

Ep #402: Eldest Daughter Syndrome: You Were Never Supposed to Do It All



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. Listen, I'm curious. I'm just curious. I'm just curious. Is there any chance that you are constantly, ridiculously, pretty much like big-time annoyed by how freaking incompetent everyone around you seems to be? Or just like, is. They is incompetent.

Or, are you the one standing on the receiving end of that? Or in the audience of someone who carries this kind of like, "Oh my God, what is happening?" Ajera kind of way of moving through the world, who judges everyone, including you, against her own completely and outstandingly unreasonable capacity to do all of the things all of the time? If so, I'm glad you're here.

I have some light to shed on this woman, and studies show it may or may not be, but totally actually is very much, in fact, because I spent most of my life being her. 'Cause I am, after all, the animal known as the Eldest Daughter. So I know her from the inside. And here's the first thing to know about her. My beauty, my beauty, she is furious.

She's furious. She's full of rage, and the rage is because they're doing it wrong, because they are. Let's just be clear: they're doing it wrong, they're doing it late, they're doing it not in the right way. They're just, they are effing it up, and it's gonna be on her to fix it. And sometimes she can keep it to herself, but a lot of the time you can really hear it.

It's the like, can you freaking believe someone would do it that way with so much stress behind the syllables that they practically vibrate? It's the chronic, quieter version too, which sounds like, it's a lot of huffing. It's the, "Well, I wouldn't do it that way," muttered at somebody, but also nobody, but

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somehow still loud enough that like everyone in the house has learned to brace for it.

I mean, people know. She's verbal about it often, but sometimes it comes out sideways instead as an extremely low tolerance for other people's confusion, a physical, "Ugh," response to watching someone fumble something she'd figured out at age nine with absolutely zero help from anybody. Foreshadowing. A specific, particular, done, "I am just done with this. I am done with all of this," that's been following her around since, I'm gonna say approximately like the Clinton administration, possibly longer, possibly since the Lewis and Clark expedition, who knows?

Time is a flat circle when you've been the responsible one since before you could legally drive yourself anywhere at all, or even reach the pedals. And so what people don't always clock, including her, is what it's actually about, because they're either her, so deep in the angst and the, "What the hell?" of it, or they're on the receiving line and trying to calm her down and trying to like help her to see like, "It's not that big a deal. It's okay. I'll take care of it. I'm sure they didn't mean it." And either way, however it cuts in your life, we're not looking at the what that's under the what, 'cause what we see on the surface is so big.

Our protagonist here, I feel like I've been saying that a lot lately, our protagonist, she's been told this is like a her problem. "Well, I don't know. I think it's just you. You're too much. You're too intense, you're too impatient. You're probably, you know what, you're controlling. Have you tried therapy? Have you tried magnesium?"

And some days she started to wonder if they're right, because how can she feel so tired? Because she can feel how tired she is of being the only one who's always bracing for the next disappointment. And because she knows somewhere underneath the certainty, I mean, I guess she does know that her brusqueness costs her things. Like the friend who used to call every week and now calls rarely ever. Her sister-in-law who goes like quiet and

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her energy shuts down whenever she starts telling people how to load a dishwasher correctly.

She comes in with huge intensity. She tells people how to be because she is certain she is right. And she pushes her own agenda into a room without leaving anyone else space to breathe. And some nights she lies there wondering if she is, in fact, just a lot. Her brusqueness, it is real. Her friend really did pull back. The dishwasher comment really did land wrong, and she feels bad. And none of that erases the other thing that's also true. The thing that nobody ever taught her. This is what happens to a kid who never got to not know how to do things, all grown up.

And once you see that, it's hard to unsee it. The way your childhood phone number still lives in your hands, even though you've not dialed a landline since the Bush administration. I want to say something about who I mean when I talk about the eldest daughter because it's not like a, it's not a birth certificate situation. So sure, sometimes the eldest daughter is the eldest daughter, but it's a role that gets assigned, not inherited. It lands on all kinds of children for all kinds of reasons.

I mean, maybe you are literally the first born. Maybe you are the only girl, and thus, the emotional and domestic labor defaulted to you on that basis alone, which like, cool, cool, cool, super cool. Love a patriarchy. No notes. Maybe your mother was depressed, or your father was checked out, or there was substance use or illness or a general low hum of, "Everything is fine. Why would you ask?" kind of stiff upper-lippedness, and you became the one who made sure that everything actually was.

