

Ep #393: People Pleasing: What Keeping Others Happy Costs You



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 B  a 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. Hey, so over the next few weeks, I'm sharing a series I'm calling something like, why you're still feeling stuck, even after doing all of the work. All of it. And these episodes are about the deeper emotional patterns that tend to continue long after we become self-aware, especially the ones that still shape our relationships, our reactions, and of course, our sense of self, which is like the whole thing under all the things, especially when it comes to emotional outsourcing, right?

So, at some point, people pleasing morphs, right? It stops being about like being nice, being polite, just doing what you're told. It stops being like, oh, I was raised this way. I was raised to be kind to people. There's a shift where it starts to really be about attempting to feel safer in the world. If you've ever found yourself saying yes when you mean no, over explaining, justifying your desires, your wants, your needs, or managing how other people feel, it's often a pattern your body learned for like a really smart, really incredible, wow, protect you reason.

And while we honor the protector that told us behave this way, the cost of that pattern is that you slowly lose connection with yourself. You lose that connection with that deeper who you are because you're so focused on keeping everyone happy, everything copasetic, keeping everything looking some certain kind of way on the outside. So, today in this episode, as we go into this deeper emotional work series, we're going to talk about why that happens, why it sucks, and how to start to do it differently.

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I want to start with a poem. Poetry has always been a big part of my life. I was a teenage slam poet because the 90s. So, let's start with a few lines from Marion Milner.

"For what is really easy, as I found, is to blind one's eyes to what one really likes, to drift into accepting one's wants ready-made from other people, and to evade the continual day-to-day sifting of values." So beautiful. Just like, so beautiful and so relevant to our topic today. People pleasing. To blind one's eyes to what one really likes. Poetry.

So, my beauties, I spent the first 30 years of my life knee deep in people pleasing. And I still do it now and again because I'm a human and I have human habits and it's one of the symptoms of my codependent perfectionist thought habits. In the last few years, I've done a lot of work on this. I've really dedicated myself to bringing my awareness to when I am people pleasing, when that's what my brain wants to do, when I am having codependent thoughts, perfectionist thoughts, worry thoughts. I mean, I really just brought my attention to my thoughts and the feelings they create.

And it's been really amazing to increase my awareness, to step into acceptance, which is always step two, and then to take action. To begin to ask myself if I like the habitual thoughts I've been thinking, then the feelings they create, the actions I take from those feelings and the results, the outcomes in my life. And sometimes it's a yes and sometimes it's a no. And when it's a no, it's just been so freeing and beautiful to know that I have the thought work protocol to support me in choosing a new thought to feed into my beautiful, amazing brain and body to create a new reality for myself. It's been such a gift.

And simultaneously, in the last few years, I've taken a massive and at times petrifyingly scary leap for my own happiness and joy from running a very successful private practice as a functional medicine nurse practitioner with a three-month waitlist, to closing the clinic and focusing on helping folks to heal through the power of thoughtful life coaching. And it was scary in part

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because of my own thought habit of people pleasing and carrying what other people think of me above my own joy.

Here, that is that being a nurse practitioner is like a well-known, understandable, well-respected thing. I mean, who doesn't love nurses, right? And so, while many folks didn't always understand what holistic medicine or functional medicine are, they generally tend to understand that, you know, nurse practitioners are amazing. We can diagnose, prescribe, run lab work, interpret it. It's kind of just an understood thing.

And in my mind, it was understood as a marker of my smarts, my nerdiness, my success, and it was a delightful portal into external validation. Being a life coach? Less so. Or so the story went in my mind. So, it's a new field with all sorts of people in it with all kinds of levels of training, integrity, preparation for the incredible and sacred work of showing people their minds.

And in my brain, I resisted calling myself a life coach for ages. And it's because like the story went that it wasn't as important or prestigious or understandable or frankly as respectable as being a nurse practitioner trained at the best school in the US. What's up, UCSF, University of California, San Francisco? It wasn't as respectable as having a Master's degree in public health.

