

Ep #14: Buffering



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With Your Host

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Our society teaches us, in so many direct and insidious ways, that there is no need to sit with painful feelings, that you can pop a pill, have a drink, eat an indulgent food, fire off an email or a comment online and all those challenging feelings will just melt away. But the truth is, when you're putting walls up against feeling your feels, when you're buffering against them, trying to keep the facts of our lives at arm's length, when we use anything external to ourselves to try to not feel, the feelings don't just disappear.

They take root deep in our bodies and will come out, somehow, sometime, and will continue to drive your actions in ways that might not be in alignment with how you want to live your life. What you resist persists, my love. So keep listening to learn how to recognize when you're numbing out, how to sit with challenging emotions, and how to transform your life by embracing your truth.

Feeling our feelings is a way of healing; an empowering act of reclaiming our bodies, our minds, our spirits, and our lives.

You're listening to Feminist Wellness, the only podcast that combines functional medicine, life coaching, and feminism to teach smart women how to reclaim their power and restore their health! Here's your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, Herbalist and Life Coach, Victoria Albina.

Hello, hello, my loves. I hope this episode finds you doing very well. I love my work. I love helping folks learn how to manage their minds and optimize their wellness. I'm so honored that I get to do this work on the daily. It's humbling in the most beautiful way.

My work is all about behavior change and supporting folks through both the science and psychology-based cognitive behavioral life coaching work I do and the super nerdy root cause-based functional medicine I practice. The reason why I combine life coaching and mind management with my

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medical work is because I know that there is no mental health without physical health, and vice versa.

If you don't learn how to manage your thoughts and the feelings that come from your thoughts, it's hard to take action and change your health in a sustainable way. One of the issues I see a lot in my coaching work is the tendency folks have to numb themselves, to avoid discomfort or painful feelings.

And most of us are going to feel some negative feelings when we try to make a change like drinking less alcohol, eating less quick carbs like sugar or flour-based food, when we try to start exercising or we want to reduce our cortisol, by working to become our own watcher and to become less reactive to life and more responsive. That is to set and keep healthy boundaries, to show up as our authentic selves when a situation doesn't work for us, to speak our minds from a place of love, to ourselves and out loud to another human, and especially if that human might not agree with us or like what we're going to say.

Most of the time, the strategies we use to insulate ourselves from our feelings take a toll on our health, again, referring to both our physical and our mental or emotional health, our sense of ourselves, our self-confidence, our belief in our ability to handle hard things and to feel the full breadth of human emotion without it tearing us to pieces. And this is something that I personally was super scared to do when I was depressed and anxious because I was so scared that all of those feelings would literally kill me. So I kept myself from feeling them at all costs.

I was the queen of keeping life at arm's length, of taking action instead of allowing my feelings, and it got me nowhere fast and kept me in that reactive place. Today, we're going to talk together, you and I, about this process of numbing, of pushing life away, and how it keeps us from our full

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humanity. And of course, I'll share some tips for shifting the story in your own life, starting now.

Whether it's smoking, drinking, eating a bag of Oreos, mindlessly watching reruns or playing games on your phone, leaning into resentment or anger, firing off a thoughtless email or text without allowing yourself to feel your feelings, when we're doing these things to avoid dealing with the real issue in our lives, to only do those issues go unaddressed, the habits we use to create a buffer between ourselves and life can create and perpetuate real mental and physical health problems. I know it did for me.

That said, I also want to acknowledge how incredibly common numbing ourselves is and how much American consumer capitalism and the patriarchy works to support this behavior in humans of all genders. We are all fed stories about how much easier it is to cover up our emotions by buying things, from trying to transform ourselves.

And we can feel momentarily better after we make that magical purchase that's going to fix all the things. And we know, from the social science research, that women are the primary market for endless products that promise to liberate us from feeling anything other than young, slim, and perfect.

