

Ep #172: Showing Up For You And Your Nervous System In Tragedy



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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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.

This week, I had the intention of talking with you about the nervous system regulation. And right now, given what's going on in the world: The racist murders in Buffalo and California, the murder of children and teachers in their school in Texas. Plus, the ongoing war in Ukraine, the attacks on women's rights, reproductive rights, trans- and LGBTQ+ rights during a continuing global pandemic, I believe it is important, vital, really, to pause. And to acknowledge these absolutely horrifying, heartbreaking occurrences, particularly the wildly unnecessary and terrible loss of life that has occurred in the last two weeks.

I wanted to take a moment to pause, because the collective suffering and the specific suffering of those families who've lost loved ones. Those children, elders, those Black people, Asian people, Latinos, those humans who are no longer here on this planet, and the families left to grieve them, all of us who are left to grieve them; our pain matters.

While these mass shootings are horrifying, they're also sadly, no longer shocking. It's no longer surprising that these atrocities continue to happen in a country where the gun lobby has more power than voters do. While, of course, I believe deeply that systemic reform is needed, that massive shifts, not just in gun laws, but in the ways we relate to one another as humans, is deeply, deeply needed today.

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I'm not here to talk about that specifically, but rather to talk about how we think about process, and sit with this level of grief, this level of tragedy. What I want to say is... Many things I want to say, so many things, and it starts with saying this: The purpose of thought-work is not to make us feel better.

The purpose of thought-work is not to ignore what's happening, what's real. It's not to gloss over our suffering or pain on the personal or collective levels. It's not to say, "Oh, I can just think differently about these atrocities so I can feel better about them," because, well, that's gaslighting ourselves.

If you're a coach, and you're doing it, it's gaslighting your clients. It's also not realistic. That's not how brains and bodies work. I don't believe it serves us in any way to pretend that there isn't massive, human, acute human suffering happening right now.

What I want to say so clearly is that thought-work is not about attempting to pretend that everything's good, everything's fine. If you've followed my work for even a minute, you've likely heard me say that the whole #positivevibesonly thing is so profoundly detrimental to our experience of being human, of being alive.

The goal of thought-work is not to pretend that horrible things aren't happening, that there isn't suffering, but rather, it's to recognize that life is in fact rife with pain. Life is full of loss, disappointment. Life is full of sorrow.

When we attempt to use thought-work to gloss over or ignore the shitty parts of life, the horrific, horrible parts of life, we deny our very humanity, and rob ourselves of the opportunity to truly grieve, which is vital. And, in my world, is a prerequisite to even being able to begin to shift our thoughts to create new feelings.

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Instead, I propose that we use thought-work paired with somatic or body-based practices, and an understanding of our nervous system to do the work, to expand, what the literature calls the window of tolerance, in our nervous system. I prefer to call it the window of bodily capacity.

Meaning, our ability to sit with, to be with, to stay present with, and conscious with our feelings. Yes, even the most challenging ones. As a way to expand our ability to be with what is real. To thereby, fear feeling our own feelings a little less every day. Because, what we fear, we give power to.

Instead of processing our feelings through our bodies, we avoid them, we buffer against them, we pretend they aren't there. And, attempt to only focus on the “positive things” in which... A: Number one, doesn't work because, science, B: Number two, renders life so lifeless.

It's only when you can hold loving, compassionate space for the painful feelings, that you can open your big, beautiful heart, to feel all the joy of life. That's the yin-yang of it, the light and the shadow. It's only by staying present to it all that we can live truly intentional, aware lives full up with the realness of it all.

I know it hurts and I know it's challenging. But I, for one, would rather live a life with some suffering, and some joy, and a whole lot of realness, instead of a life I'm not conscious to, or present for.

What's key in feeling your feelings, while staying grounded, and not totally friggin' losing it and spiraling in that place, is one of the skills I want to teach you today. That skill is called “pendulation,” a term from the nervous system literature.

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So, I'll invite you to think of a pendulum swinging. Can you picture it? From side to side, side to side... In order to expand the window of capacity in our nervous system, without triggering or activating our bodies into full-on sympathetic fight-or-flight or full-on dorsal shutdown, the faint death response or freeze response is the following.

One, we begin by resourcing ourselves and that's detailed in Episode 135. Resourcing means connecting in with something actually real like a crystal, a plant, a pet, a loved one, or the thought of something. I often resource my abuela, my Abuela Marta, who died long before I was born. But connecting in with something that's grounding, calming, centering, even joyful.

Before then, step two, moving slowly and gently toward something painful and challenging. While grounding yourself in a resource, in order to stay present with the challenging. It's about giving your nervous system an anchor, so that you can swim out into the choppy waters of life knowing you're tethered to the shore.

