

Ep #388: A Guide to Healthier Self-Talk & the Power of Your Mind



Full Episode Transcript

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. In this series called Start Here, we've been looking at the deeper patterns that shape how we relate to ourselves and why those patterns often keep us feeling so friggin' stuck. Like, if you grew up in the 80s and 90s, remember how scared of quicksand we were? I feel like everything, like there was just so much quicksand awareness that you just don't hear these days. So I guess I'm talking about the emotional quicksand. I guess that is what I'm talking about.

Listen, one of the biggest influences on how we experience our lives is something most people barely notice because it's so built into just how we do, which is the way we speak to ourselves all day long. And I know this because I make a habit of talking to myself and to you with a lot of tenderness, my tender ravioli. And I know it's like chocante. It's striking for a lot of people because most of us don't realize how constant our internal dialogue is or how much it shapes the way we truly experience, not just life, but like our capital S self. Who I am, how I'm showing up. Am I a person worthy of love? Well, I talk to myself like I'm not, right? Am I a person who's worthy of care? I talk to myself like I'm not, right?

The way you talk to yourself affects your confidence, your decisions, what you believe is possible for you. If that voice is critical, dismissive, demanding, meanie pants, it becomes really hard to move forward in a sustainable way towards growth, towards healing, towards just a life of kindness when this voice is so critical and mean and jerky. It's a mean jerk. I kid, but also, I'm serious to say it's a survival skill. It's a protector in its way, and we love that voice up as the pathway to shifting it. So, let's

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slow this down and really take a really deep look at it. Let's look at it right in the snout, as I am fond of saying, because this self-talk really matters.

This is the topic for today, my love. How we communicate with ourselves. My sister, Eugenia, is a fourth-grade teacher, and the other day, she told me about a book that she's reading to her students. It's called *The Mighty Miss Malone*, and she highly recommends it to the like 10-ish-year-old set, in case any of you out there are on the market. So, in this book, the main character, Deza, is a 9-year-old girl, and she talks about having two brains. The brain that talks to her most of the time and helps her do well in school, have a best friend, and basically function, to engage in socially adaptive modalities for meeting the world.

Then, there's her second brain, the previously adaptive, now maladaptive brain that puts her down, that encourages her to throw punches, both verbal and literal. I love that this idea, this reality, that a lot of us experience of having multiple versions of ourselves, like multiple voices in our head, is in children's literature, not only because the little mammals need to hear that having competing voices in our head is super normal, but also because many of the stories that inform that second brain, or that other voice in our heads, the one that's often mean to us and others, comes from our childhood experiences.

And if all this talk about adaptive and maladaptive responses, inner child, is new to you, stay with this episode because it stands alone without it, but do make sure to listen to Episode 19 to learn more about this framework of your inner child being a friggin' brilliant. And then hop on over to episodes 22 through 26, which are all about inner child work.

Okay, so, last week, we talked about communication with a focus on how we communicate with others and how that communication can go off course. We talked about how when we use communication, including

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speech, nonverbal communication, and written communication, to try to convey a specific image of ourselves, to force a connection, or to try to get what we want without asking for it plainly, honestly, and directly, things can get uncomfortable and downright awkward. We can often feel misheard, misunderstood, or simply embarrassed, anxious, down on ourselves. When we recenter ourselves in our bodies through our breath, when we take the time to examine the thoughts that underlie our feelings in those moments, we move one teeny, tiny step at a time, closer and closer to the sort of loving and honest communication that helps us tell our story to the world and to hear the stories of others with an open, beautiful heart.

So, back to Deza and her second brain. Today we're going to focus on communication with ourselves, with how we talk to ourselves, how we treat ourselves, and the images we display to ourselves, all of the modes of communication with an inward focus. As regular listeners know, breathwork is my jam, and I know I'm like totally aging myself by saying my jam, but it's my truth.

Our breath is so powerful. Not only does it literally keep us alive, airway, breathing, circulation, for my healthcare providers out there, it also serves as a tool to help us ground and center ourselves so that we can do the work we need to do to bring our best selves into the world, to bring healing energy in, and to move old energy and thought patterns out. Today, we'll do a little breathing exercises as I'm one to do, to get ourselves in a space where we can listen to our own internal chatter, to our various brains, and do a little investigating to see what sorts of communication we have going on and what, if anything, we may want to change about it.

