

Ep #295: Ultimatums vs. Boundaries & Challenging Conversations: Listener Q&A



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Victoria: Albina, NP, MPH

[Feminist Wellness](#) with 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.

Before we get started, some exciting announcements. Anchored is open. I know, I know. I used to offer Anchored so often. It's been a lot less lately because I'm writing a book, which is so exciting. We're going to talk all about that soon.

For now, Anchored is open. If you've been wanting to take everything you're learning on the podcast a million times deeper, actually get real live, coaching from me in a beautiful community of women who really have each other's backs, Anchored is the spot for you.

We take all of this material, the thought work, the breath work, all the somatic practices, the nervous system regulation work, the political understanding of our social location and how it impacts our conceptualization of self and other. We take all of that, and we take it so much deeper because we take it from the theoretical.

It's really important to me to be super practical and offer lots of really good remedies, and they're generalized remedies. In Anchored, we apply them to you. We say in this moment, in your life, where you are right now with this person and the power dynamic you have, what is the best remedy for you? It's so exciting. It's so fun. It's so beautiful and incredible to watch people shift and change and grow.

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I cannot wait to share Anchored with you. If you've been wanting to join us, this is your chance. We start the first week of November. We're taking applications now. The group is filling up really fast, it always does. It always sells out. That's not a gross marketing thing. It's just facts and math and science. I don't know how it's science, but it's facts and it's math.

It fills up each and every time. So if you want to join us, do, because it's going to be a blast: VictoriaAlbina.com/anchored to learn more.

I'm doing a series of free webinars. They're really exciting. They're really fun. They're my way of giving back and giving you a little window into what it's like to be in Anchored, to get this kind of education based in 20+ years of studying humans and psychology and neuroanatomy and the nervous system and somatics, and on and on and on.

So I am doing a webinar all about overfunctioning, which is really exciting. I've never given this webinar publicly before. Pretty thrilled about it. It's going to be a good time. And that is on Tuesday, November 15th at 8 p.m. EST. California, listen up. Everything I do, I always announce it in New York City time. So just put it in your head, New York City time, and work backwards.

We always get this influx of emails. If the webinar is at 8, then 9, 10, 11; at 11 p.m. California sends a couple dozen emails that are like, "I can't get into the Zoom." It was three hours ago. I love you.

So, okay, my angels, lots of webinars, lots of free stuff coming up. Come join us in Anchored. It's going to be a blast.

Moving on. This week, I'm going to be answering some of your questions. It is such a delight when you all send me questions and ask me to talk about

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the things you want me to talk about. You will often hear them woven through the conversation. And sometimes I just want to get up and answer a question. So let's get going.

I'll start answering, and if you want your question featured, send it to us: podcast@victorialbina.com.

All right, our first one is, and this is such a good question, what is the difference between an ultimatum and a boundary? Such a great question. Because often, when I teach boundaries, which is always in my world, if you do X, I will do Y, right? You do what you're going to do for your life, and I've told you whether that works for me or not.

And so if you continue to do it, that's cool. Again, you do you, your life, whatever. I'm going to leave the room. I'm going to hang up the phone. I'm not coming over. I'm not inviting you out. Meow, meow, meow. I'm taking care of me. You do you.

It has nothing to do with you. Boundaries have everything to do with what I'm doing for myself. So the difference between a boundary and an ultimatum is both in the intention behind them and how they're communicating. They are both a form of limit setting. Saying, "Here's where my capacity to be with what you are choosing to do begins and ends," right?

This is an example I used a couple of years ago when I started talking about boundaries here, smoking... and no judges ever on anyone for smoking, ever... I have a limit around how close to me I want somebody smoking. So if we're out at the park and a buddy's like, "Oh, hey, I'm going to step away and smoke a cigarette." Okay, cool. Whatever. Whatever.

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My limit might be, if they come and sit on the blanket with us, I'll say, "Hey, that doesn't work for me. Could you back up a couple of feet?" But a hard boundary is, "You can't smoke in my house. And if you do, I'm going to ask you to leave and I'm not going to invite you over." Okay?

