

## Ep #29: Codependent Thinking



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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[Feminist Wellness](#) with Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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Before we dive in, my love, if you find yourself in a situation where you're being abused in any way, please know that you don't have to go it alone. I'm putting some links to some really helpful organizations in the show notes. Reach out, find a trusted therapist or counselor in your area. Contact a hotline and take care of yourself. You are so worth it, my love.

Have you ever found yourself chronically putting someone else's needs ahead of your own? Do you find it hard to make decisions for fear of someone's disapproval? Do you often worry about what others will think of you? Sometimes even to the point of not doing what you want for yourself?

Being in relationship with others is a vital part of being alive, crucial for our health and wellness. And while being connected with others can be a beautiful source of joy in our lives, if our thought habits lead us into codependent thinking patterns, our relationships can come to feel exhausting, overwhelming, and draining, as we give too much of ourselves away in a vain attempt to please or control another human.

Today, we'll talk about the concepts of independence, autonomy, and codependence. In the first episode in a wee series of episodes about codependence and self-love. Keep listening, my darling, this is a juicy topic.

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 love. I hope this finds you doing so well. One of the amazing things that's been coming up for me a lot in my daily breath work meditations are my old relationships. I think part of it may be the time of year, place I'm at in my life, what's going on astrologically, and the fact that my romantic relationship now is so good. So stable. And I know how to

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manage my mind now. So I ask for what I want and need, say what I want and need, and give myself what I want and need.

And I put myself first now, which is a massive act of love for myself and for my partner, and is magnificent resentment prevention. All of this is quite the departure from so many of my past relationships, and my spirit feels the freedom and connection I could never have imagined in my teens, my 20s, even my early 30s.

I used to look to my partner to bring me joy, satisfaction, fulfillment. Now I know that only I can bring me those things through my own thoughts. I used to be scared to speak up or ask for what I needed because I was worried about upsetting my partner. Now I know that I don't have the capacity to upset anyone else. Only the person listening to me does because I can't control how someone else hears and interprets what I say and do.

And damn, is it liberating to know how to manage my own mind, to have breath work as a space where I can connect in with my body and can somatically understand my feelings and move them through me and I can give space to others to manage their own minds and bodies. And so it is with all of this rolling around in my mind, rolling around in my body and spirit that I want to talk with you today about codependency.

This is but one gal's opinion. I am not claiming to be the be all, end all expert on codependence. There's like, tons of books written about this and whole programs that help people to recover and heal from ancestral legacies of codependent thinking and behavior.

And I'll put some links in the show notes to some of my favorite books on the topic so you can dive deeper if this is something that interests you. So I would like to start by talking about dependency and independence. In nature, independence is a completely foreign concept. Balanced

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ecosystems from the Amazon rainforest, to our own gut microbiome function only when the various players involved work together in a healthy give and take.

Pollinators need flowers, which need pollinators, and our guts give feedback to our brains via our vagus nerve, which help us make the choices that then feed our guts. In the human realm, when it comes to how we behave in relationships, we often forget that we too are part of nature, and that our little mammal selves need one another to make it along through our lives.

While we can pause to problematize the modern use of the word tribe every time we mean a group or community, I will say that humans are pack animals. Community is vital for our health and healing, and studies show that feeling connected to others, living in community, not feeling or being alone as your baseline state is a remarkable balm against both depression and anxiety.

And yet independence as a goal is baked into so many aspects of our modern capitalist Western culture and society. From the praise we give children when they can do things by themselves, to popular culture that highlights the importance of independence and going it alone. That whole framework of rugged individualism.

However, full independence in relationships is impossible, and isn't a goal I personally aspire to. Something I both see in my life coaching clients and have lived myself, and one that many of us raised as women can relate to is the extreme opposite of independence. Codependency.

The co meaning that we base how we feel on how someone else feels or rather, our interpretation, assumption, and projection of what that other person feels or may feel. It's how we become so connected to a partner

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that we lose ourselves in them and the relationship, that we lose sight of what we want and who we are.