Suck it up, Buttercup. No time for feelings around here, am I right? Maybe you were the most sensitive kid in the house, the one who could feel the temperature of a room and could feel it shift before anyone said a word or even thought about saying a word. And the family system clocked that early and handed you the thermostat and said, "Congrats, you're in charge of the climate now."

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However you got the job, the job is the same. Be the one who manages all of it. Figure out what needs to happen before anyone asks. Do not add to the pile. And above all, do not need too much yourself. Because the bandwidth for that was never available. And you learned the cost of testing it somewhere around, I'm gonna say second grade, and concluded both correctly and efficiently that it was way too high.

And now that kid grew up. She's probably in her 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s now, tender little hummingbird heart beating a thousand times a minute while she looks completely calm on the outside. She's competent in a way that stopped being a choice decades ago and started being the air, something she does without deciding to do it, the way you don't decide to breathe. The way you'd only notice it was missing if it stopped.

She lies awake at 2 a.m. running tomorrow's hard conversation through every possible version of itself until she's pre-managed every outcome. And she does not experience this as a sign that something's wrong because surely, this is just what brains do. Surely, everyone's brain is hosting a 2 a.m. tribunal, right? She rewrites texts three times before sending them. She says yes when she means no and then rearranges her entire week around the lie. She has never once let herself be visibly bad at something without it costing her an enormous amount of internal real estate. The kind of real estate that should have a doorman and a view by now, given how much she's paid into it over all these years and decades.

She is tired in a way no vacation can fix, tired in a way sleep does not reach because what's exhausted, sure, yeah, I mean it is her body, but it isn't just her body. It's the part of her that's been running the operation since she was eight years old and has not, not once been relieved of duty. Not for a long weekend, not for a fever, not for the year everything fell apart. The operation runs regardless. The operation has a glitch in it, and it shows up in exactly one place.

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When she gets irritated, and she does reliably, at the partner who cannot locate the object directly in front of them, at the colleague who needs hand holding through a process she considers deeply self-evident, at the friend processing, "Oh my God, the same situation for the fourth consecutive month, like it's a part-time job now. Just leave him already," at the stranger on the subway encountering, oh, I don't know, are you encountering a revolving door for the first time in your adult life and finding it against all odds, a deeply and personally surprising? She has been told, and she has told herself that the irritation is about their incompetence and her being way too judgmental. But it's not about their incompetence. What it is, is about their freedom to have it.

She's not just irritated that they don't know how to do the things. She is confronted in her body before she has language for it, by the fact that their not knowing is allowed, that they get to be confused and have someone explain it to them, that they get to struggle and have someone stay, that they get to take up space with their figuring it out, their questions, their need, their entirely ordinary human incompleteness. They get care, and none of it cost them anything.

Nobody sighs, nobody checks out, their eyes don't glaze over. Nobody needs them to pull it together so the whole system can keep running. And when they can't find the thing that is, in fact, sitting right in front of them, she's the one who gets interrupted to go find it, every time, because somebody has to, and it's never them doing the finding. She's the default, and she never got that. She did not get to not know.

She did not get to be confused in front of people and have them stay patient and warm and loving and kind and emotionally available to her. She did not get to need things and have those needs treated as reasonable, as expected, as the entirely normal output of a child who is still becoming a person. What she got was the message, delivered not once, but 10,000 times in 10,000 unremarkable moments, that her need was a problem, that

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her not knowing was a burden, that her falling apart was not something this house has room for.

So she learned not to, magnificently. She learned to figure it out, to hold it together, to be, "Oh, I'm just fine," in a way that becomes so total, she eventually forgot she'd learned it at all. The way you forget you're wearing your glasses until somebody asks you why you're not blinking at the eye chart like everyone else.

And now, here she is, a grown woman, standing in her kitchen, watching her perfect peony of a partner fail to locate the colander, which has lived, by the way, in the same cabinet for 13 years, which has not relocated, it has not teleported, it's not hiding, but he can't find it. And asks her to find it. And something in her goes white-hot in a way she knows is disproportionate and cannot stop anyway.