So let's do it, my darlings. If it's safe for you to do so, like if you're not driving, close your beautiful eyes and feel the ground under your feet or the surface supporting you under your seat. You may choose to lie down for this one. Whatever serves you best, my love.

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Start by bringing your attention to whatever is holding your body up and supporting you. As you breathe, imagine that each breath brings attention to where your body makes contact with its support. Get really present in the moment. Take a few more deep breaths in through the nose, out through your mouth. Notice how strong your support is. If it's your feet on the subway or in your kitchen doing the dishes, if it's a bed, the floor, or a cushion, a chair, it can hold you up, keep you supported.

The ground doesn't judge your mood. Your cushion doesn't have an opinion on your latest social media post. Your chair doesn't care what you said 10 years ago. It knows you're doing your best now. You are supported, no matter what. You are safe and have the space to learn, to shift, to grow, to tell different stories to and about yourself. Take a few more deep breaths.

And let that sink in. You are supported and held, literally and figuratively, without judgment. As you feel into that, notice any shifts in your body, mind, spirit, energy field. See if your jaw relaxes. If judgment, tension may shift out of your neck or your shoulders. If your belly might soften.

Slowly bring your attention back to your breath and to the space around you. If you had your beautiful eyes closed, slowly open them. Notice how your body feels. Notice any thoughts in your mind. No need to hold on to them or judge them. Just notice. You may notice a lot of thoughts. Take a moment to thank yourself, mind, body, spirit, inner child, for allowing you to breathe with me in this moment.

So, my darling, you may notice that a lot of thoughts came up during that practice, or you may notice a remarkable lack of chatter. Either way, when we do breathing practices and the more intensive pranayama breathwork practice I teach, we clear the fog in our minds. We bring in clarity and ease. And when we focus on an idea like that of being supported, no matter what, we pave the way for some powerful thought work. Since today is all about how we communicate with ourselves, it's important to consider that like your support, whether it was the floor, a cushion, a car seat, your mind is

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always there with you. And when we pause to understand how our minds and our thoughts work, your mind can always support you, no matter the circumstances.

Now you may be asking, what exactly do I mean by this? So let's go back to Deza and her second brain. Her second brain, like many of ours, produces thoughts, a lot of thoughts, that generally don't help us or her to feel strong, positive, empowered, or connected to our highest self. But wow, are those thoughts powerful? Our minds and the thoughts they produce have enormous power because they determine our feelings. Our feelings then lead us to take action in the world.

When we start to understand that many of our thoughts are coming from our second brains, that so many of the thoughts we think are true without question are just old habits, old cassette tapes in our brain from childhood, ancestral beliefs, cultural or societal stories, then we can create some cognitive distance to ask ourselves if these thoughts serve us, if we want to keep thinking them. And if we don't, we can grab the reins and can lovingly, gently, with peace and calm in our hearts, begin to redirect our second brain. And therein and thereby, we are reclaiming our power in this world. We are setting ourselves up for success and for the happiness that we all want and deserve.

With the idea of that second brain in place, the notion that we have a part of our consciousness that can feed us negative or harmful ideas in the form of thoughts about ourselves or about our situation, let's take some time to investigate how this second brain gains its power and what keeps it humming. As we've talked about in previous episodes, especially the mini-series on the inner child I referred to earlier, we learned thought patterns in our childhood years, and then those thought patterns get reified, made stronger, compounded as we grow. Our families of origin communities teach us through example what sort of things are okay to think, say, and do.

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In order to build bonds and at its most base level to literally survive, especially as children, we have to adapt to some degree to our social surroundings. As we grow up and our social circles and sense of self in the world shift and grow, sometimes those thoughts don't serve us anymore. We call these sorts of patterns that persist even after they no longer serve us, maladaptive behaviors.

So for now, let's consider some examples. Let's say you were taught to think that one certain way of being in the world was superior to others. In my childhood, I was taught that being thin is good and being fat or overweight is a sign of... Yeah, I don't think this is oversaying it, a sign of complete moral decay.

So, if that's what you were taught, and so many of us are taught that directly or indirectly, then that's what you're likely going to carry into adulthood as a guiding thought in your life. That thought will then inform the sorts of things that your second brain says to you. That if you're not some perfect size 2 or 0 or whatever, that you're less than, that you're lazy, that you're not deserving of love, that you're obviously not taking care of yourself, you obviously don't care about your health.

