

Ep #391: How to Stop Self-Abandoning Without Becoming a Jerk



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. I am sharing one of the most requested topics in our entire archive with you today. Our community talks about this one a lot because it answers a question that so many of us struggle with. How do I stop self-abandoning without turning into a total jerk, a total meanie pants, no-good friend?

Which really means, I love my people. I love my people. How can I be considerate and kind, and loving, and caring, and the person I want to be, loving and gentle and also not slip into those super exhausting habits of codependent and perfectionist and people-pleasing behavior, where I put me last, last, last, put them first, first, first, and then constantly overextend myself because I'm terrified of being a jerk or losing approval. And then I resent the people I love because I'm stuck in the self-abandonment cycle. And then I explode and throw a plate. Oh my God, help.

So if you too find yourself really wrestling with this line between how do I take care of myself without being selfish in this bad way? If you are, in fact, terrified of being a jerk or losing approval, right? This episode is a giant cozy blankie for you and will hopefully actually help your brain and give you some helpful tools. So let's go. Let's dive in.

This week, we're diving into a question I get all the time. It goes something like this. So I want to stop emotional outsourcing. I don't like living in these codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing habits. It sucks. It really is exhausting. It's not a fulfilling, engaging way to live. I want to live differently, and I don't want to be a jerk, a schmuck, a meanie pants who doesn't take care of the people I love, because I love them. And so I want to be helpful,

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but I also am really sick and tired of feeling like a doormat all the time, which is how I've been living for the last 40, 50, 60, 70, 1 million years.

And so I want to do that work, but I also don't want to stop being loving to my people because I do actually get joy and satisfaction from being of service and supporting people. So, help. Does this sound familiar?

This fear of being a jerk, of abandoning the ones we care for if we don't constantly show up, is what gets so many of us stuck in people-pleasing and codependent patterns. We are wired, especially as humans socialized as women and girls, to care for others. Add to that the societal conditioning, patriarchy, white settler colonialism, good old capitalism. And beyond the "honor thy mother and father," the kind of like, everyone who comes into your path is someone you could self-abandon for story that so many of us get taught growing up. And suddenly, our worth gets measured not by who we are as a human, as a person, as a being, but by how well we meet the wants and needs of everyone around us.

But here's the truth. You can be loving, caring, generous, giving, kind without falling into the trap of emotional outsourcing. You can be considerate without abandoning yourself or crossing that invisible line into codependency, where your sense of self-worth is hooked into someone else's emotions, someone else's thoughts and feelings about you. Now, one of the key signs that you're engaging in emotional outsourcing and not just giving 'cause you wanna, is that it hurts. You said yes to doing the thing, right? To supporting them, helping them move, letting them live with you, cleaning their bathroom, whatever, whatever, whatever, and it hurts. It bothers. It annoys. It irritates you.

You said yes, you can stay here, but you need to move your car when I need to use the driveway. And they didn't move it, but you kind of knew they weren't going to because they've never been considerate. But you said yes anyway because you didn't want them to think poorly of you, even though they clearly never really consider you, and you are irritated,

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annoyed, exhausted. If it feels like you're stretched too thin, if there's a nagging sense of resentment bubbling up inside you, even if it's subtle, because I often hear this, yeah, but you describe this big annoyance. It's just kind of small. Even if it's subtle. If you feel like you're being taken advantage of or being taken for granted, or that your experience, your life, your wants, your needs, you don't matter in the equation as long as this other person's getting their way, then it's probably emotional outsourcing that led you to say yes.

Because when you're doing something from a place of genuine care, there's no emotional wrangling. You might be tired or a little inconvenienced because you spent the whole day helping your friend move, but there's no bitterness, no resentment attached to it. When you pause and you look at how you spent the day, it feels aligned with your values, your boundaries. But when you're people-pleasing or over-functioning, that's when it starts to sting because you're likely abandoning your own needs in the process, like we talked about in Episodes 163 and 164, The Self-Abandonment Cycle.