That's not about the colander. That's 30 years of, "I never got to not know either," arriving in her chest every single time someone in front of her gets to not know. This is emotional outsourcing, the habitual pattern of sourcing safety, worth, and belonging from outside instead of from within, showing up here as codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing patterns. And we talked all about this in episode 380, you were never supposed to be doing all of that. Here's the version of it that's very specific to her.

Most emotional outsourcing looks like the accommodating flavor: shrinking, fawning, deferring, making yourself smaller and quieter so everyone around you stays comfortable. This gal, the eldest daughter, oh, she does not shrink. She expanded into function. And here's what that looks like at her parents' table on Thanksgiving.

She's tracking four plates, the temperature of the gravy, whether her uncle is two beers away from saying the thing he says every year, whether the dog's water bowl has water, and she's tracking a niece who looks like she might cry, doing that all at once while someone asks if she's having a good

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time, and she says, "Oh, yes, of course." And she means it because this exact orchestration is the only setting in which her nervous system has ever known peace.

And that peace has a price tag that nobody mentions out loud. Her worth as a being, as a human mammal, got outsourced to her competence, her safety to her own indispensability. I am okay because I am the one holding this together. I am safe because I am needed. I matter because I do not cause problems.

Now, this is the same mechanism as the shrinking version. So safety living outside her, contingent on performance. But because this performance looks like strength, everybody calls it strength, including her for a very long time, possibly including a therapist who once told her she has excellent boundaries because she's so good at managing everyone's needs, when what she actually has is excellent management and zero boundaries, two things that do, in fact, look identical from across the room and feel nothing alike from inside her body.

That kind of safety, the kind built entirely on being needed, does not come for free. It costs her hypervigilance. That is a body that never fully stands down, because she's always at least three steps ahead, always tracking what could go sideways, always aware of what everyone in the room needs before they figured it out themselves, like some kind of unpaid air traffic controller for other people's feelings.

When someone near her is not doing any of that, when her partner is serenely, almost suspiciously unbothered by the thing she can see coming from a significant distance, her system does not register that as his peace. It registers it as her problem. As further proof that she is, once again, the only adult in the building, possibly the only adult on the block, possibly, okay, probably, most likely, the last responsible person left on planet Earth, the weight of which she carries into the grocery store on a Tuesday for

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absolutely no reason anyone else can see, except that's how it's been written into her body.

Oh, my beauty, this is a truly exhausting and lonely way to move through the world. She'll scan a room for catastrophe with the same intensity a smoke detector applies to actual smoke, and she will go off just as loudly for someone microwaving popcorn as she will for an actual house fire, because her detector was calibrated in a house where she could not always tell which one was coming. It is also, often, not accurate. But a nervous system that learned the world this way will keep running that analysis until something slowly, with repetition, with patience, teaches it something else.

Wellness culture has a tendency to move fast towards the tender part, the part where we orient to our resources and soften and arrive somewhere more spacious. I want to slow that down today, my sweet scallion pancake, because the first place we actually need to go is not tender. For her, it's furious.

Because she was a child, and she needed her parents the way children need grown-ups, completely, without negotiation as a condition of survival. The family system needed her to need them less, and she adapted, because little kids, they do not have other options. They are like eight or 12 or whatever. And when nobody in that system stood up and said, "This is too much to put on her. She gets to be a kid. She gets to not know how to do things. She gets to fall apart sometimes and have us catch her without the whole arrangement coming down." When nobody said that, it all landed on her, because she couldn't say it either. Because at nine, you do not blow up the only source of connection and thus food available to you. You just don't. It's not on the table.

So the anger went underground. It went into standards and judgment and capability and capacity and this precise, exhausting relationship with other people's incompetence that she has spent decades calling, "That's just my

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personality." The low hum of, "I cannot believe I have to deal with this," that follows her everywhere is a message that's been sitting in her outbox since second grade, undelivered, because there was never anyone positioned to receive it. So she had to carry it all this time.

So my beauty, if you grew up carrying this role, I want to tell you have every right to be furious. You were asked to do something children should not be asked to do. You were praised for a kind of self-erasure that should have been named and interrupted instead. The adults around you were probably doing their best, and their best extracted something from you that was not yours to give. Both of those things are true at once, fully, without one softening the other.