Sorry, it pains me to even say these things out loud because wow, they have so been in my brain. And when we tell ourselves these things, when we repeat these painful lessons, we are literally creating our reality. The thoughts that you hold about yourself and others create your feelings in this world. So if you walk around thinking I'm fat and that means I'm terrible, you are going to feel terrible about your perfect, incredible, amazing human body. And feeling terrible about you will lead you to take action that will keep you in that framework of feeling, because that's what we do. So if you walk around telling yourself you aren't deserving of love, you're not worthy of love, you're unlikely to find love, putting that energy out into the universe, holding that thought about yourself will inform the way you act, the way you show up in the world.

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Likewise, if you experience a lot of anger around you as a young one, you may speak to yourself with anger. Not only does that angry self-talk damage our bodies by spiking our cortisol and other chemicals into our bloodstream, it also colors the way we see the world and how we carry ourselves through it. When we walk through the world in anger, we are less likely to see the positive and to project that anger out into our surroundings.

Now, when I work with my life coaching clients on tuning into their self-talk, I hear a lot of similar sounding resistance to this idea that self-talk is something that can change. Remember, our brains do not like change. Homeostasis is the name of the game for mammals like us, and change is scary, not just in our minds and hearts, but on a neurological level. I hear clients saying, "I'm not being negative. I'm just being honest," when they replay their tapes of self-deprecation or blame. That response, one that I've heard so many times, only makes sense if we don't have the tools to recognize our patterns, to step outside of our thoughts. Then we fall back on our habitual responses, and our brains get confused and hold on to a thought and call it a fact.

"You are terrible. You should treat yourself terribly, and so too should all the world. I'm not being negative. It's just being honest." Gosh. Is that a tape that you want to hold on to? Is that a story you want to repeat, my love? Or do you want to open your heart to finding ways to love yourself? And to show up for yourself in the world with love and care first. And when we look out upon the world through these self-deprecating, blaming, I am not worthy lenses, everything becomes colored by it, right? So your boss calls you and says your report needs to be revised. And in your brain, you might think, "I'm a fraud. They've finally caught on to me. Man, I shouldn't have gotten this job in the first place. I'm so unqualified. How could I mess up one more report?" And so instead of revising the report, you ruminate, you spin in this old story, and then you don't get your work done anyway, proving to yourself that you're the fraud that you think you are.

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So too, if you see the world through this lens, let's say it's Thursday night and you had plans to see a friend, and she calls you last minute and says, "Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry. I just can't make it." That first brain may say, "Sure, cool, no problem. Whatever." Things come up. But when you're seeing the world through that self-deprecating lens, through that second brain that's not focused on loving you, that believes that your thoughts are facts and those old tapes are worth repeating, then thoughts might flood you, like, man, she probably never really wanted to hang out with me in the first place, and who can blame her? I'm such a Debbie Downer these days. The more depressed I am, the less people want to see me, which makes me more depressed, which then makes me anxious about being depressed. You see the spiral here, darling?

It's worth pausing and assessing in these moments of knee-jerk, negative, and harmful self-talk, where these words and images are coming from. The most common sources for these kinds of communication with self are, A number one, confusing thoughts with facts, on the one hand, and B number two, telling ourselves someone else's story about us and believing it on the other hand. While there are so many possible sources for these stories, these are the most common in my life and in my practice. And once we understand them, these are the ones that we can start to shift.

So let's look first at how easy it is to confuse thoughts with facts. So, nerd time. Thoughts are, quite literally, electrical reactions in our brains. That's it. That's what they are. Thoughts, sentences written in your brain. And as the old saying goes in neuroscience, what fires together, wires together, meaning that the thoughts that we think over and over and the associations we make with those thoughts create strong electrochemical pathways in our brains. So imagine with me for a moment, my darling, running a wheelbarrow over soft ground over and over and over again, creating a rut in the ground. Or as the poet Mary Oliver puts it, "And now I understand something so frightening and wonderful, how the mind clings to the road it knows, rushing through crossroads, sticking like lint to the familiar."