So my beauties, let's dig into it. First, as always, nerd alert. I love a good old nerd alert. Let's talk about the nervous system and what happens when you get that tug to people please. So when you feel the urge to fix, manage, or rescue someone else's emotions, their life, their experience, especially from their own misplanning, that's not a word, but we're going to roll with it anyway. That urge, that, "I got to step in here," is often your sympathetic nervous system firing off. Your body's stress response getting triggered. Your brain perceives someone else's discomfort or disappointment as a threat to your safety. So your nervous system reacts the way it's supposed to, by jumping into action, fixing, appeasing, smoothing things over, putting you last, and their big feels first. It's fight or flight, my darlings, just in a socially acceptable form as opposed to punching someone in the snout, running away from their feelings like in a literal sense, or throwing a plate.

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Your body doesn't know the difference between an actual physical danger like a lion chasing you and the social dangers of rejection, disappointment, conflict. So it sends the same signals. Do whatever you can to keep the peace. Make sure they're okay. Make sure they like you, approve of you, think well of you. So you start over-functioning, offering solutions or taking on responsibilities that aren't yours because your nervous system is screaming, fix this or something bad will happen.

Psychologically, this is where codependent thinking sneaks in. Your brain starts telling you that it's your job to manage other people's emotions, that you need to keep everyone happy or else you'll lose connection, love, or approval. This is emotional outsourcing in action, my beauty. Do you see it? You're giving other people control over your emotional well-being, believing that if they're okay, you'll be okay.

And as always, let's not forget the intersectional feminist piece here. Patriarchy trains women and folks from marginalized identities to take up as little space as humanly possible, to always prioritize the comfort of others over their own needs. And for many, the weight of this condition is doubled if you've grown up in communities where there are additional layers of expectations, whether it's as a woman of color, a queer person, someone living under the pressures of a capitalist system that tells you your value comes from how much you give, or you have to work doubly to protect yourself in the face of oppressive systems.

This is all important: the family origin, the story in our mind, the nervous system, the societal piece, because your nervous system, my perfect beauty, does not exist in a vacuum. It's shaped by the societal pressures you've internalized over time. You might feel a compulsion to caretaker or please others, not just because of your biology, but because of the social scripts you've learned about how you're supposed to behave, how you're supposed to shrink your needs to serve others.

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Let's look at a couple of examples to help bring this home. So we'll start with a classic work scenario. Imagine you're at work, and a colleague asks if you can stay late to help finish a project. Being considerate, loving, kind might mean checking in with yourself first. Do I have the bandwidth for this? Maybe you decide, yeah, I can spare 30 minutes, and offer to help out of genuine goodwill. And you are clear about your limits and are doing it because the wellness of the team, the company, the project, it all matters and you want to contribute. Cool, cool, cool. Chill, chill, chill. Go team, go.

Meanwhile, if you're operating from people-pleasing, the inner dialogue might be more like, if I don't help, they'll think I'm not a team player. They won't respect me or worse, they won't like me. Even though you're exhausted and all you've been thinking about all day, all week, all month, all quarter is going home and getting in the Epsom bath, you say yes. This is emotional outsourcing. You're letting their potential feelings dictate your choices, abandoning your own boundaries in the process.

This takes us into the psychological spiral. You resent the situation and your colleague, maybe the team, maybe the concept of the project as a whole, which you loved 10 minutes ago. But what it really is that deep down, you're mad at yourself for not honoring your needs and you're projecting that onto everyone and everything around you. Your fear of being judged overrode your ability to be kind to yourself. And as I go through these examples, particularly for folks who are new around here, they are never blaming, shaming, guilt, judging us for having emotional outsourcing habits. This is always within the context of our family blueprint and these bigger systems that led us to think, feel, and act this way as really powerful survival skills. Never the judgy's. Okay.

Example two, a family event. So let's talk family. Maybe your cousin asks you to help plan their wedding. Or it's Thanksgiving and your family members don't want to help you cook. You don't really want to take on all the work. You're already juggling a lot. But here's the thing, family guilt is

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real, right? And it's so ingrained and it's so old and we know so many stories. They live inside us rent-free that we're supposed to put family above ourselves. It's a lot, right? And so the people-pleasing stories in your head might sound like, oh, they'll be so disappointed if I say no. Maybe they'll stop inviting me to things. I'll look selfish. All my aunts will judge me. And so you agree to do way more than you can actually handle. And now you're cooking this giant Thanksgiving dinner while resenting everyone or planning this wedding, which becomes this massive source of stress. You're burnt out, you're getting sick all the time, you're feeling disconnected from your own life, your actual work is kind of fading in the background, all because you put your family's preferences and wants and desires above your own.