So ultimatums and boundaries can seem very similar at first blush, but they come from different places within us and have really distinct and different impacts on our relationships, right?

An ultimatum is usually, typically, used as a form of control delivered in a way that seeks to really compel and direct someone else's behavior. Ultimatums are rigid. They often come with a threat or a consequence. Which is different than a consequence in a boundary... I'm going to get to that... because it's more threat-y, right?

So like if you don't comply, it's threat-y, right? When we're issuing an ultimatum, when we've gotten to that point, for most of us, we're frigging done. We're like, "Basta," we're tapped out. And there's an undercurrent of fear, desperation, and an attempt to assert dominance in a non-consensual way that is not cute.

For instance, if you stop doing X, I will leave and I'm not coming back. That's an ultimatum, right? It's meant to force the other person into a corner and often doesn't leave any kind of room for dialogue, compromise, or a deeper understanding of each other's wants, needs, capacities, nervous system state; anything at all.

A boundary, on the other hand, is about self-care. Which, of course, is community care. Boundaries are resentment prevention, yeah? They're about protecting your own emotional, physical wellbeing without trying to control anyone else.

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And they're also largely about taking care of that liminal space, that energetic space between us, so that you're not accidentally treading on me and I'm not accidentally treading on you. We're not hurting each other's toes in the process of being mammals living interdependently with other mammals.

Instead, we're being clear, direct, kind, and loving. Boundaries come from a place of self-awareness and respect, both for yourself and for the other person. When you set a boundary, you're clearly stating what you need in order to feel safe, respected, comfortable, and at ease in this other person's presence. While clearly leaving the other person with the freedom to choose their response. It's not your business, right?

So a boundary can look like, I need X to feel safe. And if that doesn't happen... and the energetic is cool, cool, right?... I will take Y action to take care of myself, to protect myself, to show up for myself. It's not about manipulating or threatening the other person, but rather about honoring your needs without violating someone else's autonomy.

To put it in somatic and nervous system terms, as I am wont to do, ultimatums tend to activate a sympathetic state. So fight-or-flight mode, right? Adrenaline, noradrenaline, eventually cortisol, bleh, right? So there's an urgency with an ultimatum. A need to defend oneself, often grounded in survival anxiety, leading to controlling behavior.

And if that continues, all that sympathetic can lead to that high tone dorsal; that freeze, that checkout, that survival state, "Wait, what? What? You're going to leave? What?" Where we're just in survival and not connection.

Boundaries are the total opposite, right? They are a ventral vagal practice where you're grounded in your own safety and self-worth. When you set a

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boundary, you're communicating from a place of regulation, compassion, potential curiosity, openness to what's possible. Like, "Hey, how can we find a middle ground? Hey, how can everyone take care of themselves? Hey, what's up?"

And we're doing that even as we clearly, directly, with no b.s., articulate our limits. "No, sweet pea, you cannot smoke in my house. Nope. You want to go on my fire escape, you can do that. If you want to go out front, my stoop is all yours, baby." It's saying, "my limit" and "let's work together."

You're setting a boundary. You're not bracing for a fight or trying to avoid one, which is what we're doing in an ultimatum. You're setting them up, or you're, yeah, avoiding conflict. Saying, "I don't want to actually deal with the complexity of I'm a human, you're a human. We all have thoughts, we all have feels." Instead you shut it down with an ultimatum, right?

With a boundary, you're simply expressing what you need to maintain your emotional and physical equilibrium. Which is what being regulated is, having that equilibrium or equilibrium either way.

So always practical, right? In practical terms, a boundary might sound like, "I feel uncomfortable when you raise your voice. So if it continues, I'm going to leave the room for a bit. We can both regulate our nervous systems, right?" Or even leave that last part off. They can do whatever they want while you're out of the room, but you're going to regulate yourself; connecting with your resources, ground yourself, right? You're not trying to control the other person.

The previous example I gave is, "If you don't stop doing X, I will leave, and I won't be coming back." Ouch. That's intense. And sometimes we get to

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there. I'm not saying we don't, but I'm just saying, "Hey, now you know what I mean?" Okay. It's intense. And that's what ultimatums are.

