Ep #406: Stop Doing His Job: When You're the Only One Working on the Relationship



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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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, the scene opens on our protagonist. She's been staring at the ceiling for 20, 30 minutes, running the conversation again. The one she's already had a dozen different ways, looking for the version that she believes will finally get through to him. The one that will finally lead him to see her side of it, understand her side of it, finally want to make change, finally want to make the relationship really work.

A lot of the women I work with have, without at all meaning to, made their partner's willingness, their partner's desire to change, capacity to change, a prerequisite for their own okayness, for their own regulation, for their own peace and joy and ease.

And the problem with this is that it keeps them, my clients, the people I love who are doing all this work to overcome their own emotional outsourcing and who want their relationships to be freaking amazing, or at the very least, not suck. This keeps them stuck in this project of managing him, managing his reactions, his choices, his responses, his willingness, under the guise of wanting to be heard. "I just want to be heard."

When what they really, really want, deep down, is to feel safe. And I want to talk about that today, about why that loop exists, why understanding it intellectually does essentially nothing to stop it, and what it actually takes to get out of it. Because the answer is obviously not just a better version of the conversation, because I think we all have access to scripts on scripts on scripts, right? If the issue was just memorize the script, state the script,

everything would be copacetic, then everything would be copacetic. But it's not.

And I think a lot of people, and I will say specifically a lot of women, are spending years on years on years of their lives believing that's it, that the script is it. And it leads us to spend a lot of time and energy going down the wrong rabbit hole.

So, oh, I also want to note, I'm going to be talking about this today mostly in terms of women and men because the conditioning underneath it is specifically about how women get socialized and specifically about how men get socialized. And whatever, gender's not real, but this is the version I see most often in this work. And of course, the pattern itself doesn't care about gender because again, gender's not real, right?

And also, my first marriage was to an AFAB non-binary person who did essentially none of the labor to improve our relationship. In fact, actively did the opposite, and I still spent years deciding, problem must be me, that I just hadn't found the right way to reach out to them yet. So, whatever. The language is gendered, hold the gendered language loosely. The loop is the thing, the pronouns are just the version I'm using to tell it. Bada bing, bada boom.

So here's what all of this looks like at midnight on a Tuesday. Right? She's lying awake in the dark, next to a man who is sleeping just fine, composing a conversation that hasn't happened yet, workshopping the opening line of a TED Talk she's already tried to have with him in various configurations, with various entry points, various tones, with increasing levels of craft and care and "I" statements and thoughtfulness, more times than she could count. Because the last time she brought it up, he got so defensive. And the time before that, he said he heard her, "I totally hear you." And then he did the exact same thing four days later.

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And she's been turning it all over ever since. In her own mind, in her journal, in therapy, in coaching, trying to locate the error in herself. The miscalibration, the thing she did that made it not land because she has a theory that if she can find the right framing, calm, clear, non-accusatory, maybe even a little lighter than she actually feels about it, then he will finally actually hear her. And most importantly, then things will change. And she'll be able to sleep and things will be good, and she won't have to leave him to die cold and alone on a mountain top. Which is, it's a step not too far away from right here, right? Because she is at her wit's end, but also still thinks that the problem is her.

And so that whole loop is what I want to pull apart today, my sweet little dill pickle, because it can run for years, decades even, without a woman being able to stop it, even when she can see it clearly. Even when she could diagram it on a whiteboard.

And the reason comes down to a few forces operating at once that I want to walk through one by each, which is a very Rhode Island way of saying that. One by one, maybe is more general English. And we're going to do that because understanding the full architecture of why you're stuck in my worldview is what makes it actually possible to get unstuck.

So, let's start with what got handed to you before you had absolutely any say in the matter. So, somewhere back there, probably before you can even locate the moment, you absorb the idea that the right version of the ask will eventually work. That if you find the right conditions, the right words, the right night, the right version of yourself to bring to the conversation after the right meal in the right place, right? You will finally unlock him. And he will finally meet you. Right? This is very all like Cinderella and the slipper. It's the right slipper. It's the right... You just got to show up right and it's on you. It's on you, my love.

