

Ep #139: Top 5 Codependent Dating Challenges



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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This is *Feminist Wellness*, and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, and Life Coach, Victoria Albina. I'll show you how to get unstuck, drop the anxiety, perfectionism, and codependency so you can live from your beautiful heart. Welcome my love, let's get started.

Hello, hello my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. I am feeling much better this week. I had a little cold the other week. Some allergies, which I haven't had, frankly, since healing my gut. My allergies were a big thing when my gut was a hot mess, which makes science.

And since healing my gut, it's felt so much better. But you know, I moved a couple months ago and have been working in my garden a lot so I've had my nose very close to the dirt and the mulch and the everything. And you know, life, things shift, microbiomes shift.

And I had some allergies for the first time and it was very confusing. I was like, this is a strange cold with the sneezing and the itchy eyes. And then I was like, oh, it's definitely a cold but also allergies. So thank goodness I figured that one out and took a bunch of cortisone and stinging nettles and I'm feeling much, much, much better. And I hope things are going well in your life as we head into the autumn, which is such a beautiful time of year.

One of the things I've been thinking about a lot is relationships. I'm dating some wonderful new people and I'm really just loving being out there in the world and dating. And I want to talk about it because one of the biggest challenges we face from our codependent thinking is our relationships. And I mean all of them.

Friend relationships, romantic, familial, work relationships, and of course, our relationship with ourselves. And particularly, our most intimate relationships, our romantic ones are where our codependent thought habits really show up because codependent thinking is a relationship issue.

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It's about how we relate to ourselves and the world around us, and so I'm excited to dive in. I've been thinking a lot about the mistakes, the challenges, the things that happen that keep us from showing up in relationship from our full selves, from our full open heart. And the thought habits, the patterns that keep us trapped in our codependency.

So we need to rewind. Because for most of us, this habit of codependent thinking and people pleasing began at some point in our childhood, or our teen years, where we learned the lesson that we are not worthy of love just as we are.

So wise childrens that we were, we set about attending to prove our worth, value, and lovability to everyone. Most often, starting with our family of origin. But as we get into adulthood, if we haven't learned how to see these patterns and heal them, we start to do the same thing in our romantic relationships.

From the place of not believing in our inherent value as mammals, we seek to prove our worth, value, and lovability instead of just knowing that we were born exquisite, amazing, and perfect. In this process, we learned not to trust ourselves and instead, to trust someone else's opinion of us over our own.

Often, creating a lifetime of people pleasing from our insecure attachment. Some scholars in relationship science suggest that we spend a lifetime trying to heal our childhood attachment wounds through dating and romantic relationships.

When the wound within us is I am not worthy, when we didn't feel worthy, seen, or attuned to in the eyes of our parental attachment figures, whomever our caretakers were, doesn't have to be bio parents at all, then

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as adults, our inner children are often driving the bus emotionally, particularly in relationships seeking constant external validation.

And so when we seek that approval, love, and care wherever we can get it, at work, through material wealth and prestige, through codependent attachment to our friends, we also tend to seek it through our most intimate connection. Our dating, sexual, and romantic relationships.

And so I think it's really important that we pause and start to pull this apart so that we can stop repeating these same painful patterns that strengthen those neural grooves in our minds that say, "I need to earn love to be able to get love."

And instead, we can start to replace that old thought, that painful, painful old thought with, "I was born worthy. I am inherently lovable. I am growing, shifting, and changing, and I can love myself exactly as I am and can take of myself in real ways, in all of my relationships. I don't have to look outside of me to know that I'm magical."

So my beauty, let's go over five of the biggest issues or challenges for us, those of us with our codependent thinking habits in dating or romantic love and sex relationships. And remember, these habits can show up in all of our relationships, not just romantic ones.

So if you're asexual, not in a relationship, not looking to be in a relationship, this all can apply to you too, my darling. So the first is insecure attachment, and we spoke about this in episodes 129 and 130, which provided a primer on attachment theory.