The anger about what it cost does not need to be reframed or made productive or breathed into something more digestible. It doesn't need to be metabolized, and you don't need to punch anything about it. It just needs, maybe for the first time, to be acknowledged as exactly what it is and given space to be. And then underneath the anger is often grief.

This is the most consistent thing I've found in this work. That anger, held long enough and met with enough safety, eventually opens into something, yeah, it's quieter, and it's considerably more devastating. The grief does not show up where you'd expect. It does not arrive when someone is incompetent in front of her. It shows up when someone is unexpectedly kind to her. When her partner takes something off her plate without being asked, when a friend notices she's exhausted before she's said a single word about it and brings over dinner.

When someone says, "Oh, I've got this one, you rest," and she feels inexplicably, oh, I don't know what's happening, like I might cry, standing there holding a dish towel for no reason she can name, stammering, 'cause, 'cause nothing bad is happening. Nothing bad is happening. And that's exactly the problem. That is why.

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That is the part of her that knows precisely what she's been going without. Her body in the presence of being cared for, recognizing the shape of its own long hunger. Grief needs a kind of safety that anger does not. Anger has its own momentum. You can be furious while fully braced. Grief requires the bracing to soften even slightly, and she's been bracing since she was six. So it does not come down quickly or on anyone else's schedule.

It tends to show up in the places that have offered the most sustained safety: a good therapist, a loving coach, a somatic practice, a relationship where she's been shown enough time that her needs are okay. Her needs don't break things. Sometimes it's crying in the car in a parking lot after a session, sometimes write an episode on a random Tuesday in the car before she goes inside. The arrival point isn't the point.

When the grief comes, it's not regression or weakness or falling apart, and I need you to hear me say that. It's the most honest thing in her, finally getting enough room to exist. If you are her, here is the one practice I actually ask people to start with, and it has nothing to do with managing the irritation better, because like, whatever. Managing it better, it's more of the same job. Instead, I'll invite you to pick one low-stakes moment this week, something small and real: a recipe, a route, a setting on the dishwasher you've never bothered to learn, and say the sentence out loud to another person. "I don't know how to do this. Will you help me?"

Now, we're not doing this simply as a performance of being vulnerable. Just the plain sentence in a moment where nothing's actually at risk. Like, this is irrelevant. Notice what happens in your chest when you say it. Notice if you immediately follow it with an apology or a joke or a distraction or a reason why you're actually better than this. Don't fix or change that either. Just notice it, the way you'd notice the weather. And work to do that enough times and in enough small moments and something underneath the irritation starts to soften. Because your body finally has evidence that you

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can be real, you can be a real human, you can not know how to do something, you can even, eek, ask for help, and the sky doesn't fall.

That sentence is a doorway. And the room on the other side of it is bigger than the irritation, and it's the part that actually changes things. Because whatever the irritation, underneath it is a nervous system that's never been shown proof that imperfect is survivable. And the only thing that builds that proof is doing something imperfectly and living to tell about it. Not a grand gesture, a kitten step, which is, of course, the smallest version of a step that still counts as a step, the kind a wee newborn baby kitten could manage on its first try.

Let one thing be 1% worse than your standard for it. Send the email with a small typo on purpose and don't go back to fix it. Leave one dish in the sink overnight. Let the gift be store-wrapped instead of the version you'd have made, and then notice whether you're still loved at dinner. Notice whether the world continues exactly as it was. Once you've done this enough and your body starts to believe that about you, the same belief becomes available for everyone else.

Because right now, you're applying one rule to yourself and a different rule to other people. And underneath both of those rules is the same fear: that not perfect is dangerous. Not perfect means the world falls apart. So the work is to start practicing the opposite where it costs you legit nothing. A stranger cuts you off in traffic. Before you build the whole story about what kind of person does that, try this instead. "I don't know what's happening in that car right now, and it isn't actually my business to find out."

That's it. You don't have to feel generous about it. You don't have to, please don't scold yourself if you went to judgey's. You just have to let the story stay unwritten. Okay, and that's the work. Let's feel into this, right? What's the common advice? Oh, stop judging people. Maybe their alpaca just died, and there's just really they need to like race to the whatever. Or like, right,

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we start to tell these other stories that makes our internal state somehow linked with theirs and whether like it's justified for them to do what they did.