And the root of this line of thinking in my own brain is people pleasing and respectability and assimilationist politics, which is an important subject, but it is one for another day, my darling, but yes, that, right? Trying to change ourselves to be acceptable to others is often the root cause of people pleasing, which is also an un-trauma response. So, I kept myself stuck in something I was really good at and for sure at times deeply enjoyed, because it kept me from being vulnerable, vulnerable to failure in the bad way. And more than anything, to my fear of other people's judgments, critiques, not accepting my work as valid, people not being pleased with my choices.

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And I heard all about it as I've made this transition. The number of times people have said, you cannot not share your medical knowledge and not run labs and not prescribe. You can't not take care of people in this functional medicine paradigm because the people need you. And while it's true that there are not enough really good women in functional medicine out there, my truth is that's not how I meant to serve the world or myself. Not by sitting in front of a computer, reading labs and putting band-aids on trauma responses and thought habits that don't serve, treating the IBS or hypothyroid that shows up as a symptom of codependent thinking, self-judgment, holding it all in and not living into your authenticity.

My driving why, the reason I'm here on this planet, part of it, for sure, is to show people where their thoughts are keeping them stuck. Like I was feeling stuck, where they're employing old codependent and perfectionist scripts and finding themselves resentful. By helping people to honor and love their inner child and regulate their nervous system. And I got to put down that desire to please others in order to please myself. And it's been so challenging and ultimately so profoundly rewarding.

So, my angel, let's do what nerds do and define terms. What is people pleasing? So, people pleasing is when you try to make other people feel something, usually joy or happiness or appreciation of you and all that you do for them or in the world, and you prioritize doing so ahead of, instead of your own desires. It's a way to put what you think other people want ahead of what you actually want with the goal of trying to make or keep them happy. And it's so common in folks with a habit of codependent and perfectionist thoughts, or those raised by folks with those thoughts.

People pleasing is when you prioritize other people's desires or preferences over your own, even around simple things like what to eat or what movies to watch. I did this myself for years and years, and I would feel upset, disappointed, and resentful of the other person when I did it, especially if I did have awareness of my own desires and chose to override

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them to not make waves or to attempt to be seen in a particular light, such as friendly, generous, kind, compassionate. What can happen when you have people pleasing thought habits is that you can end up in a state of overwhelm because you're trying to manage your own wants and needs and what you perceive everyone else's wants and needs to be.

It's exhausting because your internal spotlight is not on yourself, it's on everyone else. And it can lead to resentment because you're not ultimately getting what you want and need. And boy, oh boy, does that ego like to take it personally? Now, it's okay to want to do nice things for other people. I love doing nice things for other people. The problem comes when it's at the cost of your own happiness, wants, or desires. Compromise is wonderful if it doesn't feel compromising. You can also help people and support people from a healthy, loving, kind, generous place without it being people pleasing. And the difference lies in how your choices make you feel. When you pause long enough to take a serious look at your thought habits.

So, my darling, because the life coaching work I do is strengths based, that is, I always look at how the habits that hold us down in life were once actually really amazing, brilliant survival strategies as a way to get your needs met as a child or at another point in your life. That is where we will always start. While also holding that those same habits can now have not so nice consequences for us as adults. They can become or take on the energy of being maladaptive, which we learned all about in episode 19. And so, it's important to talk about how this people pleasing habit has served you and me.

Folks with these habits are amazing chameleons. They're adept at taking the temperature of the room, tuning in, intuiting their assumptions of what other people think and feel and need. And because they've been doing it their whole lives, they can be shockingly accurate in their assessments. And there are so many jobs from being a nurse, service worker, waitress,

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leader, a CEO, where anticipating needs and desires is the most laudable skill.

Folks with people pleasing habits tend to have amazing work ethics. You make yourself indispensable in any setting. I mean, it's great job security. And the side of people pleasing habits that doesn't serve you is when you do or say or wear or eat something you don't want to because someone else wants you to, or you think it will make someone else happy at a cost to yourself.

When your desire for approval and validation are stronger than your desire to do what you want, it can be really challenging to speak up for yourself, to state your own desires. And for some folks, you might not yet be skilled in acknowledging your wants, preferences, desires, for fear of someone not liking it, not agreeing with it, or being pleased with you. You become so used to anticipating other's needs, you lose touch with your own.