So I didn't realize my own insecure attachment until maybe a decade ago. And it was life-changing to see how I was showing up in relationships either clinging from my anxious attachment, or pushing away vulnerability, I'm fine

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thank you. And not fully receiving love. Having blocks against that from my avoidant attachment.

If you recognize codependent thinking as a habit yours, I'll encourage you to learn more about attachment theory so that you can start to shift towards more secure attachment in every area of your life. And yes, I'll be talking more about attachment in episodes and webinars to come because it's a central core issue for us with our codependent thought habits.

Second is chameleoning, a.k.a losing yourself, or maybe better said, giving yourself away and attempting to become someone you're not to try to please. From our codependent thinking, we believe we need to be everything to everyone. We believe that it is our job to keep everyone happy with us, and to keep everyone happy in general.

And so we become these masterful manipulators without realizing it and we learn how to scan a room or a date or a friend to try to read their mind, to assess what everyone else wants and what we want them to want, and we attempt to give it to them, whether they actually want it or not.

This often looks like hypervigilance, which is part of the sympathetic nervous system, an over-activation there in fight or flight. We get habituated to scanning the world for danger and learn to chameleon, to try to get ahead of any potential danger by being different than we are.

By code switching, by being strategically inauthentic. While this was a brilliant strategy for us as children and our families of origin, when we continue to chameleon as adults to try to get other people to like the false self we present to them, we move further and further away from living an authentic and intentional life.

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And this once brilliant protective habit is part of why I hear my clients say all the time in Anchored, my six-month program, that they don't even know what they want. They don't even know what they like. They don't even know what their own needs are because they are so focused, they've been so focused for a lifetime on filling everyone else's wants, likes, and needs instead of their own.

They're just so used to going along to get along, to people pleasing, and shape-shifting that their true desires are just a blur. An example of chameleoning from my life is from when I was around 22 and I was living in Boston and had just started moving my body in a self-loving way that felt so good after a lifetime of diet culture, body dysmorphia, and disordered eating in relationship to food.

At the same time, I was dating Jack, a PhD student who was living a life of the mind. It was really early on in our dating and I was so into her and I wanted her to like me. And I remember we were talking about our lives and what we were into, and I told her I was going to the gym every day and was loving it.

And immediately, she was like, "Ew, you're not some kind of jock are you?" And she gave me this very displeased look, like questioning if I was someone she could hang out with because I exercised while she sat around reading poetry. And I remember - I'm having a somatic, visceral, my belly's flipping, it feels all rumbly and hot.

I felt shame. And remember, guilt is I did something wrong, and shame is I am wrong, me, my being, as an animal, I am wrong, bad, and unlovable. And I felt shame in that moment.

I was so insecure in who I was, so wrapped up in my codependent and people-pleasing chameleon thinking, and I so wanted her to keep seeing

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me the way I wanted her to see me, so that she could continue to choose me. So I took her opinion as gospel and I stopped working out.

It's so wild to say that out loud. I stopped working out. I was doing this thing that felt so good for me, but in doing so I ran the risk of someone else not liking me, not approving of me. And I wanted to be who she wanted me to be so I could continue to live in the illusion that this relationship would make me feel safe, would make me feel wanted.

And in that moment, I craved that. That sense of being wanted, even for a false self, right? More than I wanted to live as my authentic self. So I chameleoned because it was the only skill I had in that moment to soothe my ramped up nervous system that wanted me to be chosen. And thus, to feel safe.

It's wild to think about it literally 20 years later. Ouch, right? That was ouchie. And you know what, I'm so grateful that I get to say I won't be doing that again. I won't be self-abandoning in that way in an attempt to take care of myself, through attempting to keep someone else pleased with me. No thank you, I'm not available for it.

And that brings us to number three, people pleasing. So in chameleoning, we changing who we present ourselves as. In people pleasing, we change our behavior. We do and say things that we don't want to do and say. We go along to get along in an attempt to keep other people happy based on what we believe they want.

This is at the heart of codependent relationships. Meanwhile, in interdependent relationships, your partner wants you to want what you want and wants to hear what you want. They want to hear that from you and vice versa.