He cut you off in traffic, but he's getting to, I don't know, he's a brain surgeon, whatever. It's still keeping us in that judgment mind. It's still keeping us in that storytelling mind. And the work when you're coming from eldest daughter is to let the story stay unwritten. Let the story stay unwritten because it's irrelevant. We are working towards not judging them, and that means not judging their story worthy or unworthy. Eh? You see what we're doing here? This is the shift.

And so you do that with strangers for a while, the easy targets, the people who will never know you decided not to judge them or write a story about them. And then slowly, only when the stranger version has gotten boring from how easy it's become, bring it closer to home. Your partner squeezes the toothpaste from the middle every single time, like a man with no relationship to consequences. But you, you're going to let it be his way. Not because his way is right, but because you're practicing the exact same muscle you used on the man in traffic.

And this is the version of the exercise with something real attached to it. Letting yourself be imperfect without dying and then letting everyone else be imperfect without murdering them. But without it costing you your peace, right? That's the whole shape of this work, start to finish. So if you're listening to this and the person I've been describing is not you, but someone you love, a partner, a sibling, a co-worker, a friend, that colleague who appears to be running a small multinational corporation from her laptop and seems faintly irritated by your continued breathing and your continued presence in the office in which you hold the exact same title, I want to say something directly to you. Please try to hear it. You ready?

Her irritation is not actually about your competence. Your ease, your freedom to not know things, to need help, to be confused without it costing you the regard of everyone around you, that lands in her body as a

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reminder of something she was never allowed to have. And she's not measuring you against a standard. She is, without knowing this is what's happening, confronted by you. There's a real difference between those two things. And knowing it hopefully can help to bring in some compassion, some curiosity, some care.

The thing that actually helps is not becoming more competent on her behalf, which is everyone's first instinct and which addresses the wrong problem with tremendous dedication. The thing that helps is building enough consistent safety that she occasionally gets to be the one who does not have to know. Where she can say, "I don't understand how to do this," and have someone stay and walk her through it without making it like a whole freaking production. Where she gets handed the tea and told, "I've got this one. You can sit down."

And she will resist. She'll probably take the tea and go find something else to organize or to print or to like work on because unstructured okayness is disorienting in a very real physical way for a nervous system that's been on duty this long. And that's fine. Keep going. She's learning, possibly for the first time as an adult, that needing things does not cost her your presence, meaning you're going to stick around.

And that is a slow lesson for someone who has learned the opposite at an age when she was still losing teeth. So be patient in the specific way that means you keep showing up even when she reorganizes the hall closet by color instead of accepting the help. So on the other side of this, what becomes possible when she lets her internal nervous system update? It's not some frictionless, irritation-free existence where she floats through life unbothered by colander questions and revolving doors and people meeting a metro card for the first time. It's something smaller and realer than that.

It's a Tuesday where she doesn't know how to do something, asks for help, and the world keeps turning, and she doesn't beat herself up endlessly for it. An afternoon where she drinks her tea and does not immediately go find

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something to fix. A moment where she's not the one holding it all and she discovers, maybe for the first time, that she was never the only one standing between everyone and everything she loves and total structural collapse.

So the work is learning to source her okayness from inside herself rather than from how well she's running the operation. That's the work, my beauty. That's the work. And I trust and believe, having done it myself, that you can do it too. I hope this has been helpful. I hope it's been supportive. I hope it got your wheels going. And the next time you feel like you're irrationally going to rip someone's head off their body and put it up their nose for doing something ridiculous like not knowing how to work the fax machine. Come on. Come on.

If you want help in that process, that is the work I do. I do it in Anchored, and I do it in The Shift. And it starts not with a framework or a protocol, but with the most radical thing available to a woman who has been fine for as long as anyone, including herself, can remember, which is owning when she's not fine and being loved on anyway.

And if you want help in that process, I'd love to see you in Anchored, my deep dive six-month coaching program. The Shift is a 12-week program where we work specifically on codependent thinking and its habits and how it shows up. And you can learn all about the both of them and all of my other programs on BeatrizAlbina.com/courses. I'd love to see you there. We'll have a blast, for realsies. All right, my love. Thanks again for being here. I'm so glad you're you. I'm so glad you're here. I'll see you next week. But first, 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. Mwah. I'll talk to you soon. Ciao, ciao.