely cooked. Right? So that's a real physiological state, and it deserves real care.

And—and this is a big, loving, gentle and—for a lot of us, the story of overwhelm, the story itself, is doing a second job, a hidden job, one that has nothing to do with our actual nervous system state and everything to do with staying safe inside a framework that has never, not once, given us permission to just be a regular human with regular human limits. Let me tell you what I mean.

So, we've talked about this before, right? That perfectionist habit, it's not really about high standards. And I know it often looks like that. From the

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outside it looks like, "Well, I just care a lot. I'm really thorough. I'm just a really conscientious person who takes her commitments really seriously."

And underneath all of it often is something older and considerably more scared. And so the perfectionist habit is at its core about safety. It's the deeply held belief, usually one you did not consciously choose, one that was handed to you early by people who were doing their best but were also kind of a challenge to be parented by. This story that you are only acceptable, only lovable, only not the problem if you are excellent and superlative, and thus not a problem. Right? If you're doing it right, if you are never the one being annoying or taking up too much space or being, God forbid, inconvenient or having wild demands like, "Could you not smoke in this car with all the windows closed, parent?" Right? I mean, anybody else from the 90s or the 80s or the 70s, right? How dare you have a belief? You wild little banana pancake you. How dare you.

And so, all those stories cobbled together, create a belief. That's a belief: a series of stories and thoughts smushed together to be the story, the narrative, the belief that runs our lives. And this belief creates a very particular and often very brutal binary, which says, "You are either excellent and superlative and above reproach, or, wow, you are the problem." And there's no comfortable middle ground here. There's no, "I'm doing my best and today my best looks like canceling plans and eating cereal for dinner, and that's just fine." Right? There's no, "I am human, and humans have limits, and limits are actually just biology, and they're really important, and they build loving community." Oh no.

There is excellent or there is bad. There is excellent or, well, you need to explain yourself. There's excellent or you have failed, which, when you're in this mindset goes from, "You have failed," to where? "You are a failure. You are a failure." Oh, peanut. My sweet little tenderoni, my perfect little lamb chop. When you think about it, you don't even have to think about it very hard. I mean, it's just an absolutely exhausting way to live.

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Now here's where this gets interesting. And by interesting, I mean the thing that I think explains about 80% of what we do and why we do it and why we can't seem to stop doing it, even when we can see exactly what we are doing and often why we are doing it. So, life, as it turns out, does not care about your perfect binary, not even a wee little bit. Life gets lifey. Things pile up. Your kid gets sick the morning of your biggest presentation. Your partner picks a feelings conversation for the one night you had nothing left to give. Your inbox becomes sentient and starts breeding and creating more and more emails with more and more demands. And your nervous system, which has actual biological limits that are not negotiable no matter how much your to-do list disagrees. I mean, darling, eventually you hit a wall.

And when you hit that wall, when you cannot do it all, cannot do it all perfectly, cannot be the excellent employee and the present parent and the attentive partner and the bestest of friends and the person who remembered to take her magnesium, your perfectionist parts do not just sit down quietly and accept the situation. They remind you forgot your protein and your fiber, too. They get creative.

And here's what they come up with. If I cannot be perfect, perchance I can be innocent. That is, blameless. Someone who cannot be held accountable because, because, because, because, because she was never really choosing. She was simply being acted upon by a life that was just too much.

Think about what those words carry: innocent, blameless, not guilty, not the problem, not me. Not an agent who made decisions and now has to stand behind them, just a person suffering under the weight of too much. A victim of circumstance rather than a person making choices. Someone who would absolutely do more, be more, give more, if only life weren't so relentlessly, crushingly demanding.

And I'm not saying there's not a lot going on. I'm not saying life's not challenging. Listen, I am a profoundly political person. I'm reading the

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news. I know what's going on. It's a lot. I have moved many times in the last couple of years, written a book, gotten divorced, gotten married. And listen, I'm not out here saying that what's going on in your city, in your state, in your country, sociopolitically, across the globe, perimenopause, I'm not saying life isn't a lot. I'm not saying that life's not being lifey. I'm not questioning the facts.

I'm questioning the story and the position that we go to as a way to attempt to shield ourselves, our identity, when it all gets to be too much. This is what the overwhelm performance is at its root: a way of shedding agency, of temporarily becoming someone who just throws their hands up and can't be blamed. Because the overwhelmed woman is morally safe in a way the woman who says, "Uh, I'm choosing not to," simply is not.

You see where we're going here? Because the overwhelmed woman, "Oh, it's all so much." She's trying her best. She didn't choose to forget the permission slip or bail on the dinner or not reply to those texts for 11 days. She just literally couldn't. She was drowning. Can't you see? And you cannot fault someone for what they couldn't do. You can only feel sorry for them, offer to help, definitely not hold them accountable for the limits they never actually claimed. Huh? You see that?

And that, my tender ravioli, that's the move we're talking about here. Right? It's a way of having limits without the vulnerability of owning them. A way of saying, "I cannot keep doing all this," without the terrifying risk of saying, "I'm actually choosing not to." Because "I'm overwhelmed" gets you sympathy. "I'm choosing not to" might get you called selfish. And honestly, what's worse than a selfish woman? How dare a woman have a self?

Because for those of us who are raised to treat other people's comfort as more important than our own truth, that distinction is everything. And this is emotional outsourcing in one of its sneakiest, sneaky-pants forms. And for those new to my work, emotional outsourcing is a term I coined to describe the thought habits that develop when we have been taught explicitly and implicitly to look outside of ourselves for safety, worth, and identity,

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belonging. When we scan the room instead of checking in with our bodies, and then we trust what we believe we're seeing outside of ourselves more than what's within. When we manage how we are perceived rather than honor what we actually need. When we perform our limitations rather than claim them.