When we forget that our thoughts create our feelings, and thus drive our actions. When we forget that we have control over how we feel in a relationship by choosing the thoughts that keep us feeling dependent on others and how they feel as a way to validate ourselves and feel good in our lives.

This extreme of codependency is just as unhealthy and just as damaging to relationships and to ourselves as striving for the false notion of complete independence, and is what we'll dive into today. What I'd like to explore with you today my loves is how to understand relationships in terms of autonomy instead of independence, some signs of a codependent relationship and the thought errors that can underlie codependence, and how to start shifting our thinking from unhealthy codependency to healthy interdependence.

To start, if part of you is wondering if I'm really suggesting that independence in relationships is not awesome, I would ask you to stay open to thinking differently about some of the vocabulary that we use around relationships. I would ask you to consider whether or not you're singing that Destiny's Child song in your head about independent women because I know I am right about now.

So much of the messaging we get about what it means to be an adult, to grow up and come of age centers around being able to accomplish tasks and make decisions on our own. While there's a lot to be said for being able to have control over our lives, I want for our purposes today to think of this as autonomy rather than independence.

Autonomy literally means the right or condition of self-government, which has to do with you making decisions for your life, for you. Keeping your

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focus on yourself and what you want and need in this beautiful lifetime, leaving aside your worries and thoughts about how others will react, what they'll think or feel, and how they'll act in their own lives if you manage yours the way you want to, for you.

Independence as a concept has more to do with others than with ourselves. Independent says I don't need you, you can't control me, whereas autonomy says I can do this and I'm doing it for me. The difference there is subtle and important. If I declare that I'm independent, I am defining my position in terms of others.

More specifically is not needing others. In my mind, I see a teenager, arms crossed who can do things by herself, thank you very much. When I define myself as autonomous, I am only speaking about and for myself. I am literally self-directed or self-governing. I can handle myself, but that doesn't mean I won't accept or ask for help and support from others.

When I think of autonomy, I see myself standing tall, confident, open, a fully embodied emotional adult. I understand that my thoughts create my feelings, and your thoughts create yours. In relationships, we by definition seek the support and help of our friend, partner, spouse, roommate, coworker.

If we didn't at times look to one another for a boost, for words of support, for intimacy, or for help reaching the top shelf, then we wouldn't be in a relationship at all. So the idea of independence in our relationships doesn't quite hold water. Autonomy by contrast leaves space for partners in a relationship to value, show up for, and support each other without giving up their own ability to self-direct and self-govern.

Now that we have some shared language, my loves, I'd love to go into more detail about what codependency looks like. Before we get into the nitty gritty though, I want to invite you to join me in a little exercise. This one

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will be particularly easy if you're writing public transit or chilling on the couch. But if you're driving, either pull over or maybe skip this one.

So I'll invite you to start by closing your beautiful eyes and bring your attention to your breath. Feel your breath move in and out of your body, through your nose, down your throat, and into your lungs. Feel your breath moving back out. Do this a few more times. In and out.

Now that you're in your body, we're going to think about a few different relationships to see how your body reacts. Like we've talked about in so many other episodes, our bodies have so much wisdom and when we can tune in, we can learn so much about what's true for us.

One major sign of a codependent relationship is that of enmeshment. When the partners in the relationship lose themselves in the other. This can mean losing touch with one's own likes, dislikes, preferences, or opinions, or also prioritizing the other to the point of losing touch with yourself.

Now, as you're breathing and staying grounded in your body, I want you to call to mind the face of someone in your life around whom you're able to fully arrive as your complete self. I want you to stay open to what it feels like in your body to call up the image of this person or four-legged, or bird, lizard, cat, dog, pony. This creature with which you are in some sort of relationship, and with whom you can feel your authentic self.

If it works to call to mind someone who's passed away or someone who you haven't seen in a while, that's okay. Just notice how your body feels. Are you at ease? Open? Perhaps you feel warmth or a sensation somewhere in your body. Notice it. Feel it.

Now allow the image of that person to float away into the clouds and send them thanks and love. Now, I want you to call to mind the image of someone around whom you find it challenging to be your truest self. I don't

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mean to imply that person is a partner in codependency necessarily because not all unhealthy relationships are codependent ones.

