Ep #403: Parental Curiosity: Were Your Parents Actually Interested in You?



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Béa Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

Feminist Wellness with Béa Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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This is *Feminist Wellness*, and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, somatics and nervous system nerd, and life coach 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. So listen, I've been thinking a lot about how the people who do the most sustained, serious work on themselves, who've been in therapy and coaching and worked with plant medicine for years and read everything and can name their attachment style and describe their nervous system responses with real precision, those people are often the most confused about where any of it actually started.

Like some segment of them, right? Who can't point to a specific trauma or a set of traumas. The ones who look back at childhood and, I mean, the picture's just fine. It was okay enough, meaning nothing "crash, boom, bam" happened. Everyone was fed. Recitals were often attended. And by every available metric, the childhood was a success.

And yet here they are in their 20s, in their 30s, in their 40s, in their 50s, rewriting a text message for the 47 millionth time before sending it because they cannot land on a version that will cause the least disruption to another human being who may or may not even be in a mood about anything. But they're anticipating a potential mood, so they're writing and rewriting their words, when their words are quite simple, and this is the thread through of their life. That kind of self-doubt, that kind of, am I doing it okay?

And so the thread I keep pulling on, the one that I think explains so much of that gap between nothing was wrong and something is clearly very often how I relate to myself and the world and dates or friends or my parents or whatever, is this question. You ready for it? Was anyone ever actually curious about you growing up?

Ep #403: Parental Curiosity: Were Your Parents Actually Interested in You?

Curious in the most ordinary sense. Like, did your parent ask how your day was and want the real answer? The actual answer, not the, "It was fine, thanks," answer. Did they notice when you went quiet on a car ride home? Did they track the things you were obsessed with at age nine and 19? Like the weird, specific "you" thing? Because most kids have some weird thing that they're super into. Did they track it with any genuine interest even when they didn't share that interest?

Did they treat the inside of you as a place worth visiting and hanging out with, or did they manage the outside of you? The grades, the behavior, the weight, the social presentation, while your interior was essentially left to sort itself out in the dark. Because a parent who is incurious about you, and I want to stay with that word because I think it's more precise than neglectful or absent or harmful. So a parent who's simply just not that interested in who you are as a distinct person with a real inner life, that does something very particular to a developing mind, body, spirit, sense of self, nervous system identity.

They teach through the sheer repetition and volume of hours, your interior is not that interesting. And a child whose nervous system is running its constant little threat assessment calculations about what this world is and who matters in it takes that information and arrives at the only conclusion available to it. "Oh. Oh, okay. Well, I guess I guess I must be the problem. I guess maybe I'm boring. Maybe I'm inherently boring. Maybe there's not that much worth orienting towards in here. Maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm not worthy. Maybe I'm not important. It must just be me."

And in this scenario, it's not because anyone said so. It's not because anyone was like, "Listen kid, you're a bore. You're a rube and a bore, and I want nothing to do with you." But rather, it's like, I don't want to say sin of omission, but that's what's coming to me. It's because nobody looked. And my sweet little clementine pound cake, that conclusion, when it's built into your identity, when it's a story about who you are, boring, who you are, not

worth getting to know, who you are, not interesting, it's not just a story of childhood. It becomes written into your body. It becomes your identity.

It doesn't get filed away somewhere. It goes forward with you into every classroom, every friendship, where someone could have been curious about you and wasn't. And instead of landing as more data about that particular person and their capacity to co-regulate and to be with you and to show up and to be present, it lands as confirmation of something your nervous system believes it already knew, as it were.

And that's that, of course, they're not interested. Of course they're not interested. The data's always been consistent. You're not that interesting. And this is the origin story for a whole swath of what I call emotional outsourcing, which is the habitual pattern of sourcing your sense of safety, belonging, and worth from external sources rather than from within. And it shows up as codependent patterns, people-pleasing, and perfectionism in ways most people recognize immediately and then cannot stop doing even when they can see them with total clarity.

This origin story is not dramatic. There's no incident, no big trauma to point to. The wound is the shape of what was absent, the repeated non-event of a parent who was in the house and uninterested in the person. And that shape gets filled in with a belief that then runs the whole operation for the whole of the life until you can recognize it and shift it.

