

## Ep #19: Coping Mechanisms and Obsessive Thoughts



### **Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host**

**Victoria Albina, NP, MPH**

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## Ep #19: Coping Mechanisms and Obsessive Thoughts

Functional medicine is so much more than choking down a fistful of supplements every day or doing a dozen lab tests. I believe deeply in root cause medicine. And the longer I do this work, the more clarity I have that self-love is the key to healing. It is only from a place of true esteem for self that we can do the tasks of self-care consistently.

Eating foods that nourish you, taking your perfect human body on a walk, or otherwise engaging in thoughtful self-loving self-care while simultaneously engaging in a thought pattern that puts you down, that tells you you're not worthy of love, that doesn't value you will never lead to sustainable healing.

It's only by getting to the root of your thought habits that you can really shift them for the long haul. In my own healing, getting the right blood work and the right stool tests, the right adrenal test, were vital parts of my healing. But my truest healing came when I learned to love myself enough to take a look at the maladaptive thought patterns that were leading to maladaptive behaviors, that kept me stuck in lousy relationships, jobs that weren't in alignment with my life's purpose, habits that kept me feeling sick and so tired.

Today, my love, we'll be looking at the concept of adaptive and maladaptive thoughts and the feelings and behaviors they lead us to have. I'll explain the science and psychology and will share my own unique framework for meeting ourselves with love so we can create self-loving change to last a lifetime.

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.

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Hello, hello, my love. I hope this episode finds you doing so well. I'm really excited about today's topic. And before I dive in, I want to do two little things, and I'll make it quick. First, I want to thank each and every one of you who has followed me online, who's sent me sweet DMs and comments, who's taken the time to email me and tell me that you love the show and that it's helping you in your life.

I cannot begin to tell you how honored, humbled, delighted I am to hear that this work has been supportive for you. It is my life's calling to support and guide folks in their healing and I am so grateful that I get to do so and that this podcast medium exists for helping folks worldwide to heal themselves, to take back control of their minds and their lives. It's so remarkable and amazing. Thank you for showing up to listen and to heal yourself. What a gift.

So, the second thing, this may not actually be that quick, but I'll do my best. I want to share a real-life story of something that happened in my world last week when I was in San Francisco for work and to see beloved friends. So, it was like the afternoon and I was walking down Valencia, which is like a big street in the Mission District in San Francisco. And I was walking and listening to some music, looking around, like really enjoying being in the sunshine after so much rain here in New York this spring.

And my energy got pulled to my left, towards the street, where I saw an old man collapse in the middle of the street and saw a dude on his bike and another dude, like, run over and grab him and pull him over to the sidewalk. I'm a first responder, so I stepped in to help.

From a quick look at him, from a quick nursing assessment, he was seizing and his whole body was shaking and trembling. He had blood all over his face and his hands. He looked like he had been living possibly on the streets and was in some rough shape.

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I did what we do. I signaled someone to call 911. We were near a police station. I told someone to go inside and get first responders, get an ambulance to come help us.

I went over to the guy. He looked like he was in his 70s and he was not on this earthly plane with us. He had lost consciousness or was in that seizure state and he was in rough shape.

And I spoke to him in a sweet soothing tone and I said, “Hey, you’re okay, we’ve got you, help is on the way.” And it’s really interesting, as I’m retelling this, my body’s starting to tremble and shake a little, which is okay, it’s just energy moving through me.

As a tender empathy in that moment, and apparently in this one too, I felt every ounce of that old man’s fear and pain. The police got there before the ambulance and there was a lot of, sort of, tense energy as they approached the scene. I was telling them my observations. The other two responders were chiming in.

And the ambulance pulled up. They got him onto a bed, onto a gurney, and got him into the truck. And my body was responding. I was in there with him. I was feeling his fear because when the cops walked up and said, “Hey there, it’s the police,” in this really big tone, his eyes opened and you could tell from looking at him and feeling the energy that he was in pure fear.

He went immediately into this deep, deep fear body and it took him over and he went from being, you know, all slumped and in that postictal, which means just had a seizure, moment of being like, eugh, to his whole body tensed. His whole body tense, he tried to stand up, he tried to, like, move away.

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I had spoken calming words, “Hey, it’s okay, there’s other people here, an ambulance is pulling up.” And the EMTs, you know, touched him with gentle hands, were really loving, and once he was safely in someone else’s care, my job as a first responder was over. I had transferred my responsibility in that moment to those in charge of getting him to the emergency room.

And I was shaking as I walked away. My body was vibrating with the energy that my rather porous energetic field had let in. So, I paused. I took a seat on a wall and I began to take slow deep breaths and use my thoughts to calm myself.