Whatever you're thinking about your body or skin, your hair, there is a miracle product out there that will make you feel amazing about yourself. Instead of learning to love our bodies just as they are, we can buy slimming jeans to create the illusion of a slender waistline; the pinnacle of societal perfection and external approval. Instead of sitting with your feelings about the fact that time is steadily ticking by, you can buy hair dye to cover up those embarrassing grays; unsightly evidence that you are not, in fact, 14 years old, mon dieu.

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Instead of making uncomfortable changes to your diet, learning to enjoy foods that reduce inflammation, or learning to love your perfect human body just as it is, you can pop a pill that promises to deliver you to that perfect size zero. And it's so tempting to buffer against feeling bad about your body, your hair, your everything by buying a promise of easy transformation, by using a product to temporarily liberate you from looking at your real feelings about yourself and your life.

The truth is, none of these quick fixes work and just serve to keep you from connecting inward, where your real power lies. And again, if you like slimming jeans, if you like dying your hair, cool, totally cool. The point is, I want you so much to learn how to be in touch with your own feelings, to feel and allow them and then to make your best life choice.

And the good news is that there are concrete tools you can use to shift these behaviors and the thoughts and feelings that lead to them to stop buffering against life, to become more present to yourself and your true wants and needs, so you can take courageous action towards your goals.

So what is this buffering I've been alluding to and why do we do it? So, the concept of buffering was first written about in the 1970s by psychology researchers Cohen and Willis. The buffering hypothesis states that when folks have a social support system, that community helps buffer or shield the person from the potentially negative impact of stressful events.

And there's been a lot of research into how having folks in our lives that have our back can help us not experience a situation as being as negative as we might feel when we're doing it alone. Research shows that folks with a strong social support system have a greater ability to fight off cancer, to reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease, and even to keep heart disease at bay.

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Having a strong system of support can help us from feeling as alone when dealing with mental health concerns, like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress. Human beings are pack animals, social creatures, and our bodies experience less physiologic stress when we're in community. Feeling loved supports our vagus nerve to fire appropriately, reduces circulating freak-out chemicals like adrenaline and cortisol and positively impacts our mental and physical wellness in deep ways.

I'm a huge fan of social connection as a vital and important positive buffer against pain and undue stress in difficult times, such as the death of a spouse, parent, or other loved ones, after a birth or adoption, after a natural disaster, job loss, a challenging diagnosis. Community is a vital part of feminism as I understand it, and of my life and work.

Few things are as important as having a beloved community of folks to connect with, when things are good or otherwise. I believe deeply in this positive use of the word buffer and that we can get support from the folks we love in a positive and fulfilling way.

This positive concept of buffering is not about using community to escape your feelings; quite the opposite. We can be buffered by loved ones in a difficult moment so that we can go deeper into our feelings. For example, when someone dies and folks bring food over or help you around the house, that creates room and space for you to go deeper into your grief, to really feel it when you're not worried about simply surviving.

That said, so many of us can create an internal buffer to keep life at arm's length versus holding space for our own difficult feeling emotions, by making choices that keep us from feeling our feelings, which doesn't help us work through them. I've been thinking a lot about the ways that we can buffer against life. Again, food, alcohol, speaking without thinking, being reactive, ways that keep us checked out versus checked in and how we can resist using buffering in a negative way that keeps us from accepting

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life on life's terms and can keep us from feeling and processing our feelings.

So, you know the story, you go through a bad breakup, have a fight with your mom, or maybe you're just having a crappy day at work, you feel lousy and you want to feel better. Maybe you curl up on the couch with a pint of ice cream and turn on the latest show. Pretty soon, your bad feelings fade into the background as you get lost in the magical TV machine and the gooey goodness of mint chocolate chip.

Or maybe you have a really stressful job and you get into the habit of unwinding by coming home and enjoying a glass of wine or two, a beer or two, a fancy cocktail or two, or three, or four. It helps you to momentarily relax and forget about the finance report that's due in the morning, or meeting your fourth quarter targets, or that particularly demanding patient.

