

Ep #184: Avoidant Attachment Styles



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. I'm so grateful for you to be here with me to share another episode of *Feminist Wellness*.

I'm excited today, because this episode was inspired by a listener who reached out wanting to know more about attachment theory and attachment styles. Specifically, avoidant and disorganized attachment styles. What delighted me about this request is that a listener identified a desire, something she wanted to know more about, and asked for it.

For those of you have been listening a while, you know that that is exactly my jam. I am all about people listening to themselves, identifying what they want and need, and then asking for it. So, thank you, thank you to that listener, and to all those of you who write in asking for what you want; keep the requests coming. I love it. Love it, love it. You can send those emails to podcast@victoriaalbina.com.

Okay, so now, on to today's topic, which is attachment theory. My original episode on attachment is an oldie but goodie Episode 129. I did a replay of it last week, so you'd be all cut up for this week. You're welcome. If you haven't listened to that episode, yet, you may choose to check it out before listening to this one, since it gives you an attachment styles primer. And that's always nice, right my nerds?

Also, I share about anxious attachment there. One of the things to know is that we often, not always, but often attract or are attracted to folks with a different attachment style than our own. So, if you tend more towards anxious, a partner or partners might be more avoidant, or vice versa.

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One of the ways to create more love in our lives, is to grow our understanding of the people in our world. And identifying not just our own, but our partner's attachment styles, can help us to get it more when one of us does a classically that style thing. More understanding, more love, more connection, more nervous system regulation, more joy. Right? Right.

So, what on earth am I talking about when I talk about attachment theory? Well, it's a psychological theory that proposes that we live our lives, and are in relationship with the people in our worlds, in ways that can be categorized as generally adhering to one or more of four possible attachment styles: anxious, avoidant, disorganized, and secure attachment. Where these frameworks describe the attitude or patterns that we bring to our interactions with others.

According to this theory, we each have a predominant style. This style was established early in our lives, in our relationship with our parents, or our primary caretakers. In my work, I talk a lot about something that is sort of outside the classic way of thinking about this, which is our attachment with ourselves. And so, the work I do with my clients in Anchored, my six-month program, is really focused on how we can get into secure attachment with ourselves, so that we can really know and believe that we have our own backs.

So, there are these four primary styles. And we know, from all of the amazing new science around neuroplasticity, which refers to our brain's ability to change and shift, that our childhood attachment styles are not our destiny. It's not like some permanent state of being. We are not, and I repeat, not stuck or doomed to continue to live from our childhood attachment styles.

Through thought work, breathwork, and somatic practices, we can shift our attachment styles by developing intimacy with ourselves and learning to have our own backs. We can evolve in how we show up with the people in

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our lives, as we change how we show up in relationship to ourselves. This change doesn't happen overnight. And yes, it takes work, loving work, that helps us move into being the raddest version of our ever growing and changing selves.

I gotta tell you, doing this work has been so amazing in my own life. I love things that are rad, and also things that are dope, because I am definitely from the 90's. And yes, Tribe Called Quest just started playing in the background, in my brain. So hello, ADHD, my old friend.

Back to these attachment styles, so, we have secure, anxious, avoidant and disorganized. In Episode 129 I focused on anxious attachment since that's where a lot of folks, who are working on perfectionist codependent and people-pleasing habits, come from in their relationships. But it's certainly not how all of us operate.

Today, while I will get to the avoidant attachment style, I want to start by grounding us in what secure attachment looks and feels like. I want to start here, because I want you to have a vision and a sense for what is possible. Living with and from secure attachment is definitely one of my primary goals.

Because living from insecure attachment is super painful in a lot of ways. If you're feeling stuck in your relationship with others or with yourself, it can be so hard to see a way out. To imagine a different version of yourself, or to even let yourself consider another healthier way of being in the world.

When we start to think of that, to picture it, it's normal for our egos to swoop in and say, "Change is dangerous. Change is bad. Just keep doing what you've been doing, because it's kept you alive so far." What I will say to that voice, with love, is that I'm here to do more than just survive. And you are, too. We get to thrive, and to reach for what we want, so we can feel most alive.