What I am feeling is not mine. It’s someone else’s energy, someone else’s pain, and I don’t have to take it on. I don’t have to keep thinking these thoughts that are creating my own feelings around this experience. I don’t have to project more pain, create more suffering. I can own my own cortisol experience, my own fight-flight-freeze, can lean on my own skills to complete that stress reaction cycle we talked about in episode 17.

And I gave myself, my vibrating body, permission to cry right there on Valencia Street and I cried it all out. I let myself really do it, not caring about what anyone around me would think or feel because those are things that I can’t control. All I can do is show up for myself the way I showed up for that elderly gentleman.

And when I was done crying, when I felt that shift in my body, that signal that the stressor energy had moved on and through me, had passed, I stood up and literally shook my body. And then, from that place of centering in myself, from grounding myself in my own power in the earth below me, the sky above, after reminding myself I am safe, everything’s okay here, I have a choice about how the energy I feel affects me, that I can, as a witchy little science nerd, see the validity and truth in both an energetic

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understanding of the world, and the cognitive behavioral understanding of the world that I hold dear.

I can recognize these two frameworks are not at odds, but rather are a mutually supportive system for understanding the universe and our choices in this human lifetime. From that place, from holding these two truths, from attending to myself energetically and physically, I reached out to my dear friend Whitney, a trauma therapist who specializes in supporting first responders to manage stress – what a good friend to have – and I told her what had happened and allowed her to hold space for me, which she did beautifully.

And note, my love, that I attended to myself first before attempting to ask someone else to do it for me; something someone else cannot do until we've done it for ourselves. I felt the energy, I did my cognitive thought work on it and realized the feelings my thoughts were creating. I held space to shift those thoughts, but first, I allowed my perfect body to complete that stress stressor cycle and then shifted my thoughts.

I told myself, "That man is on his way to San Francisco General, one of the most amazing hospitals in this country. He is safe and in good hands with the EMTs who were so gentle with him. I am not responsible here. I have done my job. I have done everything I can and showed up with a full heart."

I felt calm fill my body, from my little feet all the way up to my head. And then I reached outward and asked for the support and love I needed. And I have to say, looking back on this moment, it is such a gift to be able to walk my talk. And I'm so grateful for all the teachers in my life who have helped me to put all these tools in my self-care toolbox. And I'm grateful to myself for practicing them daily when I'm not in crisis energy, so that those tools are there when I need them.

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Okay, it's amazing to feel into my body, that original stress energy, that tense energy, that sort of, "Oh gosh, am I really getting vulnerable here," energy that I felt when I started to talk about this experience has melted and shifted out of me. It's so beautiful to feel those two energy states and to know that my own thinking about the telling of the experience, how beautiful and what a gift it is to be vulnerable, it's not a thing to fear, that my thoughts created that shift. Let's take a big deep belly breath in together, in and out. Okay, thank you for listening, my love. I'm grateful.

So today, we're going to talk about coping strategies, for pretty obvious reasons given what last week looked like in my little world. I had a different topic all recorded and lined up for this week, and we'll have that conversation together next week, my love, because right now, what's really present for me is to talk about the ways we've learned to manage ourselves in this world and how maybe some new frameworks for seeing ourselves and how we get through it can bring supportive love and peace to you.

It's common in modern psychology and psychiatry to label behaviors and thought patterns as either adaptive – those skills, actions, schemas for living that help us get through the day, blend into society, get along and move along through the world that we live in with ease – or to label those behaviors and thought patterns as maladaptive – quite simply not adaptive; those thoughts and behaviors that keep us from, well, adapting to life on life's terms, the things that keep us stumbling, stuck, acting outside of a way that feels in alignment with our highest self, not moving with life on life's terms, but rather attempting to soothe our own anxious minds by avoiding, projecting, or otherwise attempting to not be present to reality, confrontation, hard feelings, and to do so with behaviors that actually keep us from thriving and living into that highest self.

I first learned these terms about a decade ago and this framework has been so helpful for me and I'm excited to share my own take on it with you today, my love. And for my educators, especially my special ed' teachers



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out there, I'm well aware that I'm using these terms in a slightly different way than you might do at work.

I'm using them in reference not to the skill set needed by kiddos and folks with special needs, but rather in reference to neurotypical folks; folks with the capacity to meet their own ADLs, activities of daily living. That is, I'm applying this in a really psychological and not day to day skills-based framework, and I'm applying them to myself and have for years in ways that have been really helpful, illustrative, and supportive of my own growth. So, I'll invite you to gently put aside any previous understanding you've had of these terms and to open your heart and mind to hear them within the framework that has worked for me and for my functional medicine life coaching clients for the last decade.