Or maybe you turn on the news and get really overwhelmed by all the terrible everythings going on right now and seek solace in a little retail therapy and gossiping and complaining, whining, procrastinating, and doing anything other than feeling your true feels; sadness, anger, disappointment, stress. This is buffering against life versus allowing your feelings.

And I get it. There are a million reasons why we want to periodically check out and escape our feelings, especially when we don't have the tools to make any other decision. This is the old, when the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail story. And I get it. I've been there too.

If buffering against your feels by distracting yourself from them is the only way you know how to cope with them, then it makes perfect sense that that would be your go-to. And I mean this in a very sincere way; good for you, way to go. I'm proud of you and your brain.

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If you don't have a way to manage feeling upset or angry or overwhelmed, if your brain believes that you shouldn't be feeling these feelings because they will in fact kill you, which is the kind of black and white thinking that brains love to do, then you shouldn't feel those feelings. If you have no experience or framework for feeling them and telling a new story about how they will affect you, then they will continue to feel really dangerous and your brain won't let you go to there in a healthy way.

We do these things, these buffering activities, because on some level they work. They provide temporary relief, or at least the illusion of relief. Drinking, eating white flour and sugar, watching TV, all of the things provide our brains with a hit of dopamine; a neurotransmitter that creates a temporary fleeting sense of pleasure, a false pleasure.

When our brain gets this reward, we want to keep doing it. And when we stop, we can experience cravings and withdrawal. To relieve ourselves of that discomfort and or feel that pleasure again, we often repeat the behavior. Again, pure brain genius when you know no other way out.

It's also worth noting that pretty much everything in our culture supports these choices. As kids, we tend to have pretty healthy coping skills. We play or draw or talk to dolls. But over time, we learn ways of coping that are actually less about coping and more about escaping.

I worked with a client who would periodically binge on fried chicken and whisky, and it had become her norm and not something she even thought about, even though it made her joint pain, headaches, depression, and anxiety worse, not to mention how it affected her endometriosis.

When we explored the pattern, it turns out that she craved these things every time she talked to her parents who, she said, stressed her out. While of course I'm not demonizing food, any kind of food, particularly fried food, or whisky, these things aren't bad, I'm saying that in this case, they had

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become the tools that she used to avoid dealing with the old painful feelings she had about her childhood that were triggered by her thoughts when her parents called.

The problem with all this buffering is that when we stop making conscious choices, we can lose sight of what's best for our bodies and spirits in the long run. We engage in spiritual bypassing, leapfrogging over the truth into some more easily digested version of reality.

This can also apply to not just covering up negative feelings, but jumping to tell a positive story before you've really sat with how hard whatever happened is or the way you're feeling sad or disappointed. Here are some of the problems that I see emerging with too much checking out or buffering.

The first issue is that when you're not in line with your intuition, you are stuck in either your primal lizard mind or your thinking mind, depending on the situation and what exactly we're rolling around with here. You are not checked in with your body, with your spirit, with whatever you think of as a higher power, be it god, consciousness, nature, unicorns in the sky, whatever keeps your boat afloat.

When you check in, you could ask yourself if you're hungry, angry, lonely, or tired; the acronym HALT, that I love so much and use 1000 times a day. And you can address your real need in a real way versus just covering it up with a buffering habit. Second, buffering keeps you from dealing with the real issues that are causing the behavior in the first place.

If you're telling yourself that you're an emotional eater, for example, it can be hard to shift that pattern of eating until you get to the root cause, the feelings you don't know how to deal with. As long as the eating soothes you, you'll be less likely to dig deeper for the true source of your unhappiness.

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If you drink at night to ease your anxiety, that drinking can stop you from uncovering and resolving why you're anxious in the first place. To be clear, when you're masking these problems, they don't go away. They're still there playing out in your life, whether you deal with them directly or not.