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Learning to feel more secure in my own relationships, not just romantic ones, but friendships, the relationship with my perfect and amazing sibling, Genie, with my clients, with y'all or youse if you're from New England, ahh, it's been life changing.

So, when someone has a secure attachment style, they are secure in who they are, which helps them bring that sense of security to their relationships. Someone with a secure attachment has their own back. They know that they have choice and agency in their lives, and they're willing to communicate that. To ask for what they want and need in a clear and direct way.

They know they'll have their own back, regardless of how they're received by others. They don't take things personally that just aren't about them. The opposite of what we tend to do from our codependent thought habits, am I right?

Another way to think about a securely attached person is about how they navigate the space between themselves and others. When we are securely attached, we approach others with love, tenderness, care, connection at the forefront. We set and hold our boundaries, with love for ourselves and others, because we know that clear boundaries are resentment prevention.

For example, I have a secure attachment with my sister. I talked a little bit about that in Episode 129. If **Jeanne** calls me, and it's a bad time to talk, I can tell her directly and plainly without fear; I'm not available. And she can hear me without reading anything into it. She just says, "Okay, talk to you later." She does the same for me. We approach each other with loving intentions, and have a deep and powerful emotional generosity with one another.

If we get in our feels, if something happens and we feel sad, embarrassed, angry, ashamed, we can talk about it, without worrying about ruining the

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relationship because our attachment is secure. This doesn't mean we never hit rough patches, of course we do. But because our attachment is secure, we can navigate challenging times, and moments where we might misunderstand each other. We can each self-regulate and can co-regulate with one another. And it's so awesome.

For example, we both tend to be jokers, it's a way we learned to lighten things up in childhood, when things got heavy. If one of us needs a serious talk, and the other shows up with silliness or jokes, we're both adept and feel safe in saying, "Hey, I need serious energy right now, not joking energy. Are you available for that?" Knowing the other will listen with love and an open heart, and won't shut down or get defensive. We each trust each other to just say, "Absolutely."

Of course, it is vital to situate this conversation, to locate it, within our social locations. That is to say, the intersecting systems of oppression that each of us lives under; our socialization, our conditioning, our religious upbringing, our experience in the patriarchy under white settler colonialism, living in a racialized body, or immigration status. The cultures we came from, whether we're living in a fat body, in a disabled body, in a neurodivergent body, on and on.

So yes, secure attachment is possible for all of us. Gentle, gentle; if you learned that being a person living in your identities, means that having that secure attachment wasn't always smart in the world, sounds like that was pretty smart of you. It's something to be thoughtful about, compassionate about, loving about, for yourself and the people in your world.

So, my darling, you might be thinking; I have people in my life that I do feel securely attached to. But come to think of it, I feel wicked anxious or avoidant with others, is that normal? Yes, that's often how it is. We can show up in one way with one person, and in a totally other way with another person. This is why safe spaces matter.

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I want to invite you to take a moment with me to get curious about how it feels, in your body, to be around those folks with whom you feel that secure attachment; the version of **Jeanne**, my sister, that lives in your life.

So, let's take a moment. Breathe into it, if that feels safe. What does it feel like in your body to be with that safe person? What are your thoughts and feels when you're in that secure relationship, and are relating there? How do you allow yourself to show up? What do you allow yourself to do? Who do you allow yourself to be?

It's really important to pause and to get in touch with that because we can grow what we know, and can work on bringing that secure attachment to more and more relationships when we know what it looks and feels like.

If you don't have a secure attachment with a real live person, right now, that's okay. I'll invite you to think about a pet or a plant, about the memory of someone you felt unconditionally loved by. Or, you can think about and feel into your connection with the earth, with nature, with Pachamama, if that's the thing for you.

Or, and this is one of my favorites, is there a character from a book or a movie that you felt really connected to? Think about that person, and what it might feel like to be in conversation with them.

Now, from this sense of what a secure attachment feels like in your body, I want to shift to exploring insecure attachment styles. When we are relating to others from insecure attachment, which is a broad umbrella term for the other three types; anxious, avoidant, or disorganized, we are relating from a dysregulated nervous system. That is, a nervous system that is focused on internal protection as a way to manage the turmoil and stress we feel around connecting with others. Because our bodies are focused on survival.