So what's a more considerate approach? You thank them for thinking of you. Tell them you're really flattered that they want your help to plan the wedding and you're at capacity. Or in the Thanksgiving example, you set a boundary. "I am delighted to spend time together. I don't have the bandwidth to cook the entire meal. If you're not available to help, then I'd like to suggest we go out to eat instead." Yeah? And if you've been in my world for a minute, check that sentence out. It has, if you do X, then I'll do Y, which is how we set boundaries. And we talked all about boundary setting in Episode 118.

So, this way, by being clear about your capacity, what you're up for, what you're not, and offering alternatives, you're actually being way more considerate because you're considering you and them. You're still being supportive, and you're doing it from a place of choicefulness, not obligation, avoiding that creeping resentment that comes from overextending. And remember, if I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times, boundaries are resentment prevention. And not saying yes from obligation, expectation, emotional outsourcing, and instead saying a kind, considerate, "no, thank you" is a beautiful way to protect not just our wellness, our peace, but that

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of the people we love because then you're not mad at them on the back end, which is not exactly kind, right? It's not exactly considerate.

So my love, let's talk about that moment where you could choose to be considerate or step into your emotional outsourcing habits. And let's tie it all back to our nervous system, my nerds. When we're stuck in sympathetic arousal, the part of the nervous system that's, "Oh no, this situation is dangerous," we become hypervigilant about how others perceive us. Codependent and people-pleasing thinking are classic signs of a fight-flight response being activated. We might not be running away from a tiger, but emotionally we feel unsafe, so we start managing and controlling how others see us to attempt to avoid rejection or conflict.

We don't just fall into people-pleasing or codependent thinking by accident. So often, we've been taught that our worth and value are tied to how useful we are to others. And if we're not being useful, that's cause for sympathetic activation all on its own. It's dangerous, right? And so this habit goes beyond being considerate. It becomes about making ourselves responsible for everyone's well-being, the rescuer, the fixer, the one that saves people from their own lives. As though it's the only way we can prove our own value, not realizing how pejorative, patronizing, and paternalistic we're being to the others who we think it's incumbent on us to rescue. We make caring for others both our obligation and our identity. If we aren't the ones holding everything together, well, the world's just going to collapse. And if we aren't the ones holding everything together, then we fear we have no worth at all. Two sides of that coin, huh?

This thought pattern creates an endless loop where we continually seek out situations where we can feel needed, helpful, indispensable. Not just because we're genuinely trying to help because I believe that's in there, right? We like to give, we like to help. And deep down, we believe that being everything to everyone is the only way to feel valuable. When caring for others becomes your identity, you don't just step in to offer support from

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a place of love. You actively create opportunities to feel useful so that you can affirm your worth. It's not about showing up for someone from a place of care, it's about proving to yourself that you matter by over-functioning in the lives of others, even if that means inserting yourself into their lives in places and ways they never asked for and often don't even want.

This goes beyond simple kindness or consideration. It becomes a way to shield yourself from your internal feelings of inadequacy. And often, the situations we end up in are not about genuine care at all. They're about feeding a deeper belief that we are only worthy when we're giving. It becomes less about others and more about keeping that fragile sense of self afloat.

Let's say you're that friend who's always juggling everyone else's plans, taking on tasks for others even when your plate is beyond full. You say yes to driving your friend to the airport, then helping your colleague with their presentation after hours and cooking dinner for your family all in the same week. You're stressed, overwhelmed, and maybe even resentful. Haven't made it to the gym in weeks, even though you know cardio is your savior.

Deep down, without even realizing it, you keep doing it because without being the helpful one, the one people can count on, you feel lost. You don't even really know who you are. The thought of being seen as anything but the go-to person feels too uncomfortable. So you keep stacking your schedule, using these tasks as proof of your worth.