You may cope with your terrible work situation by procrastinating and gossiping with a coworker, but at the end of the day, your job hasn't gotten any better and the time you spent on the buffer behavior keeps you from actually doing your job and will worsen tomorrow's overwhelm story. And the temporary solace you found while distracting yourself from what you actually need to do and the feelings that come up around deadlines, for example, may actually keep you from doing not just your work, but what you really need to do, which is to figure out how to make your work enjoyable and fulfilling, or at least neutral and doable.

You can think of buffering as a kind of false consciousness. It doesn't change your current situation into a better one, and it can distract you from getting to the real issues and getting things done to better your life. Third, buffering keeps you from being fully present to your life and the world around you.

When you're buffering, you can't connect fully to your creativity or your passions, nor can you be there fully for yourself or those you love. While you're numbing the bad feelings, you're also numbing the good ones. It's a package deal.

If you want to experience the deep joy and beauty of life, then you need to be present, and that means also learning to deal with pain and discomfort. Fortunately, when you confront the hard stuff, you also get access to all the good stuff. As a bonus, when you let yourself feel your feelings and when you accept life on life's terms, you get to know yourself in a deeper way, learning what truly makes you happy and unhappy.

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I am no stranger to the impulse to buffer. I still feel it these days, though less and less the more I coach myself. Mindless eating used to be a buffer for me, particularly in social situations where I felt uncomfortable, like parties or seeing someone I hadn't seen in ages.

I would overeat whatever was around like chips or snacks, and would eventually get a bellyache that would last for days. I have also used complaining and gossiping as a buffer. Instead of feeling sadness, disappointment, or anger, I used to craft a thoughtful feeling story of my own victimhood and would repeat it with enthusiasm and intensity to anyone who would listen.

Repeating those stories ad nauseam was a way to not sit with the underlying feeling, and in the end didn't serve me, and likely bored the crap out of whomever I was rambling at. This is not to say that thoughtfully processing a difficult moment isn't important. It's literally my life's work to hold space for folks that tell their stories.

But there's a difference between the complaining I was doing, which kept me in the ramped-up anger and credulity versus my actually pausing to feel the real feelings. And thus, that complaining was quite the negative buffer and kept me spinning in the story of upset versus feeling the feelings of it.

Fourth, if you're checked out, you're checked out. In addition, when we decline to acknowledge and confront our own pain and suffering, it can be hard to empathize in a deep and real way with the suffering of others. Now, more than ever, we need to be present, kind, and caring, to ourselves and to those who are suffering in our world.

I get it that the news these days is beyond overwhelming. I mean, please, the amount of crying I've done about how mi gente are being treated by our governments – I mean little babies in cages and the lasting harm that's being done to their psyches. It's too much.

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And I get the impulse to eat about it, drink about it, buffer about it. But, my loves, these negating behaviors do nothing to make change and do nothing to make the world a better place. Finally, buffering can be a way of giving up your own agency; our ability to act for ourselves, to make choices for our lives, minds, bodies, and to take action on our own behalf.

So to dig into this concept of buffering and agency, instead of recognizing that you have the power to changed your thoughts, feelings, and actions to feel better, you're relying on something external for temporary relief. You're reinforcing the notion that you don't have control over how you feel and what you do. And even though it can seem monumentally hard to change some behaviors, I'm here to tell you that you can change and you can do it without checking out.

And the most sustainable change comes from first checking in. You have everything you need already within you. You can build new habits and new coping skills that put you in deeper touch with your feelings while learning how to truly support and sustain yourself when things are difficult or challenging.

The awesome thing is that when you stop negatively buffering against life, you are on the path of replacing the temporary pleasure circuit of a cupcake or people pleasing or whatever with the lasting pleasure of learning to connect with yourself and the world around you, to manage your own thoughts and feelings and to create an abiding sense of wellbeing and compassion.