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And maybe you got that from your mother, maybe watching her do the same thing with your father. Maybe you got it from every movie ever where the guy comes around in the last 10 minutes and the whole theater exhales. Maybe you got it from a culture that has spent centuries teaching women that his response to you is a scoreboard. That whether he hears you tells you whether you did it right. Whether you asked correctly, whether you are the kind of woman worth listening to. The onus is always on us, isn't it? Isn't that fun?

Underneath that scoreboard is an even older assignment. The one that says that making the relationship work? That's clearly your job, sister, and specifically yours, regardless of what he brings to it. So that when it isn't working, the only correction your nervous system knows how to reach for is more of you. More effort, more directness, more indirectness, more softness, more research into the right approach.

Nobody sat you down and explained any of this to you in those terms. But it got in young enough and probably sort of sottovoce, quietly enough that by the time you noticed it, it didn't feel like something you'd been actively taught. It felt like, "Well, that's just something I've always known." Which is exactly how conditioning is supposed to work.

The second force at play here is emotional outsourcing. The habitual pattern of sourcing our safety, belonging, and worth from external sources rather than from within, which covers our codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing habits. And this is where most relationship advice misses the actual mechanism because emotional outsourcing might be what's happening when you've made his willingness to change a prerequisite for your own okayness, for your regulation, for your sense of being safe and okay in your own life. Which means you are functionally trying to manage his interior world in order to manage yours.

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And the more he stays the same, the harder your nervous system works to fix that. Because it's decided his movement is the only road back to okay. A nervous system that learned under real conditions with a kind of brutal internal logic that his okay means you're okay, and has been running that equation ever since.

Here's the part of the emotional outsourcing that does the most damage in exactly this situation. Emotional outsourcing tends to tell you, in a thousand wee, tiny little ways, that you are the problem to be solved. So you better go to work on yourself. You best. And so, of course, you read the book. You do the somatic exercise. You find the better way to ask. You examine your own attachment wound for the 40th, 100th time, looking for just that crack that's letting all this happen.

Which would make sense if the relationship were actually a two-person project with two people showing up to it. And sometimes it is and that's great and those relationships get stronger, but sometimes it isn't. Sometimes you, my love, the one listening to this podcast, yeah, you're doing all the noticing, all the repairing, all the growing, all the asking better, while he does none of it. And emotional outsourcing will rarely suggest that as the explanation because emotional outsourcing's operating assumption tends to be that the fix lives inside broken old you. It rarely occurs to the nervous system running this pattern that the actual problem might be staring it right in the face. Not that you haven't found the right way to reach him, but that you are the only one reaching at all.

Here's what that costs you over the years. And it's not the thing that I imagine you'd expect. You lose your own signal, your own read on what's actually happening, on what you actually want, on what you feel, on what you need, on what you desire, on what you like. Because you have spent so much energy tracking whether he's shifting that your own experience, it's gone quiet from disuse. The way a muscle, it atrophies when nobody's

asked anything of it in a long time, you lose your strength. You become a full-time researcher into the question of what it would take for one specific man to change. And the data keeps coming back the same way. And you keep adjusting the methodology because changing the methodology feels more bearable and frankly, more doable than facing what the data is actually telling you.

My beauty, this was never about you. It's not about your wording, your timing, your tone, your 20th round of self-examination. It is, in fact, about homeboy. It's about whether homeboy is willing to do the work to change, to grow, to actually show up and save the relationship Brad says he actually wants. You can hand him every possible version of the truth in every possible voice and tone at every possible hour, and none of it will make him willing if he isn't. Which is not about you. That's information about him. And the problem is you were trained up to treat it like information about you for a very long time. Now let that sink in.

There's a second piece to this redirect that matters just as much, maybe more, because it's the one nobody hands you alongside the emotional outsourcing framework. It's not enough to stop outsourcing your regulation to his willingness to change. You also have to stop doing his work for him.

Those are two different rescues, and you've likely been running both at once without clocking that they're separate jobs. So one is about your nervous system borrowing its sense of safety from his behavior. Right? And like whether you do it right and he responds right. The other is about your hands, your time, your brain, your energy, actually picking up the half of the relationship that was never yours to carry, and then slinging it on your back and carrying it anyway because watching it sit there undone always felt worse than carrying it yourself.

So you researched the communication style, you found the right book, you left it on his nightstand. You rehearsed a gentler version of the ask so he'd

have an easier time hearing you. You did the repair work for both of you and then resented the hell out of him for never doing his half, while also making sure he never actually had to.