And this habit has its roots in codependent perfectionist thought habits, trauma, stress, growing up with caregivers who didn't see you or attend to you in the ways you wanted and needed developmentally, and also in structural inequalities, all of which we'll dive into in a moment, my darling. And for some time, in some setting, the adjacent skills of people pleasing folks can be useful and beneficial in their ways.

So, the work is not, and never is, to beat yourself up or denigrate these skills. It's to get into alignment with yourself and your true needs and to find that balance. Me first, you second, with love. To do this is not selfish. Our work here is always to be interdependent, not codependent or independent. To be able to lovingly connect with others. And to do so, we get to show up for ourselves first. And when we do, we can show up better, more authentically, honestly, lovingly, and with less resentment for the other people in our lives.

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As always, if this topic is bringing up a lot for you, that means it's likely something that's a part of your thought habits. Nothing is wrong. Everything is okay. We all have habits. And there's nothing, nothing to regret or to be mean to you about here. Just keep listening, keep breathing, and keep being gentle and kind with yourself. Okay?

Some other hallmarks of this habit include hiding parts of yourself so others will like you, or at the least, won't disapprove of you. So you blend in with your family, the cool kids, the in crowd, to not feel singled out. Not setting or holding boundaries or limits, often because you never learned what they are, what they feel like or look like. And just as often, you don't set boundaries because you're scared you won't be able to stick to them, enforce them, ask for them to be respected. And you're scared someone else won't like them.

Upholding the party line, agreeing with people to keep the peace. A hallmark of this habit is apologizing often, even when you did nothing wrong or when the situation has nothing to do with you. Not letting people know when your feelings are hurt. Feeling responsible for how other people feel. Feeling burdened by the things you have to do. Focusing on how others see you. Not saying no when you want to. Looking for external validation or praise to feel good about yourself. Avoiding conflict at all costs. Hiding your pain, fear, worry with, "I'm fine."

So, let's dive in like we do in functional medicine because this is functional medicine life coaching, right? To look at just a few of the root causes and common experiences that come with people pleasing. Note that when I was thinking about this topic, I came up with about a billion root causes for people pleasing. And while I'm sure you'd love to hear a 473-hour episode, I've picked the top few I see most often.

And as always, I want to start by saying this, it's not your fault if you have had this habit. There are massive societal influences at play that determine the thoughts we are programmed to think. Here, society, patriarchy, racism,

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xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, our cultures of origin, and the dominant culture as well as capitalism come to mind as root causes of those thoughts that were programmed into your sweet little mind.

Capitalism tells us that our production is the most important thing, that we need to be constantly working, producing, proving ourselves, work late. Back in the day, be the first at the office, right? That first in, last out. Say yes to taking on another project when you're stretched beyond capacity or the boss won't be pleased with you. People pleasing is insidious and sneaks into our brains in so many ways. And if you're a person of color, you have to work doubly hard to prove yourself. Research backs this up, and the alma. It takes a serious toll on health and wellness in all ways.

An example that really stands out for me is from a holiday I spent a year or so ago with someone in my life's family of origin. Their mom, let's call her Beth, had spent all day cooking this elaborate meal. And while I walked into the house, she was like covered in flour and butter and was obviously frazzled. She declined the help I offered saying, "I just want everyone to be happy, to have a good time." While she was clearly overwhelmed, sighing a lot, sending a lot of indirect communications, which we talked about in the communication series, episode 31, 32, and 33. And she was letting us know in her own way that she was, well, overwhelmed.

We sat down and had appetizers and Beth didn't even join us. She was working in the kitchen the whole time we were relaxing and didn't even pause to eat all day. When we sat down to dinner, Beth barely joined us. Every time someone said they wanted something, she hopped up to get it. And the second we were done eating, she cleared the plates and started doing the dishes. We literally didn't see her all day or all night. And we all kept asking her to sit down and she kept saying that she wanted us all to have a good night, to enjoy ourselves, to have fun.