I want you to ask yourself what your world could be like if you just lived a real authentic life without buffering against negative experiences. It's a life without false pleasures, without pretending you're joyful, without the drugs we all turn to to keep unhappiness at bay.

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These things trick our brains with that dopamine hit, but that is not true wellbeing. True wellbeing comes with the highs and lows of life. True wellbeing comes with authenticity, with all the realness of this life.

So how do I stop buffering, you may be asking? The first step in stopping buffering behaviors is to realize when you're doing them. You can't change what you don't recognize. You can begin by checking in with yourself. You can learn to pause and become mindful of how you feel in any given moment.

You can ask yourself, what am I thinking? What is the story I'm telling about this situation? And is it one where I'm the victim? What am I feeling? How is that feeling present in my body? Is the feeling hard or soft? Is it in my chest, my arms? Is it rolling around in my brain or is it solid in my feet? It's about creating enough space for you to stop, think, connect inward, and make a conscious choice, one that will best serve you and your health.

One thing that can help you learn to pause and be more present and connected with yourself is meditation. Meditation can be as simple as stopping a few times a day to take some deep breaths and check in with yourself. If you're interested in starting a more formal meditation practice, there are some great apps to help you out. And I'll mention that the Calm app is free for teacher and educators, by the way, which is pretty amazing. I also love the Insight Timer and Stop, Breathe, Think.

And I also have a short but powerful mindfulness body scan meditation available for free just for podcast listeners that you can check out, and I'll put a link in the show notes for you; short but powerful. That described me to a tee.

I also highly recommend daily journaling, writing things down is so magical. It creates that cognitive distance from our own thoughts so we can evaluate them properly. When thoughts are rolling around your head, it's hard to be

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discerning about them. Writing it out can be really important as an initial step to making change. And you know I love data, so consider keeping a log of your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, so you can become more conscious of your choices and can better understand your own patterns of buffering.

When you do check in and step out of your habitual buffer, you might realize that you're anxious, sad, angry, or have some other uncomfortable feeling. And that's okay. Part of what we all need to do is to learn how to recognize and tolerate some discomfort, while at the same time learning new and healthier coping skills.

Once you identify the uncomfortable feeling, you can start to figure out the thought, a sentence in your mind, that is causing that feeling in your body. Our thoughts create our feelings, which drive our behaviors. The key to changing behaviors then is shifting our thoughts and feelings to ones that lead us to take the action we want for our lives.

We get to figure out the old stories we're telling ourselves that are unhelpful and create new stories that support our best lives. And while trust that I get how deliciously tempting it is to jump to a new action, to do something, to make change, if you don't sit with and allow the discomfort, you'll never truly move through it and shift the experience of it in your body.

You'll just bottle it in, shove it down, and pile a new buffering activity on top of it. It's like a volcano, all that hot magma just rolling around at the earth's core. And the earth does everything it can to keep it in, until the pressure is too much, and then Vesuvius is erupting, yelling at her girlfriend, snapping at the kids, berating herself for being such an effing effer once again.

Often, when people stop a buffering behavior, they have a lot of feelings. I know I did. You're likely to have feelings about stopping the thing in the first

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place, and then you're likely to have the feelings that that buffer behavior was falsely protecting you from.

Letting go of buffering can mean a significant lifestyle shift for some people, like learning to socialize without drinking or eating foods that give you a bellyache. And if you stop the thing you're buffering with, you will crave it. And that may be the first feeling you get to choose to embrace.

And listen, you don't need to go it all alone. Get help from a trained professional, lean on your supportive community to bring in that positive kind of buffering that helps us to feel loved in a deep way, deeply taken care of, so we can do the hard work of improving our lives.

When you learn to live in your authenticity, feeling the grief, the anger, the sadness, then you learn that you can manage these feelings without covering them up and that is so amazing. That is being truly connected with yourself. You can learn to show up for yourself in a true way, and that is where deep confidence comes from. That is truly healing. It's an amazing way to feel. I will happily testify to that.