And the problem is we think we're being generous. Right? Because we're doing two people's job and calling it love because emotional outsourcing taught you, taught us, that if the work doesn't get done, it has to be you who does it. And a culture taught you underneath that it was your job, little lady, to make sure he never had to feel the weight of his own absence in his own relationship.

My darling, you get to stop. You don't have to keep pushing on this. If he is showing you clearly with his actual behavior, not his potential, that he won't stand up for this relationship, that he won't put the effort in, that he won't work to meet you, my beauty, my beauty, my darling, you don't need a clearer signal. You don't need to ask him to prove it differently or give him a 4 millionth chance to surprise you or find the angle that finally activates whatever it would take for him to actually be present in this relationship, in what should be a partnership. My beauty, my darling, my sweet tender ravioli, he's already told you.

And here's the thing that I think breaks a lot of our brains. You ready? He has already told you, and believing him is not giving up. It's not giving up. It's not retreating. It's not a sign of any failure on your part. Believing him at his word and his action is the single most respectful thing that you can do with information someone has given you honestly, even if he gave it to you by doing nothing at all to try to help this sinking relationship swim.

So my beauty, hear it clearly. You do get to stop. Deep breath after that one.

The third force is the nervous system science. And this is the one that explains why you can understand everything I just said completely. You're

an intelligent woman. You can get it. And you can still find yourself at midnight composing the version of the conversation that will finally land.

Co-regulation is the word for it, and it comes out of decades of developmental and attachment research that, just to say it, predates polyvagal theory by a long stretch. The study of how babies borrow regulation from the adults around them and how that capacity for borrowing never really goes away. How grown adults do it for each other constantly without ever really clocking that it's happening or even meaning to do it. It's a gift we can give each other.

Your body has learned over years with this particular person that his willingness to actually hear you has become the measure. Not of whether you're happy, but of whether you feel safe. So every time he deflects or shuts down or just stays exactly the same when you've asked him time and again to change, and he agreed to do so, your nervous system reads it as a threat, as it were, and sends you straight back to the drafting table. Which isn't a system malfunction. It's running the program it was handed. The program was just never going to get you anywhere good.

Now, understanding this lives in your smarty pants prefrontal cortex. The behavior, repeating this cycle lives somewhere older and faster that has never once been impressed by a book you read, even mine. Which is why, before you can make any real decision about this relationship, stay or go or some version of both, there's a piece of work that has to happen first, and it's not about finding a better way to reach him. It's about supporting your own nervous system to get out of the loop, and it's about letting yourself actually believe what he's already shown you is super duper true.

A decision made from years of depletion and over-functioning, my beauty, that's not a decision. Right? It's a reaction that kind of looks like a decision if you squint and you deserve better than that.

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So, there's a specific skill buried in all of this that I don't think gets named enough, which is the ability to tell the difference between a relationship that needs more work and a relationship where you are the only one doing any work at all.

And here's the thing. When we're so mired in it, when we're neck deep in it, those can look super identical from the inside for a very long time because both of them feel like effort, like strain, like something that requires more of you. But one of them is two people doing the work to build something together, evenly, maybe imperfectly, sure, fine, humans, but together. And the other one is one woman, one person alone, doing the emotional labor for two adults while the other one watches her do it and decides to go play a full day of golf anyway.

So learning to tell those apart in your own actual relationship with your own actual partner might be one of the most important skills you ever develop. Because the conditioning we just talked about will keep you doing the second thing while believing with total sincerity that you're doing the first.

And so, this is where the distinction I opened with becomes the whole spine of the thing. Capable versus willing. So not what he could theoretically do given the right therapist in 20 years and a complete personality transplant. What has he actually shown you with his actual behavior that he is willing to do? Willing to do because he's actually doing it. Right? So the ceiling you've hit is his willingness. And willingness and capacity to do are two entirely different countries, and you've likely been trying to get a visa into the wrong one.

Underneath that, a second ceiling many of us have hit without naming it. His half of the work was never yours to do. No matter how badly you wanted the relationship to survive, and no amount of you doing it for him was ever going to make him willing. You can't make a man capable by working harder. You definitely can't make him willing that way either.