So, this could look like sitting in your favorite comfy chair and starting with a resource. Getting present to the feeling of the soft stable wood and wool beneath you, feeling it holding you up, cradling you, and not just thinking about it. But really letting yourself feel that physical experience of being held. Letting it expand into your body, letting yourself feel grounded in it, safe in this one moment with you, with that chair.

For me, Pachamama, Earth Mother, is my most grounding resource. So, when I heard about the murder of the niños, of those children, those babies in Texas, along with the murders in Buffalo and California, I went to the trees, I went to the earth.

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I laid down in my backyard, and let myself feel what it is to be held and loved by the earth. And, when I felt deeply connected there, when I could feel every cell in my body connected, I let myself think about all those families. All those madres, tias, abuelas, those bebitos and I let myself cry it out.

When my chest ached, and my eyes stung, I returned to the earth. Grounded myself, resourced my nervous system and went back to my crying. Like a pendulum I went to my resource and my pain. Like a pendulum swinging in my heart; love and pain, pain and love.

And in this way, we create the internal safety that allows us to begin to become present to our feelings in a profound way. Thereby, to process them through our bodies in a way that not only gets them out, instead of trapping them within as tension patterns or chronic pain responses in our nervous system, but also expands our capacity to feel those feelings with greater ease when next we're called upon to let sadness, loss, grief, anger, move through us.

Through this process, we become less afraid of feeling our feelings, because our body will remind us, "I have felt this pendulum swing before, and you have always honored me with a return to a resource."

The thing about expanding the window of capacity to be with ourselves and our feelings, in our nervous system, is that it creates ever greater ease in our lives, overall. It allows us to feel the heartbreak without going into nervous system overwhelm or shutdown.

The more we stay present to the small moments of pain, anger, frustration, and allow ourselves to process them, the less internal resistance we experience around feeling our feelings, and we're able to give voice to the

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emotions inside us and can thereby decide what we want to do with them. Instead of allowing them to make our choices for us, from an unconscious, unintentional habitual place.

So, my love, this is your invitation to truly allow your emotions, to have your feelings, to honor them, to let yourself mind, body and spirit feel. And, if it doesn't feel safe to go there alone, don't. Please don't. Call on a trusted person or team of people: therapist, coach, best friend, pets, Pachamama, the trees, to support you. We have had a series of immense tragedies in a very short period of time, once again, during a pandemic, and a war. So baby, have your feelings.

Remember, that trying to use thought-work or whatever other modality, to ignore it or pretend it's not real, doesn't serve you. It might feel like it does, because it gives you a temporary reprieve. But at the end of the day, it doesn't serve you or the collective, or those grieving these terrible losses. My darling.

I want to make two vital points here. One, please, don't just pendulate. Take breaks, for real breaks. And I mean, for realsy, real, real breaks from feeling your feelings. We talked about this back in episode 105, Buffering Versus Conscious Distraction, where the latter is honoring that one little human nervous system can only take so much input.

So, when you feel yourself on the edge of nervous system overwhelm, where you're spinning and spiraling, and aren't actually feeling your feelings but are just spinning around them in stress and overwhelm. Or, if you've just hit your limit with talking about everything, reading the news, following all the hashtags, *please*, my darling, please give yourself your inner children your nervous system the gift of conscious distraction.

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My go-to is television, particularly shows I've watched 473 times and, come on, we're nerds. There are studies about this. About how calming it can be for the nervous system to rewatch, and thereby re-experience something that is familiar. I will say, I have watched many an episode of *The Office*, this week, between moments spent crying on the earth, on the cold bathroom floor, and taking action towards change, which we'll talk more about soon enough.

From our perfectionism, we believe that it's incumbent upon us to feel all the feels, all at once. It's like we have to grieve perfectly. But no one wins when you overdo it my love. There's no medal for the most suffering-est. So, please listen to your body, and actively, consciously choose thoughtful distraction, before you supersede your internal limits.

Remind yourself that with thought-work and somatics in your toolbox, you absolutely do have the skills and the tools to be present, no matter what comes. To know, as a fact, that you get to choose how you want to feel, when the world is really, really, really challenging. Part of that, can include giving yourself a damn break, too.

For those of you who may be questioning yourself. or worried. or wondering, "Why am I not more upset?" I will say this, not being as upset as your best friend, or your spouse, or someone else in your life, or not as upset as your perfectionist brain tells you, "You should be," isn't necessarily a problem. Maybe the intensity of the loss hasn't sunk in yet, and that's okay. Maybe you're not ready to accept that all this has happened.

Sometimes it takes time for immense tragedy to really sink in, for our minds, body's nervous systems to allow us to truly feel, to tap into the grief and the sacred anger. Maybe your nervous system just isn't in a place to allow you to feel the feels around this quite yet.

