Ep #405: When Somatics Don’t Work



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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, it was, I think it's a couple years back, maybe a couple, two, three years. I was invited to join a small coach's mastermind for the day. One of the coaches in that room was getting coached live in front of all of us by all of us, and the topic for her coaching was that her right-hand gal, the woman that she completely depended on to help her run her business and manage everything in her solopreneurial life, another woman had quit. Again. And she was undone by it.

Sobbing and furious, sobbing and furious, and alone in a heartbreaking way that really clearly scared her. She was spiraling a little in obviously the exact way we all do when some piece of scaffolding we didn't even know we were leaning on gets yanked out from under us without warning. I get it. It can really unravel a person, and it we were watching it happen in front of us.

She was asking us what she should do, what could possibly help her feel less fully bowled over by this. I sat there quietly, watching her shoulders climb towards her ear every time she said the word, "alone." Like her own body was trying to brace against the word before it finished leaving her mouth. Her hands kept grasping at nothing, like opening and closing around air the way you'd grab for a railing that isn't there while you're falling down the stairs.

And right in the middle of explaining how capable she normally is, how she's never needed anyone, she let out this small, sharp sigh. The kind that it's not relief, it's closer to a system venting pressure it can't hold anymore. Like you hear it on the New York subway a lot.

And so the others in the room offered thought work, which helped a little for sure. I love thought work in its place, but I was watching her body, and I could see her whole body tensing and bracing, her shoulders like boulders, the tears streaming and sputtering with no real effect, her feet starting to bounce up and down. So I offered her something, gently, the way you'd offer a tender ravioli, a cozy parmesan blanket. I said something like, "Hey, what if we did a little somatic experiencing around this? Just to help you actually feel what's underneath the panic instead of just managing your way past it."

Oh my goodness, did her head turn on a swivel like a possessed owl. She snapped at me. "I don't need to do more somatics," she said. "I am doing all the somatics. It's like all I do. I'm doing all the movements. I'm doing all the exercises. I am doing somatics and it's just not working. But all I do is do, do, do, do, do somatics."

And she kept going, getting more upset each time. "I need it to work. I need the somatics to work." Like somatics itself had signed a contract with her and was like failing to perform on it, big time. Like the deal was, "All right, kitten, you do the movements, you do the exercises, and in exchange, this feeling that you don't want to feel will clock out and leave the building. On time, as promised, and you, you're free. Free of those pesky emotions. Full refund if not completely satisfied."

As if the entire point of turning towards your own nervous system was to generate a receipt and to accomplish your desired outcome. As if there was like KPIs on the nervous system. As if grief and loneliness and heavy emotions come with a skew number you can just scan at checkout and watch vanish from the cart. "No loneliness left in your bag. Here's your total. Have a great rest of your day." She wanted it to work. She wanted evidence. She wanted a before and after photo she could hold up and say, "See? It worked. I did the somatics, and now I'm not upset anymore." Case closed.

And when her body kept doing the deeply unreasonable and frankly very rude thing, rude, rude thing of continuing to be a body, when the loneliness kept being lonely no matter how many exercises she threw at it, did towards it, she didn't think, "Oh, maybe this was never supposed to make the feeling disappear." She thought, "This somatics product is defective and I would like to speak to a manager."

I'm not saying she went kind of Karen on it, but I am. I am saying. And I'm being a silly goose because that's me. Welcome. That's where I have the, that is my constitution, goose. And yeah, I'm editorializing it and making it funny for a podcast. I don't think she actually thought that, but what felt really clear to me in the moment was that doing was the verb of somatics.

Right? And I still think about her, especially as I'm creating curriculum, as I'm teaching in The Shift, as I'm teaching in The Somatic Studio and Anchored. She wasn't wrong that she was doing somatics. She really was. Hours of it, probably. Probably more than most people I know. And she was also in that exact moment without knowing it, and I'm not judging her or blaming her, but she was standing as far away from what somatic work or body-based modalities that support us to turn inward towards ourselves are actually for. She was standing super far away from it, and she had no idea because she was sold the same thing we all are being sold, especially in this moment.

So let's pause, my nerds. Let us pause and define terms. So somatic is from the Greek. It means of the body, of the body in its wholeness. Yeah? And I never mean somatic as like a switch you flip or a system you run or things you do. I mean that whatever you're carrying, grief, joy, the specific kind of dread before you get a hard phone call, it's the recognition and the understanding and being with the fact that none of that lived experience is actually happening anywhere else but in your body.

Your lived experience is not a thought you're having that your body just happens to be present for. Somatic practice and somatically experiencing our lives is remembering that the body is where the experience lives. Yeah,

that we are a consciousness watching our consciousness have a human experience inside a body. And these somatic practices, these ways of turning inward, turning towards self, helps clue us into and gives us more access to the wisdom within our body.

Right, to the kind of knowing that your thinking mind doesn't have on its own in all of its beauty and complexity because our conditioning and socialization live in there in this whole other way. And it's that turning towards self, turning towards the body, and the allowing for that internal wisdom, and then stepping into a greater and deeper embodiment, being present in the body, yeah, is the whole reason this work matters.