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Conflict isn't a problem because you trust one another to find the loving middle ground between your wants, to flow with each other, to honor and respect and care for each other, and never to people please or fake it because interdependence is based on radical honesty, which often means not people pleasing the people we love because we recognize that owning our truth is always a kind choice. Right, my tender ravioli?

From people pleasing, life looks like this. It's Friday night and your date wants to watch a movie you don't want to watch. But you say, "Sure, okay," while grumbling on the inside. So your inner children start on in. Ugh, I never get to do what I want to do, it's always their way, guess my opinions don't matter, I have to keep them happy or I'm unsafe, but I really don't want to watch this stupid movie again.

And so of course, resentment builds up inside you. A date wants to go to a restaurant that you don't want to go to, and you say sure, while annoyance builds up inside you. You continue to people please and eat food that you know will give you a belly ache, but you prefer suffering in silence, suffering within yourself to potentially not pleasing them.

A date wants to have sex and you're not ready, not interested, not available, but sure, you say. So you go along so they won't lose interest while self-abandonment and anxiety builds inside you. A person you've been seeing for a few months wants to be monogamous, and you don't want to. you're not ready or you're into being in an open relationship, non-monogamous, poly, but they really want to be your one and only.

So you say sure, while self-trust dwindles inside you as you put others and their needs ahead of you time and again. Chronic people pleasing keeps us in the codependent habit of valuing other people's wants, needs, joy, more than our own. Being nice instead of being kind.

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We come to believe that our wants and desires don't matter, which follows logically from believing that you don't matter. This continues to convince us that we don't matter, which keeps us feeling trapped in cycles of chronic people pleasing, keeps our relationships shallow, which is both an avoidant and anxious attachment technique. And it keeps us swirling in resentment.

When resentment was modeled for us in childhood, as it was for me, it becomes normalized. As someone who doesn't really experience resentment anymore, life is so much better. I don't make other people's thoughts, feelings, and actions about me the way I used to. Instead, these days, I am anchored in myself and have an embodied sense of self and self-trust.

These days, I let others make their decisions and I make mine. I set boundaries and I know my boundaries are not about them but about me taking care of me. And when others set boundaries, I recognize that their boundaries aren't about me either.

And now, and this is new in the last decade for sure, when someone crosses my boundaries, I speak up. Because people pleasing by staying silent and seething just doesn't work for me anymore. Goodness knows it was my go-to for ages.

Four, staying in a shitty situation. Oh goodness me, do I know this one. So I stayed in an emotionally abusive and manipulative relationship for many, many years, which is a complicated topic and it is something I'll be talking about more in future shows.

I just wanted to name it, to acknowledge how easy it is to stay in a shitty situation, even though it feels like crap most of the time. And I want to talk about this and to name some reasons why we stay without shame, guilt, or blaming.

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So we're not doing any of that, okay, my love? None of that. So there are so many reasons why we stay in situations that are just shitty. And I don't just mean those that reach the threshold of being called abusive. We tend to stay in relationships and connections that are just not good for us.

Romantic ones, family relationships, jobs, relationships that feel more ugh than yay. Ones where we're doing all the growing and changing and we aren't being met, where we're doing all the emotional and other labor and aren't being met.

And some common reasons, of course this will be all inclusive, but some that came to me include we don't value ourselves. And again, not victim blaming, just saying it because it's true. It sure was for me. We don't believe that we can have good things, real love, to be really seen and cherished and cared for, to be treated well.

So we take the crumbs, the scraps, the person who says, "I want to date you," instead of asking ourselves if we really want to date them. We don't value ourselves enough to realize that we deserve better than a relationship where there's constant fighting, name calling, boundary violations, negation of our feelings, lousy communication, a lack of sex or intimacy, where we aren't being loved and met the way we want and need to be.

Where we are doing most of the labor, domestic, emotional, on and on. We just continue to put up with it because we learned to be really good at swimming in dramatic high seas, in living in chaos, in being unhappy or not having joy.