Now let's look at the workplace. You might be the person who volunteers to clean up everyone else's messes, stepping into roles that aren't even yours to begin with. Maybe a colleague is behind on a deadline, and instead of saying no or setting a boundary, you take on their work because it gives you that hit of usefulness, even though you're exhausted, you keep doing it. Because being indispensable at work feels like the only way to maintain your identity. And every time you take on extra work, you think, if I don't do this, who am I? But subconsciously. I don't think that's ever an active

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thought in someone's mind. It's kind of more like, well, more to do. It becomes so rote, we don't even pause.

So, finally, let's look at the family dynamic. You might be the one who steps in to care for everyone, your parents, your siblings, your extended family, your grown children. Maybe your parents ask for help with something minor. And then you find yourself offering to take over, managing their doctor's appointments, finance, home repairs. You take on everything. Not because they need it, but because being the family caretaker feels like your role. Remember, in codependent family systems, role confusion reigns supreme. I'll do a whole show on that.

So my angel, you believe that if you're not doing everything, if you're not constantly proving your usefulness before anyone doubts it, you'll lose your place in the family hierarchy, or worse, your sense of self. So, you keep giving and over-functioning even when you're completely exhausted because you've tied your identity to being the one everyone relies on. And that's where the over-functioning kicks in. It's a pattern designed to calm the nervous system by avoiding any potential harm, like the harm of someone being disappointed in us or, heaven forbid, not liking us. But in reality, it ends up harming us. We abandon ourselves, stretching beyond our limits and betraying our own needs in the name of keeping others happy. And over time, it leaves us exhausted and disconnected.

But let's get real about something here. My beauties, we were conditioned for this. In a society that praises selflessness, especially for women, it's easy to mistake people-pleasing for genuine care. We were taught that being a good friend, partner, parent, or colleague means putting everyone else's needs first. But here's the truth. You can only be truly caring and kind to others if you're doing the same for yourself. If your care for others is constantly fueled by fear of what they'll think, it's not really about them. It's about you trying to manage your discomfort around them potentially having uncomfortable feelings. Quite the cluster cluss, huh? Seriously.

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So let's look at another example. You're hosting a dinner party. Half the people are late. Someone else cancels last minute and the dishes haven't turned out as planned. Now, if you're coming from a grounded, considerate place, you can laugh it off and still enjoy the evening. I mean, who cares? You're present, rolling with the punches, understanding that things won't always be perfect. You could even order takeout. A dinner party's not about you proving that you're actually Julia Child reincarnated. It's about spending time with the people you love.

Meanwhile, if you're stuck in people-pleasing habits, the internal panic sets in. You start over-functioning, trying to make everything just right to ensure everyone's having a good time. You might even stop enjoying the party because you're so focused on how everyone else feels. You've abandoned yourself and your night in the name of attempting to control the atmosphere. At the end of the night, instead of feeling grateful, glad that people came over, glad you got this time together, you feel drained and disconnected because you weren't even present for the event you planned.

Now, I'll invite you to think about a time that you went out of your way to get the most perfect birthday gift for a friend or family member. Now, we're not talking just any old gift, something thoughtful, time-consuming, maybe even expensive. But here's the twist. The whole time you're thinking, I hope they know how much effort I put into this. I hope they can see just how much I care. And maybe after giving them the present, you're a little disappointed if they don't react with exactly enough enthusiasm or by acknowledging, "Wow, you were so thoughtful." And that, my beauty, is evidence of emotional outsourcing.

When whatever you're doing for others becomes about them knowing what you did or the other people around you knowing what you did for someone else, you're no longer giving or doing from a place of genuine care. It's not about the gift itself or the joy of giving, it's about controlling their perception of you. You're outsourcing your emotional validation to them. This is when

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that codependent habit sneaks in. Oh, it is so sneaky. Making you dependent on their acknowledgment for your own sense of worth.