Meanwhile, in this boundary, you're being very clear about how you'll take care of yourself in response to their actions. So let's look at an example. When I was writing my book... and my book comes out in a legit, whole year. We can't even pre-order yet. But I don't know, I'm just so excited about it. I'm so happy about it. I'm having the best team, and it's just been wonderful. But you'll get lots more details soon. Don't worry.

One of the things that I did was I wrote a ton of narratives. Because for me, it's one of the best ways to understand things, right? So I want to share an example I wrote, in the form of a narrative, based loosely in clients of mine. Obviously really well anonymized, because I'm not a jerk. So yeah, let's take a look at this story.

There's a quiet tension hanging in the air between Claire and her partner, Sam, as they sit on the couch facing each other. Their words are clipped. Their eyes weary from a string of unresolved arguments and conflicts. Claire, feeling the weight of a growing frustration, blurts out, "If you keep coming home late without texting me, I'm going to move out."

It lands with a thud. Sam's shoulders tighten, his face stiffening into a mask of defensiveness. Claire can see it, but the words are already out, and now they hang between them like a barrier, each of them staring at the wall it's built. This is an ultimatum.

Claire's words delivered from a place of desperation, rooted in a feeling of helplessness. She's trying to control the outcome, to force Sam to change his behavior, to wrestle some semblance of certainty from a situation that's left her feeling raw, powerless, scared. The threat is clear.

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“If you don't change, something drastic will happen.” There's no room for Sam to reflect, no room for understanding. Claire's nervous system is on high alert, her body rigid, her voice a little too sharp.

The telltale signs of a sympathetic response; the fight or flight wiring, kicking in, as she seeks to regain control. It's less about expressing her needs and more about the anxiety of not being heard, about securing a predictable outcome through force. Because the vulnerability of open communication feels too risky in the moment.

On the other hand, consider if Claire had paused, taken a breath, oriented, ground, and centered herself before speaking. Imagine her saying instead, “Sam, I love you so much, and I get really anxious when I don't hear from you. And it's late. I need to know what's going on so I can feel secure. If I don't, I don't know if I can keep doing this to my heart. I'm going to have to take some space and leave for a while to ground myself, to take care of me.” This is a boundary.

There's a fundamental shift in tone and in tension based in nervous system capacity. No one's throwing stones here at Claire or Sam or anybody, right? This is all about nervous system capacity. Claire's words, though still firm, come from a place of self-awareness and respect.

She's not demanding that Sam change his behavior. She's simply expressing what she needs to feel safe and comfortable in the relationship, while clearly outlining the action she will take to protect her own emotional well-being.

It's not a threat. It's a step towards creating a space where she can manage her own feelings without controlling Sam's choices. Her nervous system, instead of firing off into fight or flight, is settled. She speaks from a

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grounded place, anchored in the ventral vagal state, a place of regulation, connection, and inner safety.

Boundaries, in contrast to ultimatums, don't come with the sting of punishment or a demand for compliance. They're about clarity and standing in your own self-regard, while allowing the other person the dignity of their own response.

Boundaries then are the more feminist choice. Claire isn't telling Sam what he has to do. She's sharing what she will do to take care of herself if her need for communication isn't met. It's a difference between a defensive, tight-chested bracing for battle, and an open-hearted declaration of self-worth without the need for conflict.

Ultimatums, born out of a fear of losing control, tend to close off possibilities. They're the linguistic equivalent of a door slammed shut, leaving the person on the other side feeling trapped, cornered, and way less likely to respond in a way that fosters understanding or intimacy.

Boundaries, however, are like invitations. They set clear, respectful limits while leaving space for collaboration, for the other person to meet you halfway, should they choose.

And while ultimatums are reactive, boundaries are proactive. Claire's first instinct to deliver an ultimatum came from a place of reaction. Her nervous system, in that sympathetic firing, desperate to stop the discomfort she was feeling. Her boundary, on the other hand, was a considered response. One that took into account her own needs, while allowing Sam to respond as he wished and was able.

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It's in this nuanced distinction that the real difference lies. Boundaries honor both parties involved, whereas ultimatums center around one person's need for control.

