

Ep #59: Understanding Your Desire to Control



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With Your Host

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Last week, we talked about uncertainty and how it's a fact of this human life. One that can be very challenging and eventually, liberating, even rewarding to accept. And as humans, we get to do the work of accepting this fact, that life is uncertain, in order to live our truest, most honest lives.

And to not shunt our beautiful nervous systems into sympathetic fight or flight energy every time something comes up that reminds us or shows us in technicolor the uncertainty of life. You know, like a global pandemic. Today, we'll be talking about control, the cousin of uncertainty thinking, and how this thought habit doesn't serve you, my darling one, but comes from a place of self-love nonetheless. Keep listening. It's going to be a good one.

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 well during this particularly challenging moment in our human existence. I've been thinking so much about myself before coaching and myself after. Me now. I used to be so sick in the physical sense. My belly was a mess, I just felt terrible most of the time, and I compounded that terrible feeling by calling it a terrible feeling and creating so much thought drama for myself about my symptoms.

And I've been thinking about this global symptom of fear, of worry, of concern. Listen, I'm not here for even a millisecond, particularly as someone who's a volunteer to potentially go work in the hospitals, which is

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something I haven't done in quite a while. I'll get to relearn how to intubate and start IVs and all of that stuff.

So trust that I'm not out here being like, everything's fine. Because if you've listened to this show, you know that's never my jam. Things are bananas out there. I'm in New York City. It's an intense time. The energy is so swirly and there's a lot.

And it really doesn't have to feel like a lot. Remember who's talking, for me to be saying that. It doesn't have to feel scary, worrisome, heavy. And I say this because I coach myself. And we need coaching as a planet, as a humanity, now more than ever, to learn to coach ourselves, to get coached, to be coaches, for my coach listeners. I see you out there.

And of course, I'm never out here saying that you should go out and share what you've learned in the podcast by coaching people without their consent, but rather, I'm saying I really want to encourage you, my love, to coach yourself on the daily.

It's been so interesting not just to look back at myself. I've spent some rather special time reading my own journals and looking at the drama that I loved creating in my life. But it's been really interesting not just to look at myself but to see the difference between my clients and my coaching colleagues who know how to manage their minds, who know about thought work and apply it, like, do it daily, and the people in my world who don't.

If you understand the thought work protocol we use in this family, you know that your thoughts lead to your feelings. And so you take action and create a result in your own life. And if you get this, and if you really practice applying it, then you're able to pause and to look at your individual thoughts that may be taking a challenging situation and turning it into a more stressful one.

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And through this process, you can learn to stop the cycle in its tracks. You have control over your own thoughts. And that is our theme for today. While you can't control the world, the thing you can control is so important to be conscious of. To have and hold at top of mind. And that, my darling, is you. Your own thoughts, feelings, actions, and results. That, you get to choose and that is such a beautiful gift, my love.

Yes, your perfect nervous system will react first to a perceived stressor. That's how brains and bodies work. And your nervous system will send chemical signals through your body to alert you to what it's perceiving. And when you feel those signals, when your awareness is such that you notice them, you experience them as your watcher, not as yourself panicking, that's when you get to step in, to pay attention, to give your body love, to pull back, take a breath, pause, center, orient, ground, write, and choose the next right thought.

Let's take a little breath and out. When we're talking about control and how vital it is to manage our minds, to do thought work, to get coached, I think of a client of mine I was talking to yesterday over Zoom, who was expressing anxiety about how other people are behaving right now. People going to the beach, the park, states that haven't gone into lockdown.

She was really upset. She wanted these other people to behave differently so she could feel differently. And that's where the stress comes in. Not because people are making choices, but because she is judging those choices, ruminating about them, and trying to control the uncontrollable. Strangers, governments, viruses.

She said things like, "I would just be able to calm down if everyone would just stay inside. I would just be able to feel safer if people would wash their hands more or not touch their faces or not go to the park." She had a belief

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that they should be doing things differently and she believes that her belief about other people's behavior is right.

And it was this desire to control other people that led to her unnecessary anxiety. Let's be real. I'm a huge fan of social distancing. I have a Master's degree in public health. Part of my licensing as a registered nurse is I'm also a registered public health nurse and a nurse practitioner. Stay home, people. I deeply believe in that.

But the difference between me and her in that I've coached myself about this a lot, I've gotten coached about it a lot, is that I understand that if everyone did social distancing the way I think is right, the way you think is right, our brains would still find something else to freak out about, to attempt to control.

So yeah, I want everyone to do it the way the WHO is telling you to do it. But I'm not spending an ounce of my energy wishing, wanting, attempting to control others or to complain about how they're not doing it right, which is in itself, the expression of a desire for control.