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God, I love some Mary Oliver. That's from the poem Blue Pastures. When we think the same thoughts over and over, like, "My relationships always end in hurt and pain," we get neurologically stuck in that rut of thinking. The reality, the fact on the ground may be that your partner is kind, thoughtful, totally head over heels. But that old wheelbarrow keeps going back to, "This is going to end in pain. Watch out. Defend yourself. Always stay one step ahead. Don't get too vulnerable. Don't get too cozy." Because those kinds of thoughts, while they may not be profoundly conscious, right, like they may be rolling around in your unconscious, your subconscious, that child space, these thoughts are just habits, right? Thought habits you've developed in your brain that don't necessarily reflect your current reality.

Another thought pattern that many of us has goes along the lines of, "Pain is bad. Avoid pain. Pain is scary." And we can see the obvious evolutionary reasons for this, right? Like organisms do not enjoy pain. On a cellular level, it's very depleting to an organism, a human, a bird, any kind of animal, right, to experience pain. Gosh, all the endorphins, all the neurochemicals. It takes up a lot of cellular energy. And when we partner up those two thoughts, pain is bad and relationships, love, romance, dating always leads to pain, boom, relationship sabotaged, all because we confused our thoughts about things like pain and relationships with facts. The words that we say to ourselves are so powerful and lead us to take action.

By doing regular breathwork and thought work, we can start to get some distance from our second brain and to listen to the thoughts it produces for what they are, thoughts, chemical signals, electrical impulses in the brain that certainly affect the body. Yes, polyvagal theory. Yes, I can nerd about this for hours, and you know I shall. And these powerful thoughts that feel so factual, so real at the end of the day are just electrical currents that got wired in there. And that with certain practices, you too can start to rewire. All right, my love, let's pause and do some breathing. This is some heavy business, right?

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So if it is safe for you to do so, close those beautiful eyes of yours and take a few slow breaths in and out. Trust your body to give you what you need. Now, in this quiet, you can hear the myriad thoughts that are running through your mind. If you can, see if you can take a step back from the flood of thoughts to be a fly on the wall watching your mind. Notice the thoughts and let go. A few more breaths.

Notice the thoughts that come and go like leaves on the wind. And use your breath to help you stand at a distance. Some thoughts may try to pull you in, like an insistent dance partner. But you, my darling, are not here to dance, not today. You're here to watch, to listen, to observe, to be your own loving watcher, your own most loving parent. A few more deep breaths. And when you're ready, thank your perfect mind, body, spirit, and slowly flutter open your eyes.

Notice, with just a minute or so of quiet, of calm, of being our own watcher, we can get so much perspective on all of the thoughts that run through our minds. And with regular attention to both the breath and our thought habits, we can flex these muscles. We can learn to be our own watcher, even with our eyes open, even in the middle of our hard conversation. We can start to notice when our habitual thoughts are taking over and clouding our current, present experience. When we notice the difference and can get really skillful at differentiating between thought and fact, we gain a more clear vision of our reality. And we can communicate with ourselves with messages based in reality, not in old thought patterns that get in the way of fully loving ourselves and for showing up to be our highest selves.

Another source of harmful communication with our beautiful and perfect cells comes from our old cassette tapes. You know, the tapes we talked about way back in earlier episodes. I think I first talked about it in Episode 2: Be Your Own Watcher. Those tapes that contain other people's negative stories about us, like my own stories that I was always effing everything up. I had to be super defensive or somehow something terrible would happen

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to me. Those stories that if I wasn't like some perfect thin thing, I was not as worthy of love. Those stories that we've had on replay, on repeat forever and ever and ever in our minds.

This source of nourishment for the second brain is a sort of cousin to the confusion of thoughts and reality. When someone else tells us something negative about ourselves, and for those of us raised and socialized as women, there can be so many contradictions in these messages, and we buy it. Hook, line, and sinker. Our brain takes in that information as another electrical message. When we replay that tape over and over again, we create yet another wheelbarrow rut in our brain. One question is, "Why then do we play those negative, harmful tapes over and over again? Why not just turn the tape off?"

Well, my love, I imagine many of you have had firsthand experience with this and know just how hard it is to turn off the tape. Our minds are drawn to things that stand out, that don't fit the pattern, that don't make sense. This too has its own evolutionary origin. When we were scanning the savannah looking for danger, your eye was trained to see that beautiful brown plains grass, the rare tree here and there, perhaps a little watering hole. And your mind became accustomed to seeing that pattern and to seeing it crisply and in clear outline, so that should there be, for example, a hippo or a lion charging towards you and your loved ones across the Savannah, you would notice that it does not fit the pattern. It stands out. It doesn't make sense.