What she was not saying was that she wanted us to be pleased with her, to think well of her, to have an image of her as this perfect woman, perfect

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mother, perfect hostess. I don't think she even ate dinner. And the funny thing is, what we all most wanted was not some picture perfect meal. It was time with her. But her habit of trying to keep everyone happy, over taking care of herself and her own desire to spend time with her family and friends, got in the way of all of that.

Another one of the most common root causes I see in folks with people pleasing habits is not having healthy boundaries. Again, because most of us grew up without them or don't know how to set them or keep them. And we talked all about boundaries way back in the day in episode five. Without a clear understanding of where you end and someone else begins, you lose your place on your own path. Over time, it can feel challenging to know what you actually want when you've had the habit of putting other people's thoughts and feelings ahead of your own.

People pleasing can have its deepest root in a lack of parental attunement. If your caregivers are not tuned into you, which can look like busy parents, distracted parents, emotionally vacant or checked out parents or caregivers, parents dealing with trauma, stress, crisis, or substance use issues, or pushy parents who demanded you excel in a certain way, then you may have taken that in as a child. And as an adult, you may feel like you're going to get rejected or abandoned and your focus is on what other people think or feel as a way to keep them happy with you. And thus, the story in your head goes, less likely to leave you.

Remember, baked into being a human is a desire to not be abandoned because my nerds, being abandoned as a helpless small child can mean that you are going to die cold and alone on a mountain top. And your mind and body will do everything they can to prevent that. So smart. Fast forward to adulthood, saying no or setting limits feels scary, speaking your needs, saying what you want. Oh, not a smart move. Your brain gets concerned about people thinking you're unkind or otherwise not someone

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they would protect should the wolves come to attack the village. See how that one works?

And because ancestral trauma and understanding how we got taught these behaviors is so important to me, I want to name the intergenerational nature of these thought habits. We learned them from our parents who learned them from theirs, on and on. And smart kids do what is modeled for them. And if that's people pleasing, well, then you learn to people please.

When a parent or caregiver has this habit and is so focused on thinking about other people's pleasure and approval, so outwardly focused, you as a kiddo can come to see your adult as unstable or fragile, because they're often disappointed or upset. As that kiddo, you worry that if you're not making them happy, then they won't be happy because if your adult is kind of like walking around like an open wound, always looking for validation, then it makes sense as a child, you'd want to fill that void for them so that they'll stick around, they'll think you're worth saving, they'll think you're worth feeding. Makes a lot of sense to a kiddo brain.

People pleasers send the message that they are fundamentally not okay unless they are making others happy and getting that positive reinforcement. If your caretaker was like this when you were a kiddo, it can be a struggle for them to be available to a child in a consistent way. It creates distrust in the adult figure's reliability because they're just not really that reliable emotionally speaking, which is a challenging thing for a kid to experience. So, once again, the logical choice is to try to keep them happy, and the cycle continues.

Tied into that is attempting to be all things to all people, a hallmark of people pleasing. And I certainly loved this one, doing what for other people what they could do for themselves, doing jobs that weren't my job, sort of constantly. And this can come from a fear of criticism, conflict, challenging emotions, all of which is often based in not having a positive self-regard.

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Remember, people pleasing pleases everyone but you. So we really should call it other people pleasing.

But when you don't have your own back 100%, when you're unkind or judgmental or mean to yourself if someone else criticizes you, then trying to keep everyone happy with you is a reasonable and logical choice, though obviously doesn't serve you in a real way as an adult, but it keeps you in that thought loop. And all of this often runs in parallel with what we talk about here on the show, codependency, perfectionism. So, my darling, make sure that you take a listen to all the recent shows about those topics. Episode 54 about how sneaky and insidious codependency is, 55 about ancestral and intergenerational codependency, and then the two episodes, 56 and 57, all about perfectionism. I know you'll see the threads between all of these thought habits making this tapestry, this quilt in which you are focused outward and not on your perfect self.