Now, I also want to be clear to say just because we're not attempting to control others doesn't mean we don't have a voice or we can't have opinions. So fight the power. If something's not working in your world, if something's off kilter, if something needs to change, call your representatives.

Write a protest letter for now until we can get back in the streets. For example, all my friends who are nurses and docs and work in the hospitals who don't have the personal protective equipment they need, this is an issue. And so I've been calling my representatives and calling the White House.

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I'm not saying to blindly accept oppressive systems of power. I'm saying that when you're spinning in your own thoughts about how things should be different, that is the action you're taking. Spinning in your own thoughts, attempting to control the uncontrollable.

We talked about this within the framework of worrying in episodes 43 and 44. When you're worrying, when you're complaining, when you're ruminating, when you're seeking to control people, places, and things, that's not just the thought you're having. It's what you're feeling, the desire to control, therefore out of control.

And thus, attempting to control is the action you're taking. Let that sink in. In the moment of attempting to control everything outside of yourself, that work, that attempt to control, that is the action you are taking. No social or personal good, no real change to dismantle capitalism, the patriarchy, all these systems that harm us all comes from spending your time trying to control what you simply can't, which is everything other than yourself.

Once you do your thought work and get clear on the change you want to work towards in the world, starting with yourself and your own habitual thoughts and feelings, then you can take action in a way that can have real and lasting impact in your life, your family, your community, the world, from an empowered place. Not an exhausted and burned out place.

And attempting to control the uncontrollable is simply exhausting. So this week, I want to talk about why we seek to disavow uncertainty and why we want things to feel certain, controllable in this life. And that reason is simple enough. When things feel scary or uncomfortable or different than usual or normal, when there is change or worry, it is human and normal and understandable to want to try to control the uncontrollable.

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And it doesn't serve you in any way. In fact, it just steals your energy, your life force, and in fact, will lead to things feeling even less in control. When the locus of control, when your sense of safety is based in other people and their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

It is worth acknowledging how particularly challenging it is for those of us who have lived with a sense of relative physical safety to all of a sudden not be able to control your own safety. And for those of us who have not lived with that privilege of feeling safe in our bodies, this is more of the same, but multiplied.

What feels unique about this situation, though I don't actually think it's completely unique, I mean, this moment feels more dangerous than two months ago, but if you think about it, every moment is uncertain. That's the whole point of last week's show. My abuela for example, was killed by a drunk driver on a sunny Sunday afternoon.

So physical safety is as illusory as certainty. And again, what's worth acknowledging is that the actions of others may indeed be putting - are indeed putting others at risk. For example, a coaching client of mine has breast cancer and is doing chemotherapy right now.

And she can do all the mask-wearing, hand washing, immune support she wants, to try and protect her compromised immune system. But she can't stop the COVID positive person in her building from deciding he won't quarantine, which is an upsetting and true story.

This guy has been diagnosed with COVID-19 and is actually sick. He's coughing and all the rest, and is walking around the building without a mask, without gloves. And I want to say I get it. This feels very different from the usual things we talk about when we talk about control and releasing it.

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Things like getting your partner to do chores. Totally feels different. And this person, this client of mine, she wants a sense of control right now because there is so much uncertainty. But it's also true that the stakes feel particularly high, and for our most vulnerable, they are. And holding that in one hand, we turn to her coaching.

We did our coaching work and she's been doing her self-coaching every day, and together, she has come to see that holding onto the desire to control this neighbor only upsets her and adds to her suffering. It doesn't change him or his behavior no matter how many times she, the building management, the Department of Public Health have pleaded with him.

He's going to do what he's going to do and that's that. So that's real. Let's take a breath, maybe shake it off a little, get back in your body. Okay, so this is the setting. This is where we are. I just wanted to say all of this because I want you to know that I'm a real person. I'm a real nurse. I'm a real-life coach. I get it.

I live here too and I'm not just on some cloud of perfect thinking, trying to tell you what to do as though I'm not affected. And attempting to control other people, places, or things in the world is a stress response. And this is a really vital thing for us to look at right now because so many of us are shooting the second arrow, which we talked about in episode 15, right into our own hearts.

Sometimes the first arrow. We're adding suffering to our suffering. And I want to support you to find a little relief right now. So I want to talk about where all of this comes from, as I love to do. Attempting to control other people, places, or things in the world is often a stress response and can be a trauma response for many of us.

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We seek to control others when we feel out of control. So if you don't know how to manage your mind with thought work and connecting with your body through breath work and the other tools I teach, it makes so much sense that you would be attempting to control right now and always.