So learning to be present in and with our body, our sensations and emotions offers ways to hear yourself more completely. A somatic work isn't a technique or a set of techniques you apply to access that. It's turning towards what's already happening in here instead of only living in your head about it, which is what so many of us do to survive in late-stage capitalism, patriarchy, and white settler colonialism. Throwing stones at nobody, but just saying. That's the work. That's the work.

And that intellectualization of somatic practice, "I got to do the thing." Right? Got to do the somatics is exactly the water that woman in the mastermind was swimming in, because she was doing what we're trained to do with everything in the U.S. empire. More. More reps, more hours, more certifications. The assumption that if a little somatic practice is good, you know what's better? A lot. And if it's still not working, you just haven't done enough of it yet.

I get why we think that, right? But the thing is, somatic practice doesn't run on more. It annoyingly to us runs on things we've become unused to in such a convenience culture. It runs on patience, on staying, on not needing anything to resolve on your schedule because your schedule is not the body schedule, the spirit schedule. It's irrelevant.

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When you take that "more is better" logic and point it at your own nervous system, here's what it actually becomes: a buffer. Something that looks productive, looks like effort, looks like you're really doing the work, but that you're unwittingly using to keep yourself one layer removed from the actual feeling instead of being inside it.

We named this idea way back in episode 14, and again in episode 105. A buffer is anything that gives you the sensation of addressing or escaping a feeling without ever requiring you to feel it in a real way. And more somatics, more nervous system content, more breathwork modalities, more polyvagal-adjacent reels, more workshops, more certifications, every bit of that can become exactly that kind of buffer. The same as a bottle of wine or a clean kitchen at midnight when you're actually furious at your partner and don't want to deal with it, so you rage clean. It's like that.

We just collectively don't recognize it as one, as a buffer, that is because I mean, it looks like growth. So nobody questions the woman who says she's working on her nervous system. They hand her a gold star and a green juice. Meanwhile, she still hasn't felt the actual specific loneliness and heartbreak and all the childhood everything and everything of watching someone she relied on walk out the door. She's just gotten extremely well-resourced at managing her own panic instead of ever actually sitting inside the loneliness long enough to let it move through her. She's never actually been present with it.

And there's a name for what's actually underneath this, and it's the same thing underneath almost everything I talk about on this show. Emotional outsourcing is the habitual pattern of sourcing your safety, belonging, and worth from everyone and everything outside of yourself instead of from within. And it shows up as our codependent perfectionist and people-pleasing habits. It also shows up exactly like this. Doing one more thing, doing one more modality, having one more thing to point to outside of yourself as proof, "I'm handling it. I'm doing the thing." Instead of actually

landing inside your own body long enough to feel the thing, the credentials or the tool or whatever we're supposed to help you to feel.

Outsourcing doesn't always look like asking your partner to manage your mood. Sometimes it looks like asking an entire industry of somatic exercise teachers to do it for you. One workshop at a time, forever, without ever arriving, integrating, changing. And that's the whole problem underneath all of it.

That's what's happened to somatic work, to body-based healing, to the entire nervous system conversation, now that it's been picked up, packaged, and sold back to us at scale, often by people whose training is, well, I got questions. Here's the best comparison I've got, and I want to be careful with it because I am not a yogi. That's not my lifestyle, my lineage, my ancestry, but I do know enough about where yoga comes from to know it was never about two-hundred-dollar matching sets and 50 minutes of poses before you go right back to the exact same lifestyle you were already white-knuckling through and order a skinny marg to go with it.

Somewhere along the way, yoga got lifted clean out of its lineage, its actual philosophy, the whole reason it exists, and sold back to us as a fraction of what it is, as a workout, a doing, a box you check and then move on from, same as cardio. Somatic work is having its yoga moment right now, in real time, and that mastermind room is where I watched it happen up close.

Because somatic work was never supposed to be one more item on the doing list. It was supposed to be a different lens entirely, a way of being in your life rather than one more thing you schedule and complete. Doing, not being. And yes, somatic practice can help you process trauma. Yes, it can help you to rewrite old stress patterns and old bracing in the body, the kind that's been sitting in your shoulders since you were nine.

All of that is true, and it matters, and it's worth every minute you give it. But underneath all of that, it was always supposed to change your relationship to having feelings in the first place, not function as a faster checkout line for

getting rid of them. This is the difference between practice and praxis, p-r-a-x-i-s, praxis. And it's part of the core philosophy and pedagogy in Anchored. It's something I come back to over and over again in Anchored, in The Shift, in everything inside The Somatic Studio, which is where I teach somatics through a very different lens towards a different goal, which is to be with ourselves, not manage ourselves.

So, practice is making a time to do a thing, and it's wicked important at first. You schedule it, you show up, you do the breath work, the body scan, the resourcing exercise, the orienting, you do the thing, and then you close your journal and you go make dinner like normal. It has edges. It lives inside a container. And that container is an important thing because that container is where everything starts. And because it's contained, it carries some safety within that.