What the nervous system fills that wound in with specifically is a full reorientation of attention. If curiosity doesn't come towards you, you learn to send yours relentlessly outward. You become extraordinarily skilled at reading other people and knowing what they need before they say it, at managing the temperature in a room so that nobody tips into something that might eventually land on you as your problem to solve. You manage all the feelings before they're expressed.

Ep #403: Parental Curiosity: Were Your Parents Actually Interested in You?

And over time, this gets so fluid and so fast that it stops feeling like a strategy. And it's just who you are. It's just who I am, right? "Oh, I'm the person who's good with people, the one who always knows what to say." The one who, if you asked her what she wanted for dinner on a random Thursday, would experience a pause that is longer than the question warrants because the neural pathway, that brain super highway between, "What do I want?" and an actual answer, let me just say it's not been getting much traffic. You know what I mean?

And so that's where the emotional outsourcing loop closes on itself. My baby, my darling, my perfect little angel, you needed curiosity from your parent, mi amor. And if you got it inconsistently or not at all, and your nervous system couldn't build a stable expectation of it, what on earth is a smarty pants little you to do other than outsource the need entirely, right?

How genius of you. Can we just pause for that? How freaking genius. How smart you were. How smart you are. Look at you, champ. Right? You found ways to feel connected and safe and like you belonged by becoming endlessly useful and attuned to everyone around you and solving all of their problems and none of your own, which worked.

And can we talk about this? Because it's not talked about enough. It absolutely worked as a survival strategy. It totally did. And it also slowly made the relationship with your own interior into something you visit occasionally, rather than somewhere you actually live. And by adulthood, this pattern is not experienced as a pattern. It's experienced as a personality.

You are the reliable one, the caretaker, the one who holds it all together. And someone asks, "Hey, what do you need?" Blankness. It's like there's interior static because the honest answer, the one you're trying not to say is, "Oh, honey, I have absolutely no idea." Genuinely, "What do I want? What do I need? More importantly, what do you need? How can I support you? Let's talk about you. Let's not look at me. I don't matter. I'm not

important in this interior, uninteresting. No one's curious. These people made me, and they don't care what's in here. So look, actually, you know what? Let me tell you what, your question makes me a little suspicious." You're raising my suspicion, ma'am.

Wanting things for yourself is like the setup for a situation that ends with someone being upset and somehow that being your fault. Right? So you kind of want to push the whole notion of "What do I want? What do I need?" away because, I do not think so.

And so I really encourage my clients in Anchored, my one-on-one clients, whenever I'm working with someone, I encourage them to dive deep into this, to get really curious about this question. And so I'll ask clients, "How did you know your parents were curious about you? Like interested in the you under the surface you, the you under the like the grades and the varsity and whatever your accolades were?" And what comes back most often is evidence of presence that is actually evidence of provision.

They came to things. They paid for things. They were there. There was dinner. And all is true, and that's great, right? A lot of kids don't have that. That's phenomenal. Right? Wow, way too many people of all ages, but way too many kids don't live indoors. I'm so glad you had that. I'm glad you had whatever food you had.

And none of it's curiosity. None of it is curiosity. A parent can occupy every room of a house and remain completely uninterested in the person growing up inside it. And from the outside, that looks like a fine childhood because it is a fine childhood by most available measures. Even, again, a super-duper privileged one sometimes, and still, the body still registers the difference between being housed and being known.

And it's been carrying that gulf of a difference around and doing the math in every subsequent relationship, running the old calculation in new situations because the nervous system does not update its models on the basis of

time passing. It updates on the basis of new experience, which is actually wicked useful to know. I'll translate. Sorry, that's hella useful for the West Coast. Because it means this is workable, right? This is changeable. Your brain is plastic. You can have new thoughts, have new feelings, have new somatic practices and processes and ways of relating to yourself and your inner world, right?

You're not stuck in that old story just because that was the old story of your coming up, right? It's big news that this is workable. And I'll get to that. But first, we keep it real around here. So I want to name the grief in all of this because it is real, and it deserves a moment or more than that, right? So the particular grief of this is that there's nobody to be angry at because it's the grief of a subtraction of something that should have been there and wasn't. And the people who were supposed to provide it were probably doing the best they could with emotional resources they may have never had either, which is its own kind of lineage of not being seen, stretching back way further than you and their parents and theirs.