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Just below the level of consciousness, there's often a voice asking; who do I need to show up as, to get this person to stay? To not abandon me, or reject me? Remembering, as always, that as humans, we are pack animals, we need each other, we need community, we need the collective to survive.

That voice, just below the level of consciousness, may be asking; how can I self-abandon to show them that I'm worth staying with? What part of me do I need to turn away from and give away, to keep others happy with me? What can I get from this connection, this relationship that will support my survival and acceptance from others?

So, all of that is happening within us. We step out of presence with ourselves and others from that insecure attachment. And in an avoidant attachment style, we both crave connection, again, because we're mammals. But also, somatically fear it in our bodies, if not our minds, because it's been painful in the past to reach for others and not have them reach back.

That's what's happening physiologically, somatically. We're fearing abandonment because it meant death and doom not that long ago, right, for humans as animals. So, now let's look at where this style comes from. This deep desire to connect, but not.

The avoidant attachment style typically develops in folks who were raised by a parent or caregiver who provided the bare minimum. Like, there may have been food on the table, clothes on the shelves, a home to live in and other basic necessities, but a notable lack in truly deeply loving attention, care, responsiveness, and emotional support.

So, maybe they took you to ballet or karate, or got you to school on time or whatever, but emotionally, try as they might, they just weren't home. They didn't know how to attune to you, as the kiddo that you were.

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So, when that responsiveness is missing: When the crying baby is ignored or not given what they actually need. When the toddler, with big toddler feelings, is told to stop crying. When a young child is consistently called annoying, or a bother, or too much.

Or, the adolescent is told that, their perfectly normal teenage acting-out behavior, which we all need to do because we need to learn boundaries. When that's framed as being dramatic, then of course, a child will understandably learn that sharing their feelings is dangerous. It's going to get you rejected, abandoned, and that's tantamount to death.

Remember, especially as young people, anything that risks our connection to our caregivers feels super dangerous in our bodies. Literally life or death, to a kiddo who has no option but to live where and with whom they are living. So, many of us who are raised in environments where that care and responsiveness were missing, carry that fear; the fear of feeling out loud, of being our big, true messy selves, of being vulnerable, into our adult lives.

When we continue to unconsciously, unintentionally, live from that fear, we bring that avoidant attachment into our adult relationships with people who aren't our caregivers. Or, we may find ourselves drawn to people who withhold affection and care, because that's what feels safe. Despite the fact that we make consciously, cognitively, in our thinking brains, know that we deserve better.

Our bodies may be telling us that the old pattern is safer, once again, because it hasn't killed us yet. It is deeply painful for a child to reach out to the person, the people who they need most, only to find those people unempathetic, unavailable, chronically distracted, or otherwise uninterested, or unable to meet them.

A client of mine shared that she would often snuggle her dad for a few minutes and he'd be warmish, until he just wasn't. He would literally say to

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her, "Okay, that's enough," and would pull away emotionally and physically. Unsurprisingly, she has a tendency to detach and pull away, when there is the slightest hint that someone isn't one bajillion percent into her. That makes sense, right?

So, from this deep childhood wisdom we learn to suppress our needs, to step out of presence with ourselves and our body, because it's too painful to be at home within ourselves if we feel rejected. So, we stop reaching out, we stop responding, we stop asking for support or soothing, and we are overwhelmed by having needs. Because we believe in our gut that those needs won't be met, and perhaps will be mocked or negated for even having needs.

Therefore, it's logical and understandable that the avoidantly attached person will get overwhelmed by other people having wants, needs, and desires because it's so intolerable in our own bodies to experience a need. So, we shut ourselves off to any needs being okay, and other people making requests of us feel overwhelmingly exhausting.

We may learn smart skills like perfectionism, as a way to appear as lovable as possible. We may swing from super codependent in our thinking, to wildly independent, leapfrogging right over the possibility of interdependence, because, whoa, that's way too vulnerable. Come on now.

In one of my early Anchored groups, I worked with a most wonderful human called Zarya, who presented with a lot of the hallmarks of the avoidant attachment style. She did not like to talk about her feelings, and all but shut down internally when others shared theirs.