So, let's look at some examples of these thought patterns and behaviors to get us started, my dear nerdy one. So, I could list out a thousand examples of the big and little ways we think, and thus feel, and consequently behave, in ways that we're adaptive earlier in our lives that are maladaptive now, as grownups doing our best to live in emotional adulthood.

In my own life, I held onto several key behaviors I learned in childhood for dear life, not realizing, until I did, that they were maladaptive and no longer served me in this adult framework. To name a few, I held onto communicating indirectly and passive aggressively, which I learned from my family of origin, for sure, which also looked like hinting or suggesting versus stating my needs clearly. Saying things like, "Yeah, I mean, if the garbage got taken out, that would be so cool. I mean, like, and I wouldn't have to do it for like the 14<sup>th</sup> time in a row..." that infusion of shame and guilt. Oh man, god, I was such a pro at that one. Versus saying, "Hey, my love, could you please take the garbage out," quite simply attaching no baggage, no shame, no guilt.



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I also held onto a story that it was dangerous to be vulnerable, which was also a powerful childhood lesson for me. So I hid myself, my deepest true self, or I puffed myself up and put on the persona I thought people wanted because I was scared to show the real me.

Buffering, which we discussed in episode 14, is a great example of a once adaptive behavior that can be maladaptive now as adults. Overeating, overdrinking, distracting yourself from your feelings once may have felt like the safest choice in the world when you didn't have the skills to show up and sit with scary feeling feelings, like being sad, mad, disappointed, scared, frustrated. Without the capacity to hold space for yourself, of course, you turn to easy ways to cover those feelings up. Your brain told you to because science.

Let's remember that brains don't like things that they label as scary because lions are scary and lions will eat your face, and thus, ipso facto, big feelings, new feelings, feelings you don't know how to manage are scary as crap and your brain tries to keep you from having them because it loves you.

Similarly, drinking to excess at a party because you're telling the story, "I don't know anyone here and I feel anxious – maybe I'll be more likable with a few drinks in me," is a smart way for your brain to keep you from feeling scared. Maybe this is showing up for you by staying in a job or a relationship that isn't the right fit for you because you're scared that no one will want to hire you or date you.

Maybe you're stuck in an old thought pattern which you don't value yourself, maybe because it was safer to not value yourself as a kid and to not draw attention to yourself, rather than to be disappointed if your caretakers didn't recognize your achievements, praise you, or see you the way you wanted to be seen, or if being seen was physically or psychologically dangerous for you, as a younger you.

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Again, it makes so much sense that you would want to stay in the shadows if stepping into the light was a terrible idea in your youth. How very smart of you to protect you like that. That is, these behaviors that lead you to continue to live in cycles of pain, sadness, hiding, fear, frustration, they all served you at some point. And labeling these cycles, these thoughts and behaviors, as bad, judging them, that gets you nowhere but down the rabbit hole of self-recrimination, self-judgment, of being mean to you. I want to invite you to begin to see these behaviors in another light because it's hard to meet something you're mad at with the love it takes to change your life.

So, I believe that every single currently maladaptive behavior was once complete frigging genius, or at the very least, pretty darn smart, in that moment that your child self developed this coping. That is, you may have developed these behaviors in childhood as a way to make it through as unscathed as possible. And that's where many maladaptive behaviors come from, because as children, we have very limited options and little agency to tell the adults in our lives that we want things to be different, that we want to be spoken to, cared for, touched, or not touched in particular ways.

We are subject, as children, to the whims of our caretakers, and so we do the very best we can to survive, even to thrive on the outside by adapting to the world around us. I want to remind you, my love, you did the best you could with the mental capacity, the developmental stage brain, the information, and the emotional skills you had at the time that you came up with these then adaptive behaviors and thoughts.

No one does something that doesn't make sense. I really believe you're too smart for that. There is always a reason we do what we do. And I think it's so vital to hold this new story about our once adaptive, now maladaptive constructs as we work to shift them. They were once genius.

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So, let's dive in. Let's start to look at these patterns and to talk about how we can shift our go-to coping systems, because if what was once adaptive is now maladaptive, well, that means it's not working for you. So let's talk about how to start making that shift happen.

I'll start by exploring some of the more common ways that folks address maladaptive behaviors. Some of these might be familiar from pop-psychology, media, or self-help books. After understanding how these frameworks do and don't work, I'll go into more detail about my own approach, how and why it's brought so much peace and health to my clients and to myself.