The problem with attempting to control people, places, and things in the world is simple. And yes, it's really annoying to deal with it so we shan't BS ourselves here, my darling one. The problem is in the facts. You cannot control anything in this beautiful and uncertain life but your own mind.

Everything else in this world, whether your spouse washes their hands, whether your kid eats their broccoli, whether someone respects your boundaries, whether there is a pandemic, whether you get a raise or lose your job, everything in this world other than you and your own think-feel-act cycle is beyond your human control. And I do mean everything; literally everything.

And listen, I used to be wildly codependent in my thinking. And I get it. I too have often wanted to control the world; what other people did and said, how people reacted to me and my work, my words, if I got enough likes or follows, as if enough were a thing, how someone reacted and responded to my doing something for them, especially if it was something they didn't ask me to do and I wanted them to respond in a certain and specific way and to think something certain and specific about my, mostly that I'm amazing and therefore worthy of love.

I really could go on and on here. This thought habit was a part of my unconscious for my whole life, from childhood. Until I learned how to be my own watcher, which we talked about way back in episode three, and to start to see this habit for what it is; a thought choice that doesn't serve me anymore, but served my child self, and thus my inner child, so much.

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Other examples of attempting to control other people that I see all the time in my life coaching clients and the people I love are things like what I kid or partner eats or doesn't. Such as, "I can't believe my partner is eating chips again. I just want him to eat some vegetables." Giving advice or opinions without emotional consent, which we talked about in a slightly different framework in episodes 27 and 28. And here, might sound like, "Have you ever considered doing X, Y, Z in this way," where this way is the way you think it should be done, regardless of whether the other person wants it to be done that way, or even asked for your opinion.

This can often look like telling someone how they should be doing anything at all, "You should go to sleep earlier. You should take this supplement. You should call him. Oh my gosh, you shouldn't call her." If you found yourself about to should on yourself or others, that's an attempt to control, my darling one. Slowly step away from the shoulds.

It could also look like making a suggestion or asking a question repeatedly when you've already gotten a clear answer. This is also known as insisting and is a hallmark characteristic of codependent thinking, and codependent thinking and control, they are siblings for sure. And this can sound like, "Are you sure you don't want to come shelter-in-place with us," when the other person clearly said, "No thank you," already.

I used to do this one a lot around food. In my culture, it's normal to ask visitors and guests if they'd like to eat something or they want something to drink. And before doing my own healing work, I always felt obliged to say yes, because I didn't want to offend the other person because I didn't realize that isn't something I can control. And so, I chose being polite over my truth.

And when other people didn't do the same, I felt so uncomfortable, like they were breaking some unspoken rule of the polite universe. Not knowing how

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to manage that discomfort, I would insist, like 473 times, “Are you sure you don’t want water? Tea? A steak?” And eventually, people would get worn down and would let me caretaker them, but wow, how exhausting for us both. How not aligned with love.

For me, this desire to control the world came from several different survival impulses from childhood, which is where so much of our thinking comes from; the scripts that we learned in childhood or young adulthood or elsewhere along the way and practiced thinking over and over again until those thoughts felt like facts. Until they became beliefs in our mind, bodies, and spirit, our thought happens.

And as always, I’ll remind you, as I continue to discuss this topic, you may see a mirror of yourself, a reflection of behavior and thoughts you’ve had or have, and in that, be gentle and loving and kind with yourself. Your brain took these thoughts and feeling habits on to try to protect you. And that is such a gift.

So, please, be gentle, my darling one. On that note, I want to bring codependency in again here, which is when we base our sense of safety, wellness, and general okay-ness on someone else’s emotional state, on their energy, on their choices. One person may get overly dependent on the other to meet their needs, while the other may show up with an exaggerated sense of or need to caretaker the other.

Rules can be set or can shift, even flip-flop and reverse. The thing is, codependency at its core is an attempt to control the situations or people in our lives to attempt to feel safe because we’ve linked safety and control in our brains. Both roles in a codependent scenario involve control. One person may be expressing a lot of needs, which may be an attempt to control the other person who, historically, will want to meet those needs. While the person with the thought habit of caretaking others above

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themselves will attempt to control through the dependency this other person has on them.

This cycle just repeats and repeats and repeats. Control squared. Note, of course, that someone can try to get codependent with you and, if you've recognized this habit in yourself and can see it in others, you've learned to manage your mind around it, you can just not take the bait. Totally, totally possible. So, it isn't always that both people are engaging in this thought habit of control and codependency, just to be clear.

