

**Ep #383: Role Confusion:
The Overwhelm You Didn't Know You Signed Up For**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Béa 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 B ea 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. Listen, I want to ask you something and I want you to actually stop and feel into it rather than just answering it in your head on autopilot the way we do. You ready? Are you ready? Okay, ready?

Whose job is it to notice when someone in your life is struggling before they say anything? Whose job is it to keep the peace when things get tense? Whose job is it to remember the thing, track the thing, follow up on the thing, make sure the thing got done? Whose job is it to manage the emotional temperature of the room, all rooms, at all times? I'm going to guess that for a lot of you, the answer to most of these questions was some version of, well, golly, it's mine. I mean, obviously mine. Who else's job would it be?

And that right there, that obviously mine, who else's would it be, is what we're talking about today. Because here's what I want to offer you, and I want you to let it land in your body rather than just in your brain. Maybe, perhaps, perchance, maybe, just maybe, you are exhausted not just because you're doing too much, because I bet you are, but because you are doing, well, I want to say the wrong things, but I don't want you to think, yeah, I mean it's the wrong things. Or the jobs that were never assigned to you. Never agreed to, never actually yours. Nowhere on no kind of paper anywhere in this universe does it say you are in charge of how your dad feels about your Easter plans. You are in charge of how your mother-in-law feels about whether she can come into the room while you're birthing or not. You are in charge of all the gifts, all the meals, all the backpacks, all the consent forms, all the memos, all the everything.

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Jobs we, especially us humans, us socialized as women for sure. I don't know about you, but in my household growing up, and I'm not throwing any stones, I'm just naming what is, after dinner, my dad and if there was a dude guest, an uncle, a cousin, a colleague of his, after dinner, they would thank my mother. They would get up. They would go to the living room. They'd watch TV or listen to music or do God knows what. While the three of us women, girls, right? Two girls and a woman, but girls nonetheless, we'd clean up. We'd do the dishes, we'd scour the pots and pans, we'd sweep the floor, probably vacuum too. We'd clean up.

And that's not about the one thing. It's about the ethos of it. We were trained to do the things. We absorbed all these jobs so deeply, so gradually, but then so completely that we stopped being able to see them as jobs and tasks at all. Right, doing all the things just becomes the water you swim in. It's the shape of your days, it's the thing you call your personality. But my beauty, it's really role confusion. And it's one of the most undernamed, most ruinous, effective drivers of nervous system dysregulation that I see in the people I work with.

Let me tell you what role confusion is not. It's not just being busy, it's not just having a lot of responsibilities. It's not even taking on more than you can handle, though that's often part of it, right? That over-functioning. Role confusion, which we talk about so much in *Anchored*, is something, well, it's more specific and more insidious than any of those things. Role confusion is what happens when the jobs you're doing are not actually yours, but your understanding of self, your identity, your story of who you are in the world, is informed by the jobs you're doing. And those jobs all add up to create the role that you're in, the role that's your identity, the role that guides whether you can actually rest, you can actually relax, whether you can actually enjoy your day, your afternoon, your evening, or whether there's jobs to be done. And whose job is it to do the jobs that need done? Well, you're in the role of doer, so I guess they're yours.

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This role confusion happens in lots of other areas of life as well, beyond the to-do list. So when you're functioning as the unpaid therapist in your friendships, right, beyond just listening, but you're truly holding everyone's pain, tracking everyone's growth, being the one they call at 11 p.m., the one who always picks up, the one whose own 11 p.m. calls often go unmade because who has that kind of capacity for you? That's some role confusion, not friend, but pseudo-therapist.

When you're functioning as the emotional project manager of your relationship, doing the invisible labor of keeping the connection alive, planning the quality time, sending out all the bids for connection, noticing when things have gotten distant and attempting to do something about it, carrying the relational to-do list that your partner probably doesn't even know exists or declines to be a part of. Role confusion. When you're functioning as the mood regulator of your family of origin, showing up to every gathering with your nervous system already braced, already scanning, already hypervigilant, already doing the calculations about who needs what and where the landmines are and how to get through the next four hours without anyone falling apart. Role confusion.

You're not just a guest at the table. You're not a kid going home. You're managing. When you are functioning as the conflict absorber at work, smoothing things over, translating between difficult people, making sure everyone feels heard, taking on the emotional residue of other people's hard days because, well, I mean, you're just so good at handling it and someone has to. And due to role confusion, I guess that's you. But the thing is, none of these are in your job description. Not one of them was handed to you with a contract and a salary and a clear scope of work, not a KPI in sight. They were handed to you in a thousand much subtler ways. Through the praise you got when you anticipated someone's need before they voiced it, through the anxiety that came up when you didn't, through the slow accumulation of evidence that when you held everything together,

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things went okay. And when you didn't, things fell apart. The center could not hold. And it was somehow, by the way, your fault either way.

Oof, right? Can we take a moment for like, oof? And so this, this intersection here, this is where emotional outsourcing lives. And if you're new around here, hello, welcome. I love you. Emotional outsourcing is the term I coined to describe the thought habits and a nervous system resonance that we develop when we've been taught explicitly and implicitly that our safety and worth come from outside of ourselves, from being useful, from being needed, from being the person no one can do without.