And please do note that this is where my approach may be a little different from what you've heard before. So one of the things that's really popular in helping folks to shift a now maladaptive behavior, and this is also very popular in the eating disorder treatment world, is to engage in something called thought-stopping, which is when you state very clearly – some folks even tell you to yell – “stop” in your mind or otherwise often actively aggressively confront that part of you that is engaging in an obsessive thought, a negative thought, a harmful or maladaptive thought.

The thinking behind this approach, as I understand it, is in line with my own understanding from a cognitive behavioral framework that our thoughts create our feelings and we take action based on our feelings. So if you get yourself to immediately stop having a thought, you can thus change the ensuing feeling and action that you'll take. And while I'm all about that end result, that's literally what I teach all day, my path to there is a little different than just telling yourself to stop having a thought that is well-entrenched in the old psyche.

I do not believe in being mean to ourselves, to writing off any part of ourselves, to telling ourselves to just stop having a thought, to attempt to replace it with sunshine, kittens, and rainbows, and to expect our brains to

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believe us when we've been having this negative old thought for our entire lives, or a good chunk of it at least.

I haven't found this practice, this process, actually works in a sustainable way. I have found that humans are most able to show up for ourselves and for change, especially when the thing we want to change is rooted in our childhood stories, when we show up and embrace ourselves with love, caring, and understanding. There is a rather eerie parallel between ignoring the maladaptive thought and maladaptive behavior, which may have their root in feeling unheard or like one doesn't belong, and repeating the harm that was caused. How on earth do you heal hurt with the same hurt?

I have found that, often, those of us who are the most desperate for attention outside ourselves are those that are hurting the most, those who feel the least seen in the world, and most often, unseen by our own selves. We may feel neglected emotionally and maybe felt neglected as children, either physically or emotionally, and saying, no I will not see or hear you, to that inner child who's just begging us to be seen. It's like picking a scab, like this old emotional scab.

It just reinforces that you will not be seen or heard. And that, I mean, that just sucks for your inner nine-year-old, your inner five-year-old, for those parts of you that are you, that just want to be acknowledged and given love and understanding. For this reason, I do not believe in shutting down the thoughts and feelings we may label or see as negative or toxic, but rather I encourage us to see the part of us that wants to think and feel this way and to give that part all the love you can in this world, starting with simply acknowledging it.

The other common piece of advice in the self-help world when it comes to maladaptive thinking or obsessive thinking is to distract yourself from thinking that negative thought that may lead you to feel anxious or worried

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or what have you, and will lead you to behave in that old, previously adaptive, now maladaptive way.

Now, if you've been listening to this show, you'd probably guess that that just doesn't jive for me. I do not believe in distracting ourselves from our thoughts and feelings. I believe in diving in and feeling them and letting ourselves really embody the challenging feeling, naming it in our bodies, seeing where it lives, really getting to know it and giving that feeling some space.

Distractions are inherently temporary and don't solve a darn thing. Once that TV show is over, once that bag of chips is done or the bottle is empty, the feelings come flooding back, often accompanied by guilt, shame, or disappointment that we engaged in that self-harming behavior. And the tummy ache or hangover may be all the stronger for having avoided our own truth and denied ourselves the opportunity to be seen, first and foremost, by ourselves.

So, I don't believe in distracting ourselves from a negative thought. It's a form of buffering and I encourage you to hold space for all of your feelings, even those that may be challenging in the moment. Once you've named the negative thought, once you've recognized that you're repeating, oh my god, I am the worst, I suck at communication or dating or getting my work done or showing up – once you've named that, felt it, you can then create space to give yourself some love, and then you can choose a new thought that can create a new feeling for you, one based in self-love and self-acceptance.

All of this is to say, my love, that in this family, we start with awareness and recognizing your patterns; the thoughts that create your feelings knowing that you will take action based on your feelings, and that the results of those actions, the life we live and experience every day, is built of the big and little actions we take, and it all starts with our thoughts.

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Next, we will pause and I'll invite you to ask yourself where those thought habits may have come from. Again, remember that whatever thought or behavior your brain is jumping to did not come out of nowhere. You are way too smart for that and it likely came from a place of self-protection; be that 20 years ago, 20 weeks ago, 20 minutes ago.

And for those self-protective stories, those self-defenses that came from our childhood, I always pause and just think about it, like, for a kid to come up with this intense of a coping mechanism, I mean, wow. Y'all, that is so amazing. How cool and incredible are inner children? So smart.

From that place, you can start to create and hold space to accept that this habit is your truth. You do this thing, that's a fact. You have these thoughts. you feel this certain way because it was adaptive at an earlier part of your life. Instead of jumping to change that thought immediately, I want to invite you to pause, to praise that part of you that was trying to save your life. And what a gift to pause and praise, rather than to beat yourself up once more.