She said that relationship after relationship failed because her partner's always felt clingy. And in her own words, she felt constantly suffocated. At the same time, she wanted to be connected to other people. I mean, it's such a natural human thing to want connection. And, Zarya had trained

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herself to go through the motions of seeking connection, but never really connecting somatically.

So, she was on the dating sites. She would swipe right and go on the date, and would attempt to play the part of someone who wanted to connect. But she was really struggling inside, with meeting her dates' needs and asking for what she really wanted. So, instead of asking for space she would ghost, or she wouldn't reply to a text for days and days because within her body, it was just too much.

She had super porous boundaries and really struggled to feel comfortable in her own skin. That deep push and pull of wanting to connect and feeling scared to connect was exhausting. So, in our coaching and somatic work, we started by identifying the attachment habit at play, predominantly avoidant here.

I started to uncover the root causes in her childhood somatically, through her body; that's what somatic means, through the body. By getting into conversation with her inner children. So, she could start to give them the love and care they needed and didn't get in childhood. So, that those inner children, those parts of her could start to feel secure in their connection with adults Zarya.

Then from there, our coaching turned towards thought work, and Z practiced the new thoughts that would support her in showing up for connection, by connecting with herself first. By starting to believe in her body that she will always have her own back.

She set goals like, replying to texts within 48 hours. And more importantly, set the goal of letting her date know that that was the commitment she was available for. It was just glorious to see her grow, and to build more security with herself and with the world.

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So, if this attachment style is resonating for you, if there's something here that makes your inner children perk up and say, "That's me," know that you are not... Well, first of all, alone, at all. And, you are absolutely not destined to stay in avoidant attachment style for the rest of your life, or with everyone in your life.

It is possible to shift into more secure attachment, in which you don't push away or avoid the connection you truly want. It's also important to say, of course, that while shifting is possible, some relationships may be more challenging to shift.

For example, if you're still in contact with a caregiver who couldn't meet you, who wasn't emotionally present, or who withheld emotional support, or belittled your feelings, that might take some extra time and care to repair. And, is likely not the best place to start in your journey to more secure attachment. I would highly recommend that instead of starting with that person, you start with a friend.

You start with someone with whom you already have trust and love; a sibling, someone... In Spanish we say *hermana de crianza*. So, how do you translate that? Like, not your biological sibling but, you know, for your sibling, right, like your person. So, starting with someone like that may be a more loving place to start. How's that for diplomatic.

And, if what you're seeking around your caregiver or parent, who was not available for you, is acceptance and closure, I've got a great episode for you. It's Episode 76. It's called, are you ready? Acceptance and Closure.

Okay, so let's dive into some remedies here. So, I want to start with the minimum baseline, which we talked about in Episode 78. This is the practice of starting to make change, not by setting some wild perfectionist goal for your growth. But rather, starting with taking small steps, and in

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Anchored we talk about how baby size steps are way too big. Like, a baby's foot is like two inches big; that's wild.

So instead, we start with little kitten paw sized steps. We take these tiny, tiny steps with intention. Remembering that perfection is a myth, and that we will grow when we are kind to, and patient with ourselves. Where we can start on our path to more secure attachment, is by acknowledging that our predominant attachment style is what it is, and calling that a fact. Right?

It's not a judgment of self. It's not a judgment of your parents. It's just not a judgment. It's just the fact of what has been. And, it's changeable. So, we start with awareness, witnessing ourselves, and then start shifting into loving acceptance.

Here in, in talking about avoidant attachment, acknowledging to ourselves that our default is to disconnect, to check out, to stay distant. That our nervous system likely has the tendency to go into dorsal vagal, which is that checked out, freeze response in relationship.

That gives us a powerful starting place. If you just heard me say dorsal vagal, and you're like, wait, what? We talk nerdy around here; it's really fun. You can learn more about the nervous system and polyvagal theory by checking out Episode 174.

Okay, so once we've taken that in, once we've really stepped into acceptance around the fact that you might have avoidant attachment as your primary relating style, and knowing you want to move towards security, the next thing, is to start to really listen into your inner voice.

That quiet voice that actually wants to connect, that wants to express feelings, that craves connection. When you can start to tune in through

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meditation, somatics, breathwork, whatever other modalities that tap into that deeper part of you, then you can start to practice listening to yourself with love and care.