And my love, can you believe we made it this far into the show without an actual nerd alert? So, bodies are so smart. People pleasing gives you feel good chemicals that make you, well, feel good. When you do something and someone else validates it, you get a hit of oxytocin and dopamine. The problem is that people pleasing is buffering. It keeps you from feeling your real feelings. And God has forbid the person you did whatever for or said whatever to in an attempt to please isn't pleased, you're not going to get your hit of feel-good juice. Like I've talked about before, when you do things to get that dopamine hit, it is so fleeting. It literally lasts just a few seconds in your bloodstream. The half-life is like nothing. So, you have to please another person and another and another if you want to get that dopamine that makes you feel good. And it's an endless and exhausting cycle.

And my love, the final root cause we'll take a look at today because there are so many more, is fear. Anytime you keep your realness under wraps because you're worried about how others will respond to it, you're attempting to people please, whether that's not dressing or doing your hair

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how you want to, or assimilating to how society wants you to be so you can blend in, all of that is people pleasing. And for sure, this is a survival tactic, and it's often a vital one for marginalized folks. So, I want to be sure to be very clear here. I'm not saying this is bad, and I'm not throwing anyone ever under the bus for doing what they needed to in order to survive. I'm just saying it steals a bit of your soul. And that hurts my heart and yours.

One story that just popped into my mind from my own experience is when I worked in a large medical care group doing primary care, and I actually got called into the medical director's office, a white man's office, because there had been a complaint from a patient, I hope you're sitting down, that I was, and in quotes here, because this is an exact quote, "Acting too Latina." That was the patient complaint. And this white man, my medical director, actually wanted me to, quote, "Tone it down." Sorry, just even like thinking back to that, tone my Latina-ness down, which I guess would be saying it Latina-ness. You can imagine what I said to that. Sorry, my brain's like, whoa, I can't even believe that happened, but I can also like totally believe that happened, right? We are so often, it is not just asked of us, but like literally demanded of us that we assimilate, that we be less of ourselves in order to be pleasing to others.

Heavy, right? Keep breathing, my love. Let's take a deep breath in. Deep breath in, expand that belly, expand that belly, expand that belly, and out. Long, slow exhale.

Okay. So people pleasing is other people pleasing. It always leaves us, you, me, unpleased because we're putting other people ahead of ourselves. And my darling, that's not how you build your own joy. I'm going to pause there because this is a lot to take in, to recognize in yourself, to start to see where you're doing this, where you're saying sorry all the time. It's a lot. And it's so important.

And I want to invite you to cultivate awareness this week about how you're living into these habits, where they came from, and how they're impacting

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you in your day-to-day life. Know that next week, we'll be diving into the remedies, the antidotes, so you'll get those actionable steps I know my nerds want. But first, always first, awareness, then acceptance of the fact that you do this, and that your inner child is a total genius for gifting you this habit. Acceptance. And then, only then, we move into action. We don't skip steps, my beauty.

So I invite you to look at the list I made and to ask yourself, where am I not speaking my truth? Where am I not being myself? Where am I putting other people's happiness or feelings or wants or desires above my own? How am I people pleasing in big and little ways? Get real about it. Get honest with yourself. Get out pen and paper and write about it, my beauty. Get that cognitive distance and see it all laid out before yourself. And above all, always be gentle and kind and loving with yourself. All is well, truly. You just have thought habits, and that's normal and human and protective and okay. It doesn't serve you, but it's okay that it has been. You get to use your neuroplasticity to put new thoughts into your thought habits and to create a new tomorrow.

My beauty, when you start to see people pleasing differently, not as like a flaw, not something that means there's anything wrong with you, but as what it is, which is something you were conditioned to do, something you learned, something that's part of your socialization, especially if you're a human socialized as a woman, or a girl who becomes a woman, right? The next question becomes, what do you do with that version of you? Right? What do you do with that you that learned the things?

Because you can't change a pattern you're still judging, right? Because instead of actually doing the work to change it, you're just at fisticuffs with yourself, right? You're just busy beating yourself up instead of honoring, attending to, attuning to, accepting, and moving on. And so that's what we're getting into next week in part two of this deeper dive work, where we are exploring all the ways we've been stuck and how to start to actually

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move forward, which is what we all want, right? Right. All right. 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. Ciao, ciao. I'll talk to you soon.