When you're living from those patterns, taking on roles that are not yours doesn't feel like a mistake. It feels like love. It feels like responsibility. It feels like being a good person, a good mom, a good daughter, a good girl, a good woman. It feels like the right thing to do. And in a culture that has spent centuries conflating women's self-erasure with virtue, that has called our unpaid emotional labor devotion, that has called our limit setting selfishness in a bad way, that has handed us the role of emotional caretaker of the entire known universe and then wondered why we're tired. I mean, the freaking gall.

In that culture, the confusion is not a personal failing. It is the entirely predictable outcome of a system that needs you to keep doing these jobs without questioning ever whether they are yours. But here's the thing about carrying jobs that are not, in fact, yours. Your body knows. Not in a loud, obvious way, not always in the way that makes it easy to point to and say, that's the problem right there. It knows in the way that Tuesday at 3 p.m. feels heavier than it ever really should. In the way that you are tired in a register that sleep does not seem to ever reach. In the way that you sometimes look at your life at the good enough relationship, the people who love you, the work you care about, and you feel like a flatness you cannot explain and possibly, highly likely, feel guilty about feeling.

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And that flatness is not ingratitude. That bone-deep tired's not weakness at 3 p.m. Tuesday weight, that's not a mystery. It's your nervous system sending you an extremely clear message that you have been, for a very long time because you were trained to be, the maintenance crew for everyone else's interior life while your own has been waiting for you with the lights off and the check engine light blinking.

And here's the part that I think is the most important and the most uncomfortable. You're not going to be able to put down these jobs simply by deciding to do so. I know that would be tidy. I know that the advice you've probably gotten is some version of, well, just stop doing it, or, well, set a boundary then, or, let it go. As if the problem is that you have not thought of that yet. Right? As if the roles you've been playing for possibly your entire conscious life are just going to release their grip because you read an Instagram caption about not overfunctioning.

Oh, my baby. But the thing we need to be honest about is that they're not going to do that. And here's why, and this part actually matters to me. These roles are not just habits. They are in a very real, one could even say neurobiological sense, your survival strategy. The vigilance, the anticipation, the constant low-level monitoring of everyone else's emotional state, such as scanning your mom's face the second you walk in the door, feeling your partner's energy shift before they've said a single word, knowing by the particular quality of your coworker's silence that something is about to become your problem.

All of that is adaptive. It was adaptive once and it's brilliant, right? That was the smartest possible response in environments where other people's moods had real consequences for you. And you're no dummy. You made it make sense as best you could. And your nervous system does not give up its survival strategies because you had an insight about them over a freaking matcha latte. It gives them up when it finds something more trustworthy to orient towards instead. When it has enough real embodied

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experiences of safety that the old strategy starts to feel less necessary than it used to.

And my beauty, that is the work. It is slower and more tender than any listicle about overfunctioning will ever tell you. And it is absolutely worth doing. And it starts with something you can do right now, today. It starts with telling the truth. Not the managed truth, not the, I'm fine, I'm just a little tired truth. The actual truth about which roles you're playing right now that are and are not yours. And I'm not talking about making some dramatic renegotiation of your life. I'm talking about getting real, if only inside of your own heart.

Some questions to guide you. You ready? Whose feelings are yours to tend? And whose are yours to witness without swooping in to fix? Whose problems are yours to solve? And whose are yours to care about from a respectful distance while they figure it out themselves, as grown adults are actually allowed to do? Whose discomfort are you actually responsible for? And whose have you just been treating as your personal emergency?

You don't have to answer those questions out loud to anyone. You don't have to send a single difficult text or have a single hard conversation today. Just let the questions do something in your body. Because I'm guessing your body has been waiting for you to ask them and to get clarity, probably for a very long time. Bless its patient little heart. It knows which jobs are yours. It's always known. You just have to get quiet enough to hear it. Right? That's the work, is presencing, is growing that capacity to be with ourselves and our own inner truth. So we can step back into our choiceness, into our agency, and knowing ourselves in a real way underneath the conditioning, underneath the socialization, underneath the role confusion, underneath the story is the real answer.

Not just self-awareness through story, because I know most of us are intellectualizers because we're wicked smart and it's a great protective strategy until it's not. And we can make you a PowerPoint of our trauma.

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We can tell you the exact, well, I am this way because my dad and then this and then my mom and then, but to really feel the somatic resonance and to really connect with the story under the story under the story so you can see how it's impacting your life, so you can start to make the decision to step slowly, deliberately, gently but firmly towards, no, thank you.

I trust you to take care of your feelings on your own, and I'm here to love you up and hold really gentle, kind space for you when you've figured it out. But I will not be managing your feelings any longer. Yeah, I won't be doing your emotional work for you. I love you. That doesn't change. And I trust you as an adult to take care of this on your own. Yeah? That's where we're headed towards. And I know there's a murky, scary, what middle in the middle, and that's the work. It starts with getting quiet enough to hear yourself and to start really sussing out what the what is. You got this, baby. You got this, one tiny kitten step at a time. Really, truly.

Thanks for listening, my beauty. I really appreciate you. I appreciate that you're here. If there's ever a topic you want me to cover, tell me all about it. podcast@beatrizalbina.com. And listen, while you're at it, while you've got your phone out to send me an email, would you hit me up with a cute little five-star rating and a written review wherever you get your podcasts? And if you've already done that, thank you. Thank you so much. Share about the show on your social. Tell your mother, tell your father, send a telegram. And know that I love you.

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. I'll talk to you soon. Ciao.