But for now, just call to mind someone with whom you just don't feel quite like you can safely be you. Notice how that feels. Does it illicit any sensations in your body? Pay attention to your body's wisdom and the interplay of body and spirit here. Any tightness? Any heaviness? Sensation?

Take a few more deep breaths and then let that image fade. Ground yourself, come back to center, few more deep breaths, and when you're ready, flutter open your beautiful eyes. If that last part left you feeling less than settled, this is a great time to do the practice we talked about in episode 17 of completing that stress cycle.

Give your body a good shake, maybe cross your arms over your chest and hug yourself. Rock yourself back and forth a little bit. Maybe jump up and down. And if for example you're riding on the subway or in an elevator, just let your body know that you're okay. You're safe.

This exercise is a powerful way of getting into our bodies and of tapping into the knowledge that our bodies hold about how our relationships impact us emotionally, mentally, and physically. As we talk more about codependency, I want to invite you to hold on not to the specific sensations that you felt just now but rather the deep wisdom that our bodies and breath hold and the power that we have when we harness these tools.

When we listen in closely to our bodies, we can start to notice patterns that we otherwise tune one. Our little monkey mind may distract us from noticing that a relationship is turning unhealthy because our brains don't like change. And our breath can bring out awareness that our minds try to keep quiet. When we go deep into our breaths and into our bodies, we give ourselves space and time for those a-ha moments that we might not



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otherwise have, and when we're caught in unhealthy relationship and thought patterns, we need those moments of clarity to open up the portal to bring us back to reality and to help us to find the courage to change.

As promised, I'm going to nerd out a little bit on the classic signs of being codependent in a relationship. There are many, many signs of codependency, so I'm going to focus on just a handful here. As I flesh out these ideas for you, I would encourage you to pause as needed if a particular experience rings true or familiar to you.

Instead of turning this podcast off and throwing your phone across the room, close your beautiful eyes, take a few deep breaths, and see if you can stay present to all of this information. It can be really challenging to face these things, to start to see these patterns of thinking and behaving that we were often taught so long ago in our lives.

Seeing all of this can be really challenging and I know that you have the power to do it so that you can begin to shift your life and to see your life changing to be one that brings you joy, peace, and in which you're living in your authenticity. At its core, codependency arises when one partner in a relationship is telling the story that they need the other person and that other person's acceptance is necessary for you to feel okay. And so the other person, the other partner in this dyad in turn may need to feel needed.

Codependency is more than clinginess or neediness. A codependent relationship is one in which one partner's self-esteem and sense of worth becomes so intertwined with their attempts at pleasing the other that their self becomes lost in the shuffle. This dynamic can create a cycle of dependency that can lead to abuse, and thus the other in a position of power.

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Often, the thought, if I then they, is the driver for someone to act in a codependent manner. And this plays out as, “If I just stay home tonight, even though I want to go out, then he’ll be happy I’m home.” Or, “If I buy the dress that she likes, even though I don’t love it, I don’t feel great in it, then she’ll compliment me and then I’ll feel great and then she’ll feel great and then maybe we won’t fight tonight.” Or, “If I move to Boston when I really want to take that position in Philly then he won’t feel abandoned by me.”

If you’ve listened to this show before, then you know where I stand on this kind of thought habit. It’s bound to bring you pain and disappointment because only our own thoughts can make us feel anything, no matter what someone else in our life does. That is he won’t necessarily feel happy that you stayed home just because you want him to feel happy. You won’t necessarily feel good in a dress you don’t like just because someone else likes it, and that person won’t feel happy or good about you being in that dress that you don’t like because you want them to feel happy about it. And he won’t necessarily feel supported and not abandoned if you don’t take the position in Philly you really want and stay close to home, unhappy that you’re there and not following your dreams.

You feel what you feel because you think it, and so do other people. Trying to manage other people’s minds for them never works out in the end, and attempting to do so is a recipe for unhappiness, especially when we abandon ourselves in the process. And this can often be seen when folks merge identities or get enmeshed, as it’s called in some corners.