And while understanding can bring compassion, can bring care, can bring a whole lot of love for parents who did their best, it doesn't actually make the grief smaller. And in fact, it can make it lonelier. Because as you can hold compassion for your parents, you can still feel the specific ache of not having been known by them. And both of those things are true at the same time, and you don't have to resolve that tension into a cleaner feeling than it actually is, right? Right.

So, my beauties, a break real quick, and let's come back to talk about remedies.

All right, my loves, let's talk remedies, okay? So my beauty, if you've been listening and you're thinking, "Oh, snap, that's me," this is explaining a whole part of me I never really understood, then hopefully these remedies will be supportive.

Ep #403: Parental Curiosity: Were Your Parents Actually Interested in You?

The first one is, well, this remedy matches exactly the wounding, right? They weren't curious about you, so now you get to become curious about yourself. And I know that sounds a little simplistic. I know "Be curious about yourself" is the kind of advice that gets nodded at in a workshop and then does not translate to a Tuesday afternoon. And, you know, your girl's a nerd at the end of the day.

Let's be concrete and useful. Let me be specific about what this looks like in practice because it's weirder than just the phrase suggests. So most people, when they try to get curious about themselves, they do a performance of it. They sit down, they get out a fancy journal, attempt to inquire inward, and what comes out is either nothing, a kind of interior static, or a play-by-play report card. "What did I do today? Was it enough? How did I come across in that conversation?"

And it ends up being less curiosity and more surveillance. And surveillance is checking for compliance, whereas curiosity is actually wanting to know something you didn't already know, and it has it has a completely different quality in the body. It's a leaning forward, a leaning toward rather than bracing for the verdict.

And so the specific practice I come back to again and again with clients is so mundane it sounds like I'm joking. And I am a little, but also I'm not. So start with preferences. Actually, teeny-tiny, kitten-step, tiny, tiny small ones. So on a given Thursday, before you ask anyone else what they want, pause and genuinely ask yourself. Not as a journal prompt or a values exercise, as a real question you're waiting for the body to answer.

Do I want to be warm or cool right now? Do I want sound or quiet? Do I want something sweet or salty or nothing? And these questions feel wildly small, but you know how we do around here. The tinier the question, the better it works because your nervous system has been treating your own preferences as the last and least important variable in every equation for so long that even asking is novel enough to produce information.

Ep #403: Parental Curiosity: Were Your Parents Actually Interested in You?

So the static you feel when you try to answer is the data. That static is what decades of outsourcing your interior produces, and you have to be willing to sit inside it without immediately filling it with what someone else needs or prefers or wants without grabbing your phone or distracting yourself. You have to sit with it long enough for something to actually begin to start to come through.

And I want to say it clearly, if what you hear is nothing, great. We're not asking the question to get some an encyclopedia of perfect answers. What you're building with these tiny questions, any given Thursday, is a relationship with your own interior that functions like an actual relationship, meaning there's a give and a take, there's a listening and a holding space, right? Just the way you'd ask a friend, "Hey, do you want to go to the beach?" And she might say, "You know, I'm not really sure. Let me see how I feel tomorrow." Right? And you can just say, "Okay, I love you, and I can hold that you don't have an answer right away." That same love, that grace, that kindness you offer her, the work is to begin to offer it to yourself, right?

And every time you do that, every time you ask and hold and don't demand, but show curiosity, you see what we're doing? And like an actual relationship, this work requires regular contact for the spark to grow and for it to come to life and stay alive. And so the reason this regular asking of self, what do you want, what do you need, what's your preference, what's right for you right now? And I recommend setting alarms on your phone. For real, making this a dedicated practice.

The reason this is the right antidote to this particular wound is that what was missing in childhood was exactly this, regular contact with an attentive other who wanted to know what was going on in there. You are going to be that for yourself now, which is an incredible gift for your past, present, and future self. The other piece, the one people tend to resist more, is letting yourself be curious about yourself in front of another person. So letting someone else's curiosity about you actually land without deflecting it.

Ep #403: Parental Curiosity: Were Your Parents Actually Interested in You?

And the deflection is so automatic, most people don't even clock it as something they do. So someone asks a real question about your experience, your knowledge, a follow-up, something that goes deeper than the surface answer, and before you have consciously decided anything, you're already turning it around, making it about them, giving the short, safe answer that closes the door before they can come in any further because, well, being seen is what you needed most and also at a nervous system level, it was the thing that carries the most risk, right?