So, I want to teach you a really vital lesson. And this is the difference between true control and false control. True control is the control you have over yourself; everything we've been talking about so far. Your think-feel-act cycle, your decisions, your outcomes or results from the thoughts you're thinking, and all that they generate for you.

From true control, self-control, you respond. You don't react. You are aligned with your own integrity and act from it, regardless of what someone else wants or needs or what you think or project them to want or need.

When you're skilled at managing your own mind, your choices are less likely to be about attempting to feel and control because you know you are in control of yourself. False control is when you act so that you can feel in control of what others do, think, say, how they act. Again, with this thought that if other people act differently, you will feel differently, which is just not true.

Your thoughts create your feelings always. And if someone changes their behavior, if everyone washes their hands and literally never leaves the house, if someone stops acting in a codependent way or whatever else your brain is judging, your brain will find something else to freak out about

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and to seek to control until you learn to intercede lovingly on your own behalf for your own good.

Feeling in control of others is so alluring and it's a type of buffering. So, buffering we talked about, again, way back in episode 14, and it's such a central core teaching. I do hope, after you listen to this episode, you'll go back and listen to that one. I'll also share that episode 49, which is about getting comfortable with being wrong, could be really helpful here because false control is wrong thinking.

So, nerd alert, buffering gives you a wee dopamine hit, which, like anything else that gives you a dopamine hit, dopamine feels amazing. And it makes you want to do it again and again and again. And because people who are used to being controlled may feel most comfortable when they're being controlled, in that really strange interesting way of brains that the familiar feels comfortable, even when it's so uncomfortable, you can get into a sort of feedback loop.

You tell someone what to do, they do it, you feel the power and false safety and false control, you get your dopamine hit, the other person feels it too, they get their dopamine hit, and so the cycle continues feeding on itself. And this, trying to control other humans can strengthen the mental muscle, the thought habit of codependency, the thought habit of tying your emotional wellness to other people's wellness, your feelings to theirs.

And your emotional reactions are thus ruled and externally controlled by someone else's expression of their thoughts and feelings. And so, you seek to control others to attempt to control your own reality, often to prevent yourself from feeling a feeling that you may be scared of or are worried may be overwhelming.

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And, so the thought habit goes, if other people just do what you want the way you want, then you can feel safe. See how out of control that thought is? The irony is sort of fascinating here.

Alright, my babies, I haven't given you a good nerd alert in at least 20 minutes, so, are you ready? As you can imagine, if you are a long-term listener, the moment of getting revved up inside about attempting to control someone else – you guessed it, you knew it – sends your body into sympathetic activation; fight or flight.

You get a jolt of adrenaline from your dear perfect little adrenal glands, these little walnut-sized glands that sit ad-renally, on top of your renals or your kidneys, so they're in your back, kind of in the middle of your back. You can pet them and give them a little love.

So, as you seek to manage someone else's thoughts, feelings, or actions, you get that adrenaline hit and that dopamine hit. And those kind of acute reaction chemicals spike fast and drop fast, like sugar in your bloodstream.

And so, once again, you want another hit, and another hit. And if the other person doesn't comply with your attempts to control, you may feel shame or anger or a host of other exhausting feelings. And you may find yourself either like a dog with a bone, wearing someone down while your bloodstream fills with cortisol, or you turn all of that shame, that guilt. That anger inward, making yourself feel bad for trying to make someone else feel something, or feeling worse and worse if they won't comply.

Eventually, you may reach that level of nervous system exhaustion where you go down the polyvagal ladder, which means you go from being all activated and revved up in sympathetic fight or flight, right past the second place. So, picture a ladder, at the top of it is sympathetic, the middle is

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ventral vagal, that's where we dream of spending most of our time, that's the safe and social part, into dorsal vagal collapse.

So, dorsal vagal collapse is the bottom of the ladder. And you may find yourself there, withdrawing, sulking, feeling rejected and dejected because you're in that shutdown energy. That shutdown is racing through your body. And because that energy can feel awful, you might then rev yourself back up by calling someone to complain about how Mike won't take your reasonable advice or how Sarah just won't stop going outside and how angry you are about it, even though she lives clear across the country and you literally couldn't control her if you tried.

And so, as you go into this revved up sympathetic place and then crash right through ventral vagal, safe and secure, feeling okay, digesting, making thyroid hormone, having the kind of brain chemistry we want, your body shunts right through that into that dorsal vagal collapse and you feel even further out of touch with yourself and your own feelings.