In the case of merging identities, one or both partners in the relationship begin to lose themselves in the likes, dislikes, preferences, or opinions of the other to the point where the self is lost. Let’s not confuse this with developing a love of French cuisine after a partner introduces us to it or picking up jogging when we see how much our friend enjoys it.

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Rather, in a situation of codependent thinking and behavior, a previously autonomous self would define preferences, likes, and dislikes, loses their connection to those preferences and gives themselves over entirely to the preferences of another in order to attempt to keep the other person or satisfied, or, worst case scenario, to stave off abusive behavior.

In this situation, the codependent partner has given up their autonomy, the ability to self-direct what they like in favor of letting the other have control. For all sorts of humans, and particularly those raised as girls or those assigned female at birth, the message about pleasing others above all can be hard to ignore.

When we are told that our job is to keep others happy, we can fall into the trap of focusing so much on the happiness of others that we can back-burner or deny entirely the things that bring us joy and happiness or can come to accept things that, in reality, cause us harm and suffering, that leave us feeling separate from ourselves and our identities.

I remember one relationship I had in the very early 2000s when I was living in Boston. So I was living this new life, recently graduated college, in this grad program and I was going to the gym five or six times a week and felt amazing in my body. Exercise has long been my balm against depression and anxiety and I was really clued in with it.

The person I was dating kept criticizing this habit and said that they didn't think highly of – and this is a quote – “People who prioritize being a jock over the life of the mind.” And in that moment, I gave that thought, someone else's thought about me and my self-care, what was key to living, like, a good life or, I don't know, an intellectual life – I don't know, there was this air that this was the right thing to be doing. Sitting and reading was good and going to the gym meant you were some dummy.

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Looking back, it's a very strange paradigm indeed. But anyway, I gave that thought priority over my own desires. I so wanted this person to like me and approve of me, so I stopped doing a thing I loved and my mental and physical health suffered for it.

My thinking was codependent. I do what they want, they'll think well of me, and then they'll be happy and I won't be abandoned. This was completely unconscious, let me be very clear. I wasn't, like, consciously like, "Oh I'm going to stop going to the gym so this person will want to continue to date me."

All of this was so ingrained in me from my family of origin, I had no idea I was doing it and I was so focused on doing and being what I thought this person wanted me to be and do that I lose sight of my own desires. Eventually, I found myself having trouble making even the smallest decision because I wanted to make the right choice in their eyes and lost touch with my own thoughts about what I wanted for myself. I came to value their opinion of me over my own. I was neck-deep in codependent thinking and that relationship did not end well.

Let's take a quick body and breath check. Hearing these kinds of stories can be really activating and I want to continue to invite you to stay with me. So close your beautiful eyes, take a few deep breaths, and see what your mind and body tell you about the idea of merging identities. It may bring up a past or present relationship. It may bring up your family of origin, your childhood or something that you saw your parents or aunts or uncles or others doing around you.

Just notice. Give that part of you that may be activated, may be worked up some big old love, and when you're ready, put all that feeling on a cloud and let it go. Flutter open your beautiful eyes when you're ready. Alright, my love, stay with me.

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Another sign of codependency in a relationship is a narrowing of the support system of one or more of the partners in a relationship. For a codependent relationship to thrive, a partner needs to give themselves entirely to the other, to the point where individual autonomy gives way to full dependence on the other. This can literally mean not hanging out with your friends, family, or folks your partner doesn't like, usually because you're holding onto the thought that you can make that other person happy by not hanging out with, say, your college friends who they don't like.

An antidote to this habit, thought pattern, or tendency is to have and to stay connected with a broad network of support in the form of meaningful and positive friendships. Friends keep us connected to ourselves and can also keep us in check if they see us giving away our autonomy to another.

Now, we've all either known or been that person who disappears into a romantic relationship, especially at the beginning when things are new and there's so much to explore. In healthy relationships, this is a phase, and as the relationship grows in strength, it expands to include the friends and family of the partners involved.