When it comes to the negative stories others have about us, often a lot stands out and a lot doesn't make sense. In our cores, at our deepest level, we are made of love, of acceptance, connection. When we are told that we are less than enough, unworthy, or otherwise bad, and when we take that opinion as some sort of truth, a part of us may have pushed back because we know deep within, it can't really be true. Our brains are amazing

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machines built to notice patterns and to solve mysteries. We can't help it. That's what we do, and so often it's so helpful for us.

Perhaps you remember a time when you couldn't remember some piece of information like which album that like one Indigo Girl song was on. And then like, boom, like lightning, three hours later in the middle of a shower, you remember it was on Swamp Ophelia, duh, because your brain is working non-stop in the background. And when we take in other people's negative stories about us as truth with a capital T, as some form of reality, our brain goes to work trying to figure out how it could be. And in the process, runs that wheelbarrow of that harmful, painful thought back and forth, over and over, leaving a deep and when unchallenged, potentially damaging rut, creating a story that you will believe.

And by getting into your breath and better understanding how your thoughts work, you can put other people's critiques into perspective. You can start to see them for what they are, one person's opinion informed by their experiences, their belief systems, their thoughts. You can start to see them not as some commentary on your most inner self, but as simply more information about that other person and the way they think. And it's so great to have more information about the world, about other people, how they think, what they're feeling, and about ourselves, particularly when we have tools like the thought work protocol I teach to help you rewrite those stories and to re-record those cassette tapes. In so doing, you can get better control over the messages you tell yourself and the habits of mind that you build. You can improve your communication with yourself, which is such a beautiful gift to offer to you.

All right, my love, meanwhile, you may be asking yourself what your homework is. And you're going to be wildly shocked if you're a regular listener to hear me say that your homework is awareness. It is always the first step. Listen, I'm always going to start by imploring you, enticing you to bring your awareness, your attention to when you're playing old cassette

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tapes, when you're labeling a thought like, "Ugh, I always F everything up," as a fact. Because my darling, that is not a fact. It's just a thought. And continuing to think that thought doesn't serve you, my perfect, beautiful angel. It keeps you in the cycle of communicating with yourself with negativity. And the irony is that story, "Ugh, I F everything up," actually keeps you from seeing where you have made a mistake, where there is something that you would be delighted to do differently. It actually keeps you from learning and growing when you're telling this blanket story, which I get, it's protection, right? It's your inner child. It's some part of you trying to protect you from suffering, but it just keeps you in your suffering because you beat yourself up because you're having that thought and you don't hold the space to see where things could shift and grow.

Oh, brains, so funny, right? So, my love, in closing, I'd like to say that the ways in which we talk to ourselves informs how we live our lives, how we feel about ourselves, and thus, how we communicate with ourselves and others. If we don't get into the habit of regularly pausing to examine how we talk to and about ourselves, which brain we're activating and engaging, we are not fully in control of our lives. We're not managing our minds. It's hard to change the things you cannot see. So, the more in touch with yourself you can get, the more awareness you can bring to the ways you're communicating with yourself, the more power you take back to direct your thoughts and thus, create the outcomes you want in life.

If you're thinking old self-defeating thoughts, if you're listening to your old cassette tapes on repeat, the ones that say you've failed before, so why try now? That you're not enough, not worthy of love or attention, that your choices don't matter, then you're going to feel every feel those thoughts provoke, as though they were truth. And they're not. They're just old stories. We all have them, and you can shift them. I know you can. You can do hard things. Borrow my faith in you if you're not feeling it quite yet.

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All right, my beauty. Thank you. Thank you for taking the time to listen to this episode, to continue to engage with your own healing. What a gift. Be gentle and loving with yourself. You're learning, you're growing, and that is magnificent. There is nothing to beat yourself up about here.

My darling, sweet little perfect puff pastry, once you start to shift how you communicate with yourself, how you speak to yourself, the next place where this really gets tested is when something doesn't go the way you planned. Because how you respond to failure will either reinforce the same patterns or start to change them. And that's where we're going next. Next week's Feminist Wellness episode, I cannot wait to see you there. Make sure you're following, make sure you're subscribed. Don't miss a thing. I cannot wait to share it with you.

All right, my beauty, you ready? 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, ciao.