That's all gotten so normalized that we just keep on keeping on and don't pause to say I matter enough to me to leave a relationship that isn't

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working for me. I trust me that I've put in the work, that I am showing up from unconditional love and care, and this just isn't working.

We often don't trust our intuition or discernment enough to acknowledge in a real way when something just isn't right. So we stay in it instead of risking being wrong and making a mistake and leaving something, even if that something is making us miserable.

And it's also really important to name that we may not be able to see the shittiness for what it is because there can often be gaslighting that goes along with a challenging situation. There absolutely was in the emotionally abusive relationship I was in. And I'm slowly working on a show about gaslighting. It's still a tender thing for me, so my nervous system is asking me to go slowly with it and I am.

But in short, gaslighting is when someone convinces you that reality is not reality, that you're not sane, and that what you think and know is real is just not. And when there's gaslighting in a relationship, we get convinced that there either isn't a problem or that we alone are the problem. And so we stay because why would we leave if we are the problem?

So if there's gaslighting in your relationship, give yourself a little extra love. It's really challenging when that's going on to see the reality of what's in front of you and to take action steps to leave.

Another reason we stay is the sunk cost effect. So when you've invested so much time and energy in a relationship, you've sunk all this time into it. Years, often. Often, you've gone to couples therapy, you've read all the books, you've done all the work, and you don't want to leave because you've sunk so much into it already, right?

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Next is the fear of being alone or believing that there couldn't be anything better out there for you, and I hear that one a lot. Having low standards for yourself and how you deserve to be treated, which can go along with gaslighting or not. It can also be part of your own story coming into the relationship and it's important to bring your attention to.

We also stay for sure for structural reasons. Economic reasons, social reasons, religious reasons, fear of violence for leaving someone abusive or unkind, fear of losing community, fear of losing our health insurance. All of these things are real in late stage capitalism.

We stay because of people pleasing. We don't want to disappoint others, which can sound like, "Our parents would be so upset if we split," or, "What about the kids?" We stay because we fear failure. We fear how we will be unkind to ourselves if yet another relationship fails. We fear that other people will see our leaving a relationship, getting a divorce, striking out on our own, as a failure on our part.

We stay because we fear change and uncertainty, and even when what we have is unfulfilling or really lousy, there's a part of us that feels safer staying in the thing we know versus risking the unknown.

And finally, we stay when there's narcissistic abuse. As a clinician, I want to say while Instagram makes it sound like everyone and your mother is a for reals diagnosable narcissist, it's actually a very small percentage of the population that truly has narcissistic personality disorder.

And it is worth bringing up because some degree of narcissistic traits are more common in the population than actual disorder, and super worth noting because codependent habits and narcissism often go together. And this makes sense because as codependent thinkers, we want to focus all of

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our attention, our love, our service, our care, our whole lives on someone else, someone other than us.

And folks with narcissistic habits, narcissistic tendencies or traits want attention. And so the narcissistic habit-haver will play all kinds of mind games to keep you locked in, while our codependent thought habits frankly mean that we're all about it in so many ways. So worth noting, worth checking out, talking to your therapist about.

Next, not seeing red flags, settling, ignoring your intuition because having someone say I choose you is more important than you choosing them. So my darlings, let's be real. When someone picks you, it feels amazing, especially when you've not felt chosen in life by your family of origin, because you're from a marginalized community, because you're queer or trans, because you're the weird immigrant kid who brings Milanese and other Argentine food to lunch in elementary school at Rhode Island.

Who else is raising their hand? Just me? Okay, cool. Maybe my sister. So being chosen feels amazing, especially when it's novel. And remember, when you feel chosen, you get a dopamine hit. And it's an anticipatory hit, which is really interesting.

So every date, every text from a date becomes an opportunity to get that hit of delicious, amazing dopamine and validation, even if you're not really into the other person. That dopamine hit makes your brain say yay, I am worthy of love for 90 seconds.

And those feelings can override our connection with our intuition and our discernment, can override that quiet voice inside that maybe doubts the connection. That maybe isn't all that into the person you're dating, that voice that's trying to tell you to slow your roll, to not get all anxiously revved up and dive into something feet first, like we talked about in episode 130.