Recognize, and I'm speaking deep into you here, that you are too damn smart to do stupid things. If you felt unseen or unsafe as a child, you learned to be quiet, to be fearful, to keep your truth hidden away. If your parents were always fighting, you learned to be the clown, to not show up with your real self but to distract everyone, a-la Robin Williams, a-la younger me, and let's be real, sometimes that clown comes on out even now when I'm feeling vulnerable or overwhelmed or insecure. And I sure do get to pause and praise, because that little kiddo in me is so smart.

To go back to that habit though, of being small, of getting quiet, of shifting, changing, adapting ourselves to what we believe others want us to be is a habit taught in direct and indirect ways to all humans, men particularly. To those of us who were socialized as women, we are taught to go with the flow, to not create a scene, to be good girls and to not ruffle any feathers with silly things like being ourselves and speaking our needs.

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And even if we learn to change the behavior, if we do learn to speak up, to be leaders, to take ownership of our lives, we can feel guilt, shame, and fear when we do so. The patriarchy has made darn well sure of it and it's time that we let those old stories go and to pause to praise those parts of us that saw the writing on the wall and realized that, as children, as young women, as young people in this world, perhaps it was safer to go with it until we could learn a new way.

So, instead of judging these behaviors, we now learn to come into awareness and to say, "Thank you, brain, thank you nine-year-old me." And these are actual conversations I have with my brain all the time, "Brain, I love you. And you know what, listen, here's the great news; you don't need to continue to have this thought or behavior. This thought or behavior was so smart when we were little, but now it hurts me, so I bow to you and I thank you for showing up for me in this beautiful old way. You're so great, brain."

And key to this is to talk the way you would want someone to talk to you when you were a kiddo, or the way you would talk to a kiddo you love in this world. This is some gentle sort of intro-level re-parenting work, which is a topic I'm so delighted to talk with you about in an episode coming soon. And for now, breathe into it. You get to show up and be the parent you maybe wish you had.

So, once you have given younger you some serious love for coming up with this thought feel behavior pattern to make it through this bananas world, you can start to shift things. I start by asking myself, does this pattern serve me? See how that question holds zero judgment. It's not about labeling the patterns as bad or wrong or effed up or anything, it's simply asking if continuing to guard myself against vulnerability, to continue to obfuscate when I could be direct and honest, to buffer against life on life's terms, to project my world view onto others, or whatever your own thought-feeling-action habit is.



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Ask yourself if it is truly in service of you living your life to your highest good and highest potential. And let's be real, if you're asking the question, the answer is usually no. These thought-feeling-action patterns do not serve me and so I get to choose a different thought to think, leading to feeling a new feeling, and thus enabling me to take a different action in the world, to show up in a new and more deeply loving way for myself, the people I love and interact with in this world, and the universe as a whole.

Your homework for this week is to begin to bring your attention to your own patterns, to walk through the steps I've laid out here. And because I love you, I made you a handy printable PDF worksheet that you can get on my website, [victoriaalbina.com](http://victoriaalbina.com) on the podcast page under this episode.

Go on, head over there, sign up, put your little email in, get your little email with a PDF, print it out or do it on your computer, save trees and all. But use it, my love, and start to see where your own adaptive, now possibly maladaptive patterns are the genius they once were. And start to hold space to gently, lovingly, kindly begin to shift them.

One of the things that has been the most helpful for me in moving into that shift in my thought-feeling-action habits has been the Pranayama breath work I practice each and every morning. If you're not on my email list or following me on the Instagrams or the Facebooks, I recommend that you do so now because I'm putting together a beautiful four-week breath work journey program for you, and the theme is deep healing through self-love; something I dare say all of us could benefit from practicing.

That course will go live on my website soon and I'll be doing a little webinar about it or I'll be chatting about it and I'll also be doing a giveaway on my Instagram where you can be entered to win a free seat on the course. So, head on over and follow me there, sign up for my email list – I promise not to spam you – so you can be the very first to know when the course is available.

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I'm so excited and honored to be able to share the gift of breath work with you, my perfect love. It is a phenomenal accompaniment to the thought work we do here together each and every week.

I want to thank you, as always, for taking the time to focus on your own health and healing. You are giving yourself such a beautiful gift by tuning in each week to learn a little something that you can apply immediately to help make your own life, and the lives of the people you love, a little bit better. Be well, my beautiful love, and remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Until next time, and thank you so much for listening.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you like what you've heard, head to [VictoriaAlbina.com](http://VictoriaAlbina.com) to learn more.