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When the circumstances in life feel this enormous, our prefrontal cortex, the executive function part of the brain, often takes a backseat while our amygdala, the fear center in the limbic system, and our nervous system drive the bus.

My love, our nervous systems have their own tendencies. Their own habitual nervous system state, that's the easy go-to, it's home away from home, if you will. A place where we most easily go, when we're not in ventral vagus, which is the safe and social part of the nervous system. This will be different for all of us. And, the reasons why will be different.

Mine is dorsal, which is the freeze response. Foot off the gas, shut down checkout. And so, if that's where your nervous system most easily goes, then maybe that's where you're at right now. You may not be fully feeling the grief, the sorrow, the tragedy because your nervous system is saying, "Hold up now. All of that? That is wildly unsafe. I'm in charge of this mammal, and I will not let them go to there. Not on my watch." So, it blocks you from having, feeling, fully being in the grief and the sorrow because it loves you.

Meanwhile, if sympathetic fight-or-flight, getting angry, furious, rageful... If that is your home away from home, then that's where your nervous system goes. While anger is certainly called for here, this moment calls not just for rage, but for grieving too. So, with compassion, curiosity, and care, I'll say this: If your focus is solely on the rage, perhaps it may be possible that your nervous system is keeping you from feeling all your feels, too. And that, as well, is a place to be gentle and loving with yourself, my darling.

So, you can see how you may not be allowing yourself to feel all the feels, and to process it all through. While recognizing, once more, that your nervous system may be running the show, and may be holding you back

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from fully feeling those emotions. It does so in an act of wild self-love because that's what it is; your body, your nervous system, keeping you from feeling all the feels either by shutting you down in dorsal or revving you up in sympathetic, it's an act of self-love, of protection.

Be kind with yourself about it all. Okay? My darling, I encourage you, in whatever way is safest for your body and your nervous system, to allow yourself some moments of feeling the sad and the anger. Allowing it to move through your body.

From there, looking to build ever greater self-awareness so you can feel your feelings through your body, more frequently, as they come up. So, in these moments you can know whether what you're feeling is truly about this tragedy, or if this is leftover feeling, that you haven't processed from another moment in your life. Another moment where you haven't allowed, or felt you have the skills to feel your feelings through your body.

Really important thing to be able to do to say, "Is this about this tragedy? Or, is this unprocessed feeling about my dad, or about when my abuelo died, when I was fourteen? Or, about that breakup when I was twenty-six?" Beautiful thing to know about you.

The reason I'm talking about somatic or body-based practices, is because they are truly key in our daily lives, in our regular lived experience, and are especially useful tools of profound self-love in moments like this. To allow us a portal inward, a way to be in conversation with our bodies, to be in dialogue, to be able to know where our bodies are reacting and responding to tragedy.

So, we can meet ourselves with love. So, that we can have greater awareness of our bodily experience, and cannot just support ourselves

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more deeply, but can ask our bodies for support, which they are so capable of giving us.

When we're so used to just moving along, and getting through life, and ignoring our bodies, not just around tragedy, but around the everyday grief of life, it gets held within us. It's only when we can be in conversation with our bodies that we can recognize, and give ourselves what we truly need on that somatic level.

Things like co-regulation with pets, plants and other humans. Things like rest, community connection, care, empathy. We can give ourselves the space to fully agree, instead of continuing to push through, while wondering why we have a headache, a bellyache, why our chronic pain is flaring. All experiences I lived in in my own life, for so very long. We do this work, somatic work, so we can be present to what we truly want and need for our own best wellness and that of those we love.

I'd like to return to the subject of anger. The patriarchy has taught humans, socialized as women, that our anger is a problem. That our anger is not polite. It's not ladylike, it's not nice. That being a good girl is more important than feeling our anger and voicing our anger.

These patriarchal teachings, alongside our co-dependent and people-pleasing survival habits, have us swallowing any feelings that may make us unlovable. So, we hush it down. We don't voice it. We stuff it down until we explode. And then, we feel guilty. We retreat into our silence, once more.

And, I've got to say, I'm done with it. Enough, already. Basta. I am grieving. Yes! I am sad and heartbroken. Yes! And, this human, socialized as a Latin American woman, I am angry. That is a powerful and important thing to

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feel, and to channel into action to make change happen. Because enough is friggin' enough!

It's time for all of us to tap into our sacred anger, and to demand change now, because there is power in the anger that demands change. It is vital that we learn to express that anger. To give it voice, with the goal of holding those in power responsible. To speak truth to power. To speak up against oppression.

And herein, to speak truth to the politicians who have allowed the gun lobby to continue the control politics in the US. The politicians who have kept this country from passing stricter gun laws, the politicians who have turned their backs on their constituents and have done a full slash-and-burn on community mental health care. And yes, I can go on.