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That quiet voice gets steamrolled by that part that wants the dopamine hit, that part that just wants to feel loved and chosen. My darlings, I totally get it. It's totally understandable. And my beauty, it does not serve you. It's another way that we stay out of our intentionality and it never ends well to be in a relationship because the other person chose you when you're not actively choosing you. And when you're not actively choosing them either.

Finally, the fifth codependent dating challenge I see showing up in my own life and those of my clients in Anchored is not choosing yourself. And instead, choosing the false comfort of a relationship versus intimacy with yourself, a.k.a not being comfortable being alone with you.

Until you learn how to be alone with yourself, it's challenging. I get that. I remember those days of deciding not to distract myself and to just sit with my thoughts. And my goodness, we will buffer against being alone with anything we can get our hands on.

Alcohol, cannabis, sex, TV, exercise, overthinking, anything rather than learning to sit in the discomfort of being alone with ourselves and our thoughts and our feels. And when our minds believe that we are safer with someone else than alone in a relationship, whether it's a healthy one or not, then we will bounce from relationship to relationship in an attempt to feel safe in the world rather than pausing and experiencing being alone and learning how to get comfortable by ourselves.

Because the thing is if we're alone, then we have to learn how to validate ourselves by ourselves, versus looking to someone or something outside of us to do that validating for us. And it's admittedly scary at first and I'll testify that it gets easier, it gets much more pleasant. And these days, I look forward to my alone time because I know how to be intimate with me, how to hold me in love and positive regard and frankly, I really like my own company now.

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I'll also testify that being with someone in a relationship built on a desire to attempt to escape yourself does not feel good in the long run. And listen, let's throw the patriarchy under the bus. We're sold this story that we need someone else to complete us. It's part and parcel of the patriarchy. We need some prince charming to save us, to make us feel whole, and it's just BS.

Dating or being in a relationship from that place is asking someone to do work that they have no business doing. Strengthening our codependent reliance on others to make us feel safe instead of learning how to do it for ourselves. And then looking to others to interdependently coregulate with us.

And it's important to say that if you're in a relationship, you don't have to leave to practice being alone with yourself. This is a skill you can cultivate in the moments you do have to yourself. To learn to breathe, to check in with yourself, to get to know yourself, to build intimacy with yourself, whether you're single, dating, or have been married for decades.

It's vital for your own mental wellness and for all of your relationships. So let's talk about the remedies, my darling. Well, we're going to start where we love to start, which is with awareness. Whether you're in a relationship or not, raising your awareness about these habits and how they've shown up in your past or your present is so key.

So you can start to get real with yourself about how codependent thinking may be part of your mental landscape. Next is learning to be okay being alone. If you're in a committed relationship you don't want to leave, you don't have to put your spouse on the Titanic and walk away. But ask yourself, how do you handle being alone when your date or your partner is not around?

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Are you carving out space even a few minutes a day to journal, to do thought work, to breathe, to do somatic practices, to really be with yourself and your thoughts and your feelings, to acknowledge them, work with them, look at them, to move your body and connect inward not for the sake of weight loss but for the sake of connection?

Do you buffer or can you sit quietly with you? Have you given meditation or mindfulness practices a fair shake? Or just written it off as not for you because it's challenging and uncomfortable? And it's seriously challenging and uncomfortable at first.

Next, learn what you actually want and practice saying that out loud. Start small. Please start small. We talked about this in episode 78 about the minimum baseline. Ask yourself throughout your day what you want, and listen in not just to your mind, where your people-pleasing habits, your socialization, your conditioning from the patriarchy and white settler colonialist frameworks and thoughts, those things live in your mind.

So I want to invite you to listen to your body where your intuition lives. I'll also invite you to start small with the quotidian bullshit that doesn't get your nervous system activated. So don't start learning what you actually want by asking yourself, do I want to stay in my marriage?

Baby please, slow it down. I recommend starting with beverages. Because it's unlikely to get your nervous system activated. So when you wake up in the morning, ask your body, do I want coffee, tea, water, mate this morning? It's so simple. Most of us don't pause to check in.