When relationships stay closed, insular, that can be a sign of codependency, a sign that one partner needs to keep all of their opinions and influences out so that theirs can rule the day. There's a difference between not wanting to go out with friends on a given Wednesday and feeling prohibited from doing so, either because a partner has explicitly prohibited it, or because the dependent partner feels that they can't risk upsetting their person, even if only in their mind.

I recently worked with a client who was in a relationship with someone in active addiction. Her world had grown so narrow, in part because she felt like she had to take care of the addict in her life; words she often said to me.

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She would say things like, “If I go out, he might use and then he could have an accident. He could spend money he doesn’t have. He might do any number of unthinkable terrible things, so I have to stay home and make sure he’s taken care of.” She had come to see herself as someone who existed only to keep her addict above water, not as a self-directed or self-governing individual worthy of living life for herself.

Her self-esteem rested on how well she was tending to someone else’s needs. Similarly, the addict she was in a relationship with had come to believe that he could not function without his partner, so had given up on taking care of himself in certain ways, thus reinforcing this story that she needed to care-take him.

Over time, my client and I were able to work on building and rebuilding her friendships and balancing care for her partner with care for herself, paired with lots of thought work about the stories she was telling about her attempts to save another human from their own adult decisions, which is actually not possible.

Our thoughts create our feelings and we take action based on our feelings. Whatever her partner was thinking would lead to his actions. And her desire for him to think, feel, or act in a specific way was futile. He’s a grown up and his thoughts are his own, and thus his actions are his own responsibility. We get to let adults be adults, no matter what we want them to do. It was challenging work that started with my client’s awareness that she had fallen into codependent thought patterns, but she did not have to stay there.

Something that I mentioned at the top of this episode was the idea that when we strive for literally impossible things, like profound independence in relationships, we can end up in unhealthy places, like codependency. What I mean is that nature, our minds, bodies, and spirits holds enormous wisdom. And when we insist on going against our own natures, our natural pull to engage on others, to depend in a healthy autonomous way, on our

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friends and lovers, to remain autonomous and respect the autonomy and sovereignty of others, relationships can end up warped, like bent metal. And codependency is one form that warped relationships can take.

Again, for those of us raised as girls, the idea of independence can be a super complicated one. Girls and women are praised for helping others and supporting others and putting our partners, children, family's needs ahead of our own while being told simultaneously that independence is the gold standard for adulthood.

How do we make these two ideas work? Well, I'll say that we don't have to. We can think instead in terms of autonomy, of respecting our power to govern ourselves and manage our own minds as well as the powers that others have to govern themselves and manage their own minds.

Of course, we get to stay flexible in relationships. If you always insist that you choose the restaurant when you eat out with friends, you may end up dining alone more than you care for. But if you think about the core of your relationships as being built upon a foundation of mutual respect for autonomy, we can show up for one another confident in ourselves and ready to meet others where they are.

Another way to think of relationships built on mutually respectful autonomy is interdependence; the sort of relationship we see all the time in the natural world. Those bees need those flowers and those flowers need those bees, but that particular relationship, that interdependence, is not what defines the life of either partner because members of the relationship have other relationships too.

Fruit plants rely on insects to spread their pollen and animals to spread their seeds. Those animals in turn rely on the plants for food and don't mind a tasty insect treat when it comes along.

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When we as humans come together in interdependence, we acknowledge that, as pack animals, we really do need one another for survival. The difference here is that in interdependence, we see that we need one another in more general terms, as opposed to needing one and only one specific other human being who can and will meet our every need. No one can be your everything and it's not fair or loving to yourself or that person to expect them to be everything for you and to meet your every need or for you to meet theirs. That way of thinking can turn pathological.

By contrast, when I see my network of friends and loved ones as people upon whom I can depend and who can depend upon me for different things at different times, I situate myself in the center of a beautiful web of interdependence which provides a more broad and stable support system for me and for those in my orbit.

Holding onto the thought that my partner meet all of my needs puts far too much on them and leaves us both set up for disappointment, resentment, and frustration. Taking a broader view of what it means to depend on others opens me up to see what gifts others have to give and to share my gifts broadly too.