So, my love, start with small steps. Do a trial. Are you concerned about not drinking socially? Try it for like an hour at a party. What does it feel like? What emotions are coming up for you and how can you manage them for these 60 little minutes without drinking?

And at the end of the hour, if you want to get a drink, go for it. But do it with awareness. Notice how the alcohol takes your discomfort away for a short while, and then the next day, when you wake up, see how your body feels after having had those drinks.

Do you feel good and string or are you achy and tired or hungover? Do you remember what you did or said last night? Are all the thoughts and feelings

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you drank to avoid still present for you in the light of day? Do you still feel awkward, uncomfortable, or anxious when you think about being at a party without drinking? Did last night's alcohol actually help you learn to manage those feelings, or did it just cover them for just the one night?

By trying these small incremental steps, you're accomplishing three things. First, you are slowly increasing your comfort with discomfort, even if it's just for an hour, not even a whole day or a lifetime. Second, you are building confidence in your own ability to make change. Third, you are creating new coping skills and you are doing it from a place of agency and mindfulness, which is amazing.

By doing this work to slowly shift away from buffering against a feeling, we learn how to replace the false pleasures with pleasures that serve our health better. Instead of taking a pill to relax, try an Epsom salts bath or five minutes of gentle yoga or a walk in nature, if that's available.

Instead of dealing with feelings of depression or sadness by binge watching *The Real Housewives*, you can sit with that sadness. Allow yourself to fully feel it. Increase your self-confidence and your faith in yourself to survive those feelings just for tonight.

And I want to say this very clearly, because I've been talking a lot about, like, Oreos and chips, because those things do give your brain that very special dopamine hit of false pleasure. And I want to say that this isn't about eating more kale for kale's sake.

You can have the perfect diet – which is a thing I so don't even believe in, but stay with me – and still be an emotional hot mess. A lentil quinoa bowl isn't going to solve your problems any more than that bag of Hershey Kisses. It's not about just a swap. It's not about swapping this notion of good food, healthy food, clean food, for that evil bad food. Oh my goodness, not at all.

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It's about recognizing your motivation, the reason you're taking action, and asking how those actions affect you.

Remember though that heroin and sugar impact and activate the same part of your brain and keep you in that addictive loop of looking for that next high, whether it's drugs or candy, that keep you out of your feelings. I'm not demonizing any food, any life choice, any survival skill.

I reached for the Twizzlers, the booze, the anger, the resentment, the codependence, the self-recrimination, the coffee upon coffee upon coffee. I reached for all of it without realizing what I was doing, until I realized what I was doing, that I was keeping myself from feeling the full breadth and depth of my humanity by allowing all of my feelings.

When you decide to stop buffering against life, you can begin to take a seat in your own power and can realize that you currently have in your possession the inner resources to enjoy life on life's own terms with all of the challenges and joys. You don't need to pretend to be happy. You don't need to jump to thinking positive or creating some false affirmation when things feel like crap. You get to learn to sit with the truth of your feelings.

And when you hit a problem or an issue that feels like too much to handle on your own, instead of reaching for the Ben& Jerry's, chardonnay, or kale, reach inward for support and help, build your own capacity to feel complex feelings knowing that you have what you need to live your best life fully present.

Thanks for listening, my loves. I hope this episode has been helpful. It was helpful for me to write it all out, to look at it in black and white, to see the millions of ways that I have used buffering to falsely protect myself from feeling hard things and to remember the struggle of learning to feel my own feelings in a deep place and to recognize just how much more brilliant

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bright and beautiful my life is now when I feel sad, angry, disappointed, and discontent and work through all of those feelings.

Be well, my loves. Take good care of yourself. Remember that you are loved and that when one of us heals, we help heal the world. I'll see you next time.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you like what you've heard, head to VictoriaAlbina.com to learn more.