Before you order or make your typical lunch, pause. Do I want egg salad or do I want a Reuben? Do I want a salad or a burrito? Body, what do you want? Another favorite of mine is first thing in the morning, ask your body,

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do I want to open social media and spend 30 minutes doom scrolling, or do I want to stretch first?

And what matters here isn't the answer. What matters here is listening in for the answer. And I want to implore you to try not to judge what you hear. To try not to judge your body for wanting what it wants, but rather to practice accepting and honoring you. Your wants and your needs.

Which brings us to learning to trust yourself and to tune into your intuition, which sounds like honoring and believing what you hear when you ask yourself what you want and need. Remember, the voice of your intuition is calm and quiet. And yes, a full episode on that is coming so soon.

I also highly recommend reality testing with friends. And this can be really helpful early in a relationship. This is a lesson from the relationship experts, Helen and Harville Hendrix who remind us that it takes a bare minimum of three months, but also kind of two years to really know someone.

In that time, especially if you know you have insecure attachment habits and are working on becoming more secure, I want to invite you to introduce new dates to your trusted people and to let your people know that you would truly like their opinion on this person and the dynamic between them.

Ask if they see any red flags or have any concerns. Make sure of course that these are people you trust and whose opinion you actually value before you ask them to give you their opinion. It's okay to get outside counsel while you're building the muscle of self-trust. Knowing yourself is key and getting opinions from others can be so helpful in the process.

Finally, I want to encourage you to develop the tool of sitting in the discomfort of asking yourself real and curious questions, and getting real

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and honest with yourself about your intentions, your motivations, your drivers, your patterns in life.

Some questions you may want to ask yourself about your relationship or relationships, whatever stage they're in, are why am I doing what I'm doing? Am I trying to keep myself feeling safe by people pleasing, chameleoning, not rocking the boat? Do I stay quiet in this relationship or do I speak up? Do I speak my wants and needs? Do I feel comfortable being honest in this relationship?

Why do I want to date this person? Why do I want to stay in this relationship? Am I in this relationship for me or to keep my date or others happy? Am I avoiding anything by staying in this relationship? Are there any patterns from your past you see repeating here? Are you able to be fully yourself in this relationship? Or are you hiding parts of you?

Do you feel emotionally and physically safe in your relationship? Are you being heard and seen, loved and attuned to, cherished and cared about? Am I putting in more effort than the other person is? Is there more fighting and turmoil than there is joy? Does this relationship serve me in a deep way?

Am I showing up with an open heart? Am I being met with an open heart? Am I growing and is my partner growing too? Listen in for the answers. Listen in your body and your spirit and know this now and always; just because you have had codependent thought habits doesn't mean you'll always have them or that you have to live a life built on codependency.

You were born 100% worthy of love and care and you never have to prove it to settle for relationships where you aren't being treated like the magical wonderful, amazing human that you truly, truly are.

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Thanks for listening my darling. I hope this show was supportive for you. If you're enjoying what you're hearing, I want to ask you to please head on over to wherever you get your podcasts, subscribe or follow the show, and leave a rating and review.

I work hard on this free resource because I want to share all the wisdom, all the knowledge that I've been so privileged to learn. And I want to share it with the world. So the more ratings and reviews the show has, the more it shows up on search, and so more people can find it and get all this help for free, which is my goal.

So I'd love it if you could help me out to make that dream a reality and get *Feminist Wellness* in ever more ears. Alright my beauties, thanks for listening, let's do what we do.

Place a gentle hand on your heart if that feels loving and supportive. And remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my beauty. I'll talk to you soon. Ciao.

If you've been enjoying the show and learning a ton, it's time to apply it with my expert guidance so you can live life with intention, without the anxiety, overwhelm, and resentment, so you can get unstuck. You're not going to want to miss the opportunity to join my exclusive intimate group coaching program, so head on over to victoriaalbina.com/masterclass to grab your seat now. See you there. It's going to be a good one.