Let's take another pause to check in with our bodies. Eyes close, a few deep breaths, I'd like to call to mind once more that person around whom you feel most at ease. Breathe into it. Feel it in your body, how it feels to connect in with them. That feels beautiful. Thank them, give them some love, and let their image recede.

Now, think of someone in your life who makes you laugh. I'm thinking of my sister Eugenia, who is hilarious and she's that person I can just fully be like a 14-year-old with. Take a few deep breaths, feel it in your body, how it feels to connect with them, thank them, and let their image recede.



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Now, call to mind someone whom you can count on in an emergency. I'm thinking of my friend Suni. Man, that gal, if you need like a gal in your corner when things go sideways, she's it. She's always there. Take a few deep breaths. Feel it in your body, how it feels to connect with them, thank them, and let their image recede.

Now think of someone you miss and want to reconnect with. Take a few breaths, feel it in your body, allow yourself to connect with them in your own heart, in your own mind. Feel how it feels to connect with them and let their image recede. Take a few more deep breaths, and when you're ready, flutter open your beautiful eyes. My darling, just now, you've gotten back in touch with your own web of support and love, your own network of interdependence. How absolutely beautiful.

Codependency is a big topic with a lot to it. and my goal here was to shine a light on what it means to be codependent in our thinking in a relationship, and just as importantly, to reframe relationships in terms of interdependence and to think and feel, as we did just a moment ago, about all of the people in our lives who help us build a broad network of support so we can make sure to not put too much of ourselves into any one relationship.

I'll ask you to join me in one last little activities. Again, drivers, pull over, do this one later, or you can also just imagine this in your mind's eye and you'll likely find it quite powerful. So, I want to invite you to take your hands in front of you, interlace your fingers, and grasp them tightly, tightly, tightly together. See how tense that feels, like there's stress within your fingers?

Now, relax your grip and pull your fingers apart. Let them slide across each other until your fingertips are just touching. Doesn't that feel better? Less tense? More relaxed? Like your fingers are just gently connecting, respecting the orbit around each other and not grasping onto one another.

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This is another way of feeling in our bodies the difference between relationships that are enmeshed and relationships that are healthy and mutually supportive. We don't need to grip our partners with all of our might. We can rest on and with one another while still keeping our own identities intact.

Next week, we'll be diving further into the solution together, my angel, with some concrete actionable things you can do to help yourself release the habit of codependent thinking in your life and your relationships. I'll also be sharing an entire episode soon about how to manage your mind around other people and their moods, which is an issue with codependent tones for sure.

So make sure you're subscribed both to the podcast, which you can do on iTunes, or wherever you're listening to the show, and to my email list, so you can be the first to hear about special worksheets, PDFs, journaling prompts, and meditations that are just for podcast listeners. I'll put a link in the show notes for you, or just head on over to [victoriaalbina.com](http://victoriaalbina.com) to hop on my list. I serve up some pretty good email, so you're going to want to do that, my love.

So for now, my darling, your homework is my favorite one; awareness. Start to bring your awareness to times when you may be placing more importance on someone else's stated or imagined opinions, thoughts, or cares about your life than on your own, times when you're putting yourself last, when you're valuing someone else's approval of you more than your own, when you're having difficulty communicating or making decisions in a relationship, or when your mood feels reliant on someone else's mood, words, or behaviors.

No need to judge, just observe, make note, and bring yourself some extra love and attention when you feel yourself engaging in these thought, feeling, and action habits. They're just habits after all, and habits are

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infinitely changeable. You're on your healing path, my love, and you're doing great.

Awareness is always the very first step to change, so invite it in, even if it feels really scary. If you're looking for some more meditations like the ones we did today, to help you ground yourself, head on over to [victoriaalbina.com/bodyscan](http://victoriaalbina.com/bodyscan) to download my free short-form anxiety-reducing meditation track. And it's totally free and available for you to do every single day if you please. And it's free because I love you and your healing is so important.

Alright, my angel, that's it from me today. Thank you for tuning in. Thank you for subscribing to the show and getting on my email list. I don't want you to miss a thing. Remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Take care, my love, and I'll talk to you soon.

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.