From there, the more you're able to listen to that voice and let it know you're here with it, then you can practice befriending yourself and your feelings. Which we talked about recently, on the episodes around resistance; Episodes 180 and 181.

Instead of believing that voice, we honor it. When the voice says the same things it's always said, "Don't share what you feel, they won't share it back. They won't love you back. Emotions make us vulnerable, and that's scary, that's bad. Being vulnerable is a trap. If I risk connection, I'll just end up sad."

Instead of believing those stories, we let that part know; I see you, I love you. I know you just love me and you want to protect me. Through that process, we learn to stay with the discomfort, so we can let that habitual protective voice know that what you, what adult you, what your body, your nervous system, your minds want, is connection. And that you are learning and practicing being available for it in a boundaried, loving way.

Now, this practice takes time. But once you start to strengthen that muscle of listening to your inner voice, you can move towards letting that inner voice rise to the surface. We can practice in relationships where it feels safer voicing how we feel. Sharing what's going on in our bodies; what the felt sensation is, what the emotion word is. We can thereby, test the waters of vulnerability.

Remember, I would never advocate 180-degree shift, instead kitten steps. Perhaps, tell a friend how much you value their friendship. Let that coworker know that their sense of humor makes meetings more bearable.

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Maybe you let your partner know when you want to be intimate, or talk to them about how it feels to ask for intimacy.

When we tune into ourselves, we can start to bring those inner desires and needs to the surface. Once they're at the surface, we can move into the space between ourselves and others, into that place where relationships grow, develop, blossom. Just like our nervous system did an amazing job of protecting us when we were young, by avoiding connection and rewarding avoidant behavior, we can start to create more capacity within our nervous system to have our own backs. And, to stay regulated. We can be more open, more willing to share, more direct and honest.

When we do this work slowly, painstakingly, lovingly, and strategically, by picking the folks who want to practice being more open with, our nervous system will start to get a new message. It'll start to hear; connection can be safer. Closeness can be fun. I can start to break down the walls between me and others, while still having loving boundaries.

Through that process, we can start to feel, in our bodies, not just our minds, that it can be safe to move into more secure attachment with the people in our lives, by having our own backs. So, my darling, that's a beautiful place to start. We can get pretty far by learning how to talk to ourselves in gentle kind ways, so that's your homework.

Next week, we'll dive right in with disorganized attachment. I'll share some remedies for shifting that style towards a more secure way of relating. Always and forever, please remember our three C's, my darling: compassion, curiosity and care. When you give yourself, and the people you care about, the huge gift of showing up from those energies, you make your life, your relationships, and the world a better place.

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So, thanks for listening, my darling. I love talking about this stuff. It is so endlessly fascinating and again, has been so key in my own growth. I'm grateful to have all this knowledge and it's a delight to share it with you.

Before we go, I wanted to make sure you know about the webinars and workshops I've been doing. I've been taking folks on a deeper dive into things like polyvagal theory, nervous system mapping, somatics, and so much more. Make sure you're on my mailing list and are following me on "the gram." I give good "gram" @victoriaalbinawellness. Yeah, make sure you're on my mailing list, so you don't miss a darn thing. Two great ways to get on that mailing list.

Drop a little email to podcast@victoriaalbina.com, or you can head over to my website, VictoriaAlbina.com. You can get my free meditation and nervous system orienting downloads right at the top of my website. They are free, so the price is right; go on over, grab them. I mean, they're really great tracks, I put a lot of love and a lot of heart into them, so why not?

Finally, if you've done all of that, and you would like some extra credit, and who wouldn't? I'd be so grateful if you took a wee moment, go to where you get your podcasts. If you could leave a five-star rating and a written review, I would be ever so grateful.

The way the weird algorithms work, the more ratings and reviews a show has, the more often it appears in search, the more people are getting connected with *Feminist Wellness*, and are getting access to all of this free information, along with my free webinars and low-cost workshops. So please, rate and review, share on social media, help spread the word.

I am so honored and grateful and privileged to have all the education I have, all the coaching I've received, all the therapy, all the everything, and I really want to share it with the world. So, thank you in advance.

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Alright, my beauties, let's do what we do. A 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.

Be well my beauty. 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 you there; it's gonna be a good one!