Because the last time you waited to be seen, the person who was supposed to look wasn't that interested, and so that's coded into you, right? Your body hasn't forgotten that. And so it's this paradoxical thing, right? We deeply crave being looked at and seen and have people being curious about us, but we're also like, "Oh, that's scary. I'm not used to it. It's suspicious. It's we don't know where it's going to land because we're not used to feeling it." So what do we do? "Deflect."

And then we feel that very specific loneliness of someone trying to know you while you are actively preventing them from doing it. And then we wonder why we feel so unseen. And I say that with full love and zero judgment because it's one of the most human things there is and also because I get it. I have lived it so much, right? And it's keeping you and it kept me in exactly the loop you're trying to get out of.

So the work is letting the question reach you, staying with the discomfort of being someone worth asking about long enough to give a real answer. That is the remediating work for this original wound of incuriosity in the most literal sense. So you're going back and doing the thing the development required. Anytime someone looks at you like they actually want to know, here's what we do. Feel your two feet on the floor, find your feet, find the ground, orient your nervous system by looking around, let your nervous system land.

Ep #403: Parental Curiosity: Were Your Parents Actually Interested in You?

You can do a little self-soothing, like holding your two hands and pressing into each other. I like to do a slow bilateral stimulation here, squeezing left hand, right hand, left hand, right hand, breathe. Thanks for asking. So I was born in Mar del Plata, which is in the province of Buenos Aires. And then when I was three or four or so, my parents moved to Philadelphia, where my dad got a research fellowship, and then they found their way to the great state of Rhode Island. Let me tell you about Rhode Island. And you're off to the races.

And I get that moment right before you say, "I was, I am, here's me," where your heart clenches or your back braces a bit or something inside you's just like, "Deflect!" And I want to invite you to stay with it. Now, if your brain goes to say, "Yeah, but when am I going to meet a new person who's going to ask new questions?" don't wait. You can play this as a game with a beloved.

We do similar things in Anchored, my six-month small group coaching program, where we practice skills we want to do out in the real world, but with each other because it's a safer space, it's a loving space, it's a kind space, it's a genuine, gentle, incredible space. So find your people, find the people who might want to do this kind of work with you. It can be a coach, a therapist, old friends. It can be neighbors, people from a Facebook group. I mean, whatever. And tell them that you're doing this practice and ask them to ask you curious questions.

Oh my God, if that makes you want to die, I totally get it. I totally get it and how else are we going to get ourselves used to being someone that others are curious about? So I say I'd work on being there for you, asking yourself curious questions first. Work on becoming your own north star at first. We've talked about that endlessly here on the show. Work on getting back into connection with your own center, your own core, your own root first. And then as you gain a little more capacity, ask others to ask you curious questions.

Ep #403: Parental Curiosity: Were Your Parents Actually Interested in You?

The way kids do, right? Don't you remember? I remember there was all those little quiz books when we were kids, beyond what's your favorite color, but also starting with what's your favorite color, right? And I get it. It's vulnerable making. I get it. It can be anxious making. I get it and what do you actually have to lose? What do you actually have to lose? What somebody's going to judge you? Okay, and? And? But that's your homework, right? Is to work on why that matters.

Why if you say to somebody, "I'm looking to do this self-development growth work, I'm looking to really grow my sense of self this way, so I can show up in the world the way I want to," and they mock you or judge you or don't want to hang out with you, jeez, what a gift that you know that about them. Just saying.

So, I'm sorry to go off on a tangent here, so I'm going to hit pause internally to say, I'm sorry they weren't curious about you. Mine weren't curious about me either. And here we are, learning to be curious about ourselves, learning to show up for ourselves, learning to give ourselves the love and care and curiosity we didn't get when we were small, and giving that to other people so they can experience it, and then asking others and finding others and connecting with others who can give that to us. Yeah, in an interdependent way of mutuality and reciprocity. This is how we all grow. This is how we all grow.

And my love, if you want my care, my support in a loving community that will be deeply curious all about you, you know where to find me. Come join us in Anchored. Learn more at BeatrizAlbina.com/anchored. I cannot wait to have you join us. Check out all of my courses, BeatrizAlbina.com/courses. It would be a delight to work with you, to get curious about you, to shower you with love every week on our coaching calls, because you deserve it. You always have. You always have.

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.