So, it is vital that we get in touch with our anger and channel towards good. And, towards my perennial goal of always throwing the patriarchy squarely and fully under the bus. The patriarchy is so to blame, in so many ways here.

From the ways we teach boys to suppress and hide their emotions, to the way we have condoned and glorified male violence, to the ways that boys and men are not given the resources to attend to their mental health and to learn to feel their feelings, process them, hold them, hold space for them without being told that they're somehow not being man enough.

Hoo! There needs to be a serious reckoning around the ways we raise children, socialized as boys, in this country. A reckoning around how we think about, and celebrate toxic masculinity, and allow it to run rampant. A reckoning is needed in this country and on this planet, around the ways that masculinity is held up within white settler colonialism.

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Ah, meanwhile, one of the reasons that I've dedicated my life to teaching folks how to build a regular practice of feeling their feelings, instead of buffering against them, is so that those feelings don't stay welled up inside you until a massive tragedy happens. Instead, you can show up for yourself, your nervous system, your inner children, your communities with love and care, as your feelings arise.

Instead of being bowled over, overwhelmed to the point where you can't process your emotions, and something like these mass murders happen, which keeps you in that spiral. It keeps you from taking aligned and embodied action towards change, to make a difference, to be of service.

And therein, it's vital that we're mindful of what psychologists, Fishbein and Azjen, called the "intention-action gap," which is when one's values, intentions, attitudes don't match their actions. While this theory has, of course, been critiqued, because that's how it goes in science, I do see this at play in us with our perfectionist thought habits.

Because in these moments, we get stressed out, we get overwhelmed, we don't know how to process our feelings through our bodies. We tell the story that we really should help, and we should do it in some exactly right way. That desire to take perfect action, then keeps us from taking any action. So, we mean to do something, we have the intention to, and at the end of the day, we don't.

As always, this isn't about blame, shame or guilt. Because it's often things like our socialization, conditioning, and the survival skills trained into our nervous system, that get in our way and block us from doing things we intend to do. To be part of the change we want to see in the world.

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So, my beauty, if that narrative, “I have to do it right,” if that's spinning in your brain, I want to invite you to put it down and gently step away from it. And, to decide to take aligned action, and to do what you can most easily do, first.

Sign the petition online. Donate funds, if you have the means. Give blood, if you can. Write letters to and call your representatives, and call their offices. please do it again and again. And, perhaps you start with taking the action of grieving, because grieving is a very important action.

But my darling, I'll implore you not to stop there. Join a committee, volunteer to impact the next elections. Talk to your relatives about why voting matters. Join a Get Out the Vote campaign. And above all, recognize that the best intention in the world is of little use, if we don't take action to make change. When we don't take action when we say we will, we hurt our relationship with ourself.

I talk so often, on the show, about the importance of self-trust, self-respect, of standing strong in our own integrity. And so, if you are outraged about these mass shootings, thoughts and prayers aren't enough. Grieving is vital and it's not enough.

It's time to close the intention-action gap, which starts with coming into right relationship with our feelings. Allowing them and processing them through our bodies, not buffering against them. Honoring our need for conscious distraction, for pendulation, and then honoring ourselves and our communities, honoring humanity by taking aligned action. However we can, towards the best and highest good for all.

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As we learn how to manage our minds, our lives, how to soothe and care for our hearts, our bodies, our nervous system, our inner children in the face of yet another set of massive tragedies, I want to say this clearly.

My darling, my beauty, my sweet, tender ravioli, there is not a thing on earth wrong with you, if you can't focus right now, if you're exhausted, overwhelmed, confused, scared, worried, if you can't get the tasks you want to get done, done, if you can't be productive.

My sweetness, you are a human, living in a time of excruciating collective grief, alongside whatever's happening in your own life. I implore you to give yourself the grace, to give yourself kindness, compassion, and care to attend to you, now. To let yourself rest, now. To drink enough water, to pee when you have to. To take it easy on the caffeine, the sugar, the alcohol and instead to take a bath, a hot shower.

If you're a busy parent with jobs to work, maybe you give yourself two minutes at the end of the day. Or, two minutes in the morning before the kids wake you up. But give yourself what you can, to take care of you, to attend to you because your voice is needed. Your brilliance is needed, your anger is needed. So, be gentle with you now, my darling.

Thank you for listening. my love. My heart aches and breaks right alongside yours. I'll be sharing a list, of organizations and actions you can take, in the show notes at VictoriaAlbina.com/172, which is the page for this episode.

Be well, my beauties and let's do what we do. Gentle hand on your heart, should you feel so moved. And remember, you are safe. You are held. You are loved. And, when one of us heals, we help heal the world.

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Be well my darling. I'll talk to you soon.

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 there, it's gonna be a good one!