And we do that because claiming them feels too dangerous, too selfish, too much like admitting that we are a person with a self that has actual, non-negotiable, inconvenient needs. And it is a system, one most of us were handed before we were old enough to have an opinion about it. Owning your limits out loud feels like, jeez, an act of aggression. Saying, "Yeah, no thank you," or, "That doesn't work for me," or just plain like, "Nah. Are you going to that event? Nah." It can feel like throwing a grenade into a room full of people you love.

Because so many of us were taught, again, in a thousand implicit and explicit ways, that our needs, especially if you were socialized as a woman, they are inconvenient. A good woman, a good partner, a good employee, a good mother, a good friend, well, she finds a way, always and no matter what. So the overwhelm story becomes a workaround. Right? You're not refusing or declining. Oh, you're just drowning. You're not choosing rest. You're collapsing. You're not setting a limit. You're just, "Oh, so swamped right now. So sorry. I'll get to it soon. I promise."

And here's the thing: it sounds like vulnerability, and it often feels exactly like vulnerability, but it's an unwitting, unconscious—I don't think we're actively doing this, right? But it's a performance. A brilliant, completely understandable, nervous system-protective performance, identity-protective performance, a performance that we do because we weren't, we weren't offered another freaking option.

But here's what it's quietly costing you. So my beauty, my darling, my little buttercup, when you keep reinforcing the story that you are always on the verge of collapse regardless of what is actually happening, you lose the ability to accurately read your own capacity. So the felt sense of what is

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actually available in your body gets overwritten by the story. You stop being able to choose intentionally, and you start operating from default. You swing from sympathetic overdrive—doing, doing, doing, emailing at midnight, saying yes before the sentence is finished, answering questions that were asked of your husband in his family's text chain. You swing from all of that doing to dorsal shutdown, to staring at your phone for like a cool 40 minutes without absorbing a single thing. And then you swing back again with very little actual regulation happening in between.

And so, of course, you become more reactive, more likely to say yes when your whole body's screaming, "No." More likely to ghost, to check out, to quietly seethe with a resentment you cannot even fully justify to yourself because look how hard everyone is trying, including you. More likely to lie awake at two or 3 a.m. running the highlight reel of everything you did not get to, which like, come on. Of course, that makes the story louder, which makes the overwhelm more total, which makes it harder to ever tell the difference between what you actually cannot do and what you are simply afraid to claim that you will not do or do not want to do.

And the deeper truth, the one your body, your nervous system is waving its tiny arms as it were, trying to get you to look at, is that it's not about your schedule. It's about alignment. It's about what it costs at the cellular level to keep living in a way that requires you to betray yourself and your own preferences, wants, needs, desires on the daily, to perform your humanity rather than live it, to wait for permission to have needs instead of just, oh, you know, having them.

Which—and I don't want to be flippant about this. I don't want to sound flippant, because I understand that this is like mind-blowing for a lot of us at different points in our lives. It was for me at one point. You are allowed to have needs. You are allowed to know them, to speak them, to change the system, to get them met. You are allowed to have needs. You are allowed to voice them. You are allowed to have wants. You are allowed to have preferences. You are allowed to have them. You truly are. My beauty.

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Here's what I want to leave you with today. Not a fix. I know, I know. There's a part of you who was hoping for a tidy five-step plan. And I'm sorry, that is truly not what this is. I want to leave you with one question. And we'll keep talking about this subject all year. We're going to be pulling at this. So one question to sit with, to bring to your body and your journal, to let rattle around within you this week.

When you say you're overwhelmed, and like, there's a tone to this kind of, like, "I'm just so overwhelmed." It's like this exasperated overwhelm. What are you hoping that story will give you? What are you hoping that story will create for you within yourself, within others? What's the subtext here? Yeah? What's the subtext that you've maybe never even thought to look at? What would it mean, what would it feel like in your body to ask for that thing directly instead?

I know, it's gaspy. It's like... But that's the work, my love. That's the work. That's where it starts. So, take a breath. Be kind to yourself. Be gentle with yourself. And start asking, what's the what under what I'm actually saying out loud, what I'm actually believing, what I'm actually sharing, what I'm actually doing? What's the what under it all, and how does it keep me from actually stepping into the life that I truly want to live? Because that's the next step, is to actually dream up that life that you want to live so you can start taking steps to truly live it.

You're doing great, baby. I mean it. You truly are. I'm sending lots of love your way, lots of care. Hey, if you're enjoying the show, you know it would be so groovy. Would you follow it wherever you, wherever you listen to it? And could you give me one of those five-star ratings and reviews? It's not like a vanity metric for me. I couldn't care less. I ask because algorithms. The more ratings, the more reviews, the higher the show ranks. The higher the show ranks, the more likely it is to be shared in search. The more it's shared in search, the more people get to hear it. This free offering—well it's free to you, it's very expensive on my end—but this free-to-you offering is my way of being of service. I do it with a lot of heart, a lot of care, a lot of

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integrity, a lot of honesty, a lot of research, a lot of thinking. And I really want it to get into a lot of ears.

So thank you in advance for sharing it on social media, sharing it in your communities, in your Substack, in your online groups, in your in-person groups, and giving it that five-star rating and review. I adore you. Thank you for being here. Oh, don't beat yourself up if you've been doing this. I should have said that at the top, but listen, we're saying it now. If you've been doing this, don't be mean to you about it. That's antithetical to all our work. Don't do that. Be gentle.

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.