So practice is what happens when the practice stops being a container you step into and becomes the actual shape of how you move through your life. So you're not doing or performing regulation anymore. You're just more regulated. The way you're just breathing without scheduling it on your calendar between Pilates and a Trader Joe's run. You don't have to remember to come back to your body all the time because coming back to your body is simply what's happening all the time underneath everything else.

The practice was always pointing towards this the whole time. The doing was only ever supposed to be in service of a different way of being. For me, that looks like noticing mid-conversation that my jaw's gone tight before I've even consciously registered I'm upset, and just letting my jaw unclench without making a whole production out of it. And it looks like feeling my own chest go hollow when a friend cancels last minute and knowing without having to think it through that the hollow isn't really about the friend or the evening, it's an old echo of being deprioritized. And now, I let that echo move through me instead of my old habits, suppressing it or building an entire narrative around it.

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I don't reach for a technique as much anymore. I just notice, and noticing does most of the work because my nervous system was never actually waiting for the right exercise. It was waiting to be met. And yes, the exercises are vital. They're important. I teach them day in and day out. The exercises, the practice is vital to help us step out of the old conditioning of our codependent perfectionist and people-pleasing ways, to help us step out of emotional outsourcing and back towards and into self. They're vital. I shan't malign them. We need the practice, but we need to not stop there.

And that coach, back at that mastermind, never got to find that out because she was deep in practice, hours and hours of it. But practice alone was never going to hand her what she actually wanted. Because what she wanted was never available from a somatic exercise in the first place. She wanted the work to behave like a deadline she could hit. Do the exercise, get the result, stop feeling alone and upset and abandoned by sometime around Tuesday. And when it didn't deliver that, she didn't think to question whether that was ever the deal. She just got angrier at the practice itself and me for recommending it, which is exactly what happens when you hand a being-based tool to a person whose entire life runs on doing.

And listen, I'm not coming for her. I don't know her, and I don't think she's an outlier, sitting alone out there on her own little island of dysfunction of doing in late-stage capitalism. Come on. I think she's incredibly common. I think most of us are carrying some version of her around.

This is the same root system underneath the self-abandonment cycle we got into back in episode 227, where the whole point was learning to come home to yourself instead of running your entire life as an outside management project. And it's the same exhaustion we named in episode 355 on burnout and chronic self-abandonment where every single feeling gets handled instead of met, stacking up year after year until the handling itself is what finally burns you to the ground.

So that woman, furious at her own somatic practices because they weren't, quote, working, because they weren't making her feelings clock out on

schedule, my perfect little dumpling, this is emblematic of the whole problem. That's everything that's wrong with how somatic work and body-based healing have been sold to us, distilled into one woman yelling at her own nervous system in front of a room full of fancy-pants coaches who, I promise you, were all nodding along because they've done the exact same thing in their own kitchens at midnight.

Somatic work was never meant to be a faster way to feel or stop feeling something. It was meant to be a way back into your own body as the actual place you live, instead of a problem you keep outsourcing to whoever you've hired this quarter to help you avoid it. And if your nervous system work only ever shows up as one more task on the endless to-do list, one more thing to perfect, one more way to prove to yourself and everyone watching that you're handling it, you're doing it, my beauty. That's not somatic healing. That's performing, right? It's a front. My angel, the body was never the problem that needed solving. It was the home you were trying to find your way back into, and it's been waiting on you the entire time, patient as anything, not going anywhere.

There are episodes coming up all about catharsis and integration. And if you enjoyed this show, you're not going to want to miss those. So make sure you're subscribed, you're following, because this is just the beginning. We're just starting to talk about this, and we're going to go deeper and deeper.

While you're at it, if you're enjoying this show, head on over to wherever you find it and leave it a five-star rating and review. Share it on social media. Don't forget to tag me. My beauty. This is deep work. And if you have found yourself as one of those people doing somatics and getting PO'd that it's not working, take a deep breath. You've done nothing wrong. You're literally just doing what social media and the internet and you're just doing what you're you've been told. And I'm not mad at you for it. I'm not judging you for it. I sure hope you're not, because we're all just doing our

level best out here, right? And that's the whole thing. Learn better, do better, right? Learn more, do it differently.

So, let's take a deep breath in together. Long, slow out. You're doing the best you can. Nothing's gone wrong. Be gentle with you. Promise? Be gentle. All right, my beauty. We're going to keep talking about this, but for now, your homework for the week is to really take a look at how you're relating to your body and to somatic practices. Like maybe you're not actually doing them at all, so this is like, "Wait, what?" And that's cool. Listen, you do you.

Somatic practices can change our lives when we integrate what we find there in. And so that's what we're going to be talking about more. So look at how you're relating to your body. Do you just ignore it and keep on pushing through? That's a lot of us. I think that's probably like three-quarters of the people in Anchored, right? So just notice, just pay attention. Keep coming back. We're going to keep talking about it, okay?

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. Talk to you soon. Ciao.