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The response to that is something called radical acceptance. And I want to use the term carefully, and I know it even made me sigh because in wellness spaces, it sometimes gets flattened into, "Well, you just have to accept him as who he is and just lie down and take it and just radically accept that he wants this perfect marriage with this perfect family in this clean house and this, he wants all this but he's not willing to do any work, radically accept him." But no. Not around here, not in mama's house. No, that's not what I mean.

So in the somatic or body-based sense, acceptance is what happens when your nervous system finally puts down the effort of trying to force a reality that was never coming. So the bracing, the pre-managing, the constant low hum of monitoring his mood so you can intervene before it goes sideways, that's a posture. That's a shape your body has held for a long time. So acceptance is that posture letting go. And it will not feel like peace at first, my little chive dumpling. It will feel more like falling. Because your whole nervous system organized itself around the project of changing him. And when you set the project down, there is a stretch of time where your body doesn't know what else to do with itself. It doesn't know which way is up and that's expected. And I'll testify, it passes. And it costs you far less than continuing in that old pattern did. That I promise you.

What comes after that release is concrete and it looks like this. This is where the second rescue actually ends. Not just in theory, but in your hands, in your heart, in your words. You ready? You stop covering for him. His relationship with his kids is between him and his kids or him and his parents or him and whomever. You stop interpreting it, you stop smoothing it, you stop explaining him to them when they're disappointed. You stop catching the balls he drops, because carrying those balls was never really about logistics, right? It was about managing your own dread of what it would mean about you if he failed and you let him. What would your parents say?

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So you say the true thing once, clearly, and you skip the three days of rehearsal and the five disclaimers and the reassurance afterwards that you're not really mad. You say what you need him to hear. You let it land however it lands, being kind, of course, but your job is honesty, and his job is his capacity to hear it, and then you stop. You don't follow up. You don't remind him. You don't soften it into a smaller ask he might actually meet. You let the silence after you said it be his to fill. Because filling it has been your job for far too long, and it was never supposed to be. It was never on your roster, kitten.

And then you let yourself actually grieve. The real version, which sucks and is nothing like the low simmer of resentment that builds up after years of swallowed disappointment. Grief has a shape and an end. Resentment's just water damage, slow and structural and easy to miss until something gives.

From that place, a nervous system that's finally been given some rest, a self that's been given some room to exist, from there comes the actual decision. Stay with your eyes open, with the emotional outsourcing patterns interrupted, no longer hauling the entire relationship uphill by yourself, my little Sisyphus. Or you don't. That choice made from solid ground is actually yours to make. Made from the fog of your years of over-functioning, it was never a choice to begin with. It was just exhaustion, and exhaustion doesn't really get a vote.

So in this process, what's no longer on the table is the loop itself. The new angle, the better worded ask, the quiet ongoing hope that this is the version of you that finally gets through to him. The part of you that keeps running that loop is a survival strategy, built under real conditions by a nervous system doing its best with the map it was handed. A map drawn partly by a culture that told you his change was your job, and partly by an emotional

outsourcing pattern that learned to go looking for safety somewhere outside your own skin.

And the part of you that kept quietly picking up his half of the work, the part that called it love when it was actually just exhaustion doing his job for him. There's nothing wrong with that part, because that's the same map applied to your hands instead of your nervous system. The same old assignment that said the relationship survival was yours to engineer. So of course you engineered it with whatever you had, including the parts of it that were never yours to build.

My beauty, that map was wrong on both counts. Safety never lived in whether he finally heard you. And the relationship was never going to hold just because you were strong enough to carry both ends of it. Some part of you has known both of these things for longer than you've let yourself admit.

If you want to know why the knowing never makes it all the way down into the doing, that gap, that specific maddening distance between the two, that's exactly the territory we work inside Anchored. Six months, small group, we go straight into the nervous system architecture underneath these emotional outsourcing habits, these patterns that we were all built up to understand in our bones. We get underneath the codependent habits, the people-pleasing reflexes, and we interrupt them where they actually live, not just in your head, but in your body where the loop's been running this whole time.

If that's where you are, join me, BeatrizAlbina.com/anchored. It would be a delight to hold your hand, to walk alongside you as you figure out where your limit is, so you can truly reclaim your life. Because my beauty, you don't have to keep doing homeboy's work for him. You really can let him figure out if he wants to sink or if he wants to swim.

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Thanks for listening. I sure do love you and I'm sure glad that you're here. 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.