Again, if they're happy, you're happy. If they're angry, you're angry. Or if they're angry, you may blame or shame yourself. You may make it all your fault and beat yourself up about their choices. Because, if you believe you can control everything, then there's a belief that your worry, your words of concern and control can keep everyone happy, healthy, and safe, and that nothing bad will happen if folks just listen to you. And if you believe this, then the inverse must be true.

See what a ticking timebomb of pain and suffering this habit of attempting to control others is? So, my love, check in with your body. Are your shoulders somewhere up north towards your ears? That is a normal, natural, mammalian defense posture.

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Check your jaw for tightness; your neck too. Maybe it's in your belly or your back. Look at your fists. Are your hands balled up? When something touches close to home, it is normal to go into a defensive posture because your body thinks you need to defend yourself against a truth that may hurt a bit.

My love, take a breath in. It's okay to relax your body. It's okay. You're safe to do so. Listen, it's all just more information, more lessons, more learnings. And it's not bad or wrong that if you've been doing this, if having these kind of controlling thoughts has been your habit. I want to remind you to be gentle and kind and loving with yourself.

You might learn this habit from someone, from situations, from your childhood. Maybe you were raised by folks with codependency, substance use or abuse, narcissists, or by someone really demanding or by some other kind of wounded child in an adult and parent-shaped body. And so, your brilliant child self learned the habit of controlling in an attempt to soothe you when the world felt unsafe.

My darling, that was brilliant of you. Take a moment. and I really mean this. I'm being really, really earnest, like, I'm for realsies. I want you to applaud your child self, your younger self. What a little genius to develop this habit. Praise little you. Give yourself a hug and I really mean, if you can, wherever you're listening, put your right hand on your left shoulder or your left arm, left hand on your right, and squeeze and hug yourself. Give yourself that somatic mind-body connection, and thank you. Maybe do it right now. Why not?

Given that we're all – or most of us, I shouldn't say all, I don't know what you've been up to, but so many of us – are in information saturation these days, I'm going to pause here to give you some space to breathe, to bring your awareness to your own desire to attempt to engage in false control.

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Please, spend this week paying keen and loving attention to when this habit surfaces. And make sure that you write it down. Also, make sure you're subscribed to the show so it downloads right to your phone next week when episode 60 drops. Therein, I'll be sharing the antidote, the remedy to this thought habit.

And remember, ingrained habits take time, love, gentleness, and care to shift; time at task, practice. And, there are few things as important right now as coaching, as learning to manage your mind while fear and worry, uncertainty, and insecurity swirl in the collective all around us. You really can feel calmer, more grounded, and more secure. Coaching is the way through.

I deeply believe it, as a scientist, as a nurse practitioner, as a total nerd for this kind of healing, and of course, as a life coach. I know, in a lot of detail, about how stress affects our physiology, our nervous systems, our immune systems, our capacity to thrive physically, physiologically as well as psychologically and spiritually in this world.

And so, when we're talking about wellness, when we're talking about health at large, coaching has been one of the most vital parts of my own physical healing. I would still have wicked IBS and heartburn and depression anxiety without coaching, for sure. So, I cannot recommend it more.

Oh, I learned an interesting thing today. Secretory IgA, which is a way to measure part of the immune system within the gut, understanding that the gut houses about 70% to 80% of your immune system, secretory IgA can be tanked pretty quickly by stress. I found that very fascinating. And it's just further evidence of the power of coaching to heal your life.

If you are feeling particularly activated, anxious, stressed, worried, or if you're feeling the weight of our global grief right now, know that you are not

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alone. Follow me on social media @victoriaalbinawellness – I'm posting a lot and will be doing lives and webinars and am hosting free breathwork as often as my own bandwidth allows.

I also have some exercises that you can do in the comfort of your own home to help you to orient and ground into yourself, which are really important things to practice doing right now, especially if your trauma history makes things like breathwork or feeling your feeling feel particularly challenging.

If that's you, start with orienting and grounding. And because I love you, I made you some copies. I made you a little download, my little mixtape, just for you. Head to victoriaalbina.com/freemeditations and I'll put a link in the show notes so you can download it all.

And because coaching is more necessary than ever right now, I'll be launching my six-month course as promised in May. And I have room for one more one on one life coaching client before then. If you're interested in coaching, head on over to victoriaalbina.com to sign up for a consult for one on one work and drop me an email to podcast@victoriaalbina.com if you want to learn more about my upcoming six-month online group coaching masterclass. It's going to be so good; weekly journaling, lessons, meditations, a group Slack. I'm so excited about it.

Okay, my darling, let's take a breath together, like we do, in through the nose... and out. Thank you for listening. Remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved, and when one of us heals, we help the world. Be well, my love. 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 to learn more.