So, how do we shift this? First, awareness. Notice when you feel that twinge of anxiety, that pressure to say yes or fix someone else's feelings. When you find yourself going out of your way to keep others comfortable, keep them company, keep them happy, keep them from having challenging emotions, challenging situations, or dealing with their own life to your own detriment. Meaning, is taking you out of doing what you want to and need to for you? Pause. Bring your awareness and your attunement to your breath, in and long, slow out. Orient to your nervous system, to your environment. And ask yourself, with no judgment, no shame, no blame, am I doing this out of genuine care? Or am I in my habits, trying to avoid discomfort? There's mine, both of ours. Well, beyond both, right? Because if it's a family thing, or a work thing, okay, or a friend circle thing, in general, am I trying to avoid discomfort in my body, their body, or in my community or collective?

Second, check in with your body. When we are giving from a full open heart, when we are just being loving and kind and supportive, we feel chill in our bodies. We feel present, grounded, soft. So if you're bracing, tightening up, starting to feel overwhelmed or disconnected, if your heart's going a little faster, your breathing's a little short, you get a tummy ache or a headache or an achy ache, if your shoulders are up by your ears or your jaw's tight, these can be some cues, a couple of little clues from the old nervous system that you're slipping into survival mode. Grounding yourself, by doing what we do, orienting, connecting to your breath, doing a somatic practice can help you come back into a more regulated state where you can step into choicefulness and make a conscious decision about whether you want to be considerate or do from obligation.

Lastly, setting boundaries is vital to all of this. And it's not just an easy, quick thing. Hey, just set boundaries. It takes practice. It takes time at task.

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And I know you've heard me talk about this in the many, many episodes, webinars, workshops about setting boundaries. I cannot emphasize it enough. Being considerate and caring means setting limits. Boundaries protect your energy and your emotional well-being, allowing you to show up for others in a sustainable way. If you are constantly saying yes without checking in with yourself, you'll end up depleted and resentful, angry at others for doing something you never told them that you didn't want them to do or you saying yes to doing something you didn't want to do. It's not kind. It's not kind to act outside of your limits and boundaries and then get pissed at someone else. Oh, my beauty. Come on.

Meanwhile, setting clear boundaries ensures that you are showing up for others from a place of integrity, not obligation. It is one of the most loving things you can do for yourself and all of your relationships.

So my love, I invite you to practice this the next time you're faced with a situation that pulls at your people-pleasing habits. Ask yourself, "Am I doing this from a place of love and care, or am I trying to manage how others see me?" I'll also invite you to get curious and ask yourself, "Beyond what others think of me, am I doing this to manage how I see myself so I can continue to believe that I'm some selfless, self-abandoning person," which is a good thing in that mindset? Perhaps you think being self-sacrificing makes you virtuous, worthy, and lovable. Perhaps being the selfless woman, wife, mother, daughter was the jam in your household growing up and you never learned to have a life of your own apart from taking care of everyone else.

My sweet tender ravioli, if that's the case, does this behavior signal that you don't believe you are worthy or lovable just because you exist? Said otherwise, do you believe that you are worthy or lovable just because you exist? Because if you don't, that's a great place to start, right? Working on that belief can change so much in your life because when we believe that we are worthy and lovable just because we exist, then we stop tap dancing

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for our lovability. This is one of the most painful things we do in emotional outsourcing.

From there, you can start to ask questions like, "What would it be like to let others manage their own lives, clean their own proverbial bedrooms, and to create a life of your own to live? What would that be like? And what would be possible if you were actually living for you and not just in service of everyone around you? What if you didn't collect people and situations, like stray cats on the side of the road to care for, situations to manage, just to fill the loneliness and the void within? What if you actually focused on you and building a life you love and want to live?" My beauty, I think that could be pretty darn amazing.

So your homework is to sit with these questions and to notice what arises. What are you taking on that's not yours? Why are you doing it? Can you identify where in your life you tie your worth to giving, fixing, self-abandoning, and the story about your identity you're creating through those actions? How would it feel to be deeply connected to your own inherent worth and lovability independent of what you do for others? What could it be like to step into true interdependence with others and to support one another without all the old baggage, obligation, and expectations? What would it be like for you to choose you? The more you ask, the easier it becomes to choose consideration over codependency and to remember that a life you love can be just around the corner.

Thanks for tuning in, my loves. I am so grateful to be sharing these ponderings, these thoughts, this work with you. I'm so grateful you tune in each and every week. Thank you for listening. 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.