The importance of the kind of self-care that keeps us most grounded, stable, and present. The kind of self-care I call “taller toddler” right? Remembering that when we were toddlers, we were actual two and three-year-olds, we needed naps.

We needed snacks. We needed time in the sunshine. We needed to play and to laugh and to get read a book and to get tucked in and to have enough water and enough food, and to make sure we're pooping every day. Those are the things that a toddler needs, right?

Or else, they are... with all due love and respect to anyone here who is or was once a toddler... they are unbearable. I love them, but you know what I'm saying, right? Wow. You are just that same little, tiny baby bear, but way taller, right? A couple of good 3-4 feet taller; 2-3-4 feet taller. You are a taller toddler.

And we are much more able to set a boundary, to be clear, to be gentle, to be grounded, compassionate, curious when we have been attending to our taller toddler needs than when we are hungry and thirsty and haven't been pooping right and haven't been sleeping right and haven't been exercising and getting sunshine.

When we have not been attuning to and attending to our most basic mammalian needs, most of us are pretty unbearable, just to be plain, right? We are much more likely to have a heightened nervous system response and reactivity.

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We're more responsive when we are soothed toddlers than when we are unattuned to toddlers. So, you're a taller toddler, treat yourself as such.

All right, I hope that was helpful. Let me know, drop me an email. You know who you are, who sent in that great question.

Question two: Sometimes when my partner and I are having a challenging conversation, they will get really, really quiet. I don't know how to say this other than to say it freaks me out, and I get really anxious and worked up and try to fill the space. And it doesn't feel good. Help.

Okay. It's interesting, I have been on both sides of this one. It's challenging on both sides. So, let's talk about this absolutely deafening, deafening silence that can happen. It can feel like you're on the edge of a cliff looking down into a vast unknown, which is terrifying.

It's so natural and understandable that you'd feel anxious and worked up when your partner goes whoosh, right? When they go silent, it can feel like you've lost your co-navigator when you're navigating some really rocky terrain together, and you're alone on the top of a mountainside with half a map trying to figure out how to get back down. And it's a lot.

So, let's break down what's likely happening. Obviously, I don't know you or your person or the situation, but let's talk about what's likely happening, from both a psychological and nervous system perspective, to explore why this silence feels so alarming and how you can move through it with more understanding, compassion, curiosity, and care for both yourself and your partner.

When we're engaged in challenging conversations, our nervous systems are highly attuned. Potentially even hypervigilant, scanning for cues of

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safety or danger in the other person's body language, facial micro-movements, like that little eyebrow slightly twitching in their tone or prosody of voice, and obviously in their words.

If your partner goes silent, then your neuroception, the subconscious process that constantly scans for safety, can potentially read that silence as a potential threat. Your body, not having enough cues or clues to reassure you, may flip from ventral vagal, or wherever you're finding yourself. But if the conversation hasn't gotten too heightened, from ventral, boom, into sympathetic arousal, into fight-or-flight mode.

You might feel your heart race, your breath quickens, your muscles tense, that familiar swirl of thoughts that just won't quit, all clamoring for you to do something to make it better; where "better" is, get that person to talk. And where under that it is, "Get that person to give me some sort of reassurance that I'm safe. That I'm not about to spontaneously combust or otherwise die."

Because our nervous systems are wired to interpret ambiguity or lack of communication as a sign that something might be wrong. Think about it, if you're out in the savanna of evolution hunting, you're standing on one side of a field with a spear, and by another bush someone else is standing with a spear, and then your buddy goes silent, why did that happen?

Obviously, lion or T-Rex or a cobra, right? They're dead, they're bleeding out... We're going to get into the science, but I'm cutting to the chase here to say they're bleeding out, they got lunched, and you are next. Your nervous system is likely going to, in this case... given you're in a low lion area of the world, as many of us are who are listening to podcasts on our mobile devices... your partner's silence becomes the unknown that your brain tries to fill with all kinds of stories, because that's what brains do.

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They're meaning-making machines, right? So it's going to fill it with all kinds of stories. "Oh my God, are they mad at me? Do they hate me? Did I say something really wrong? What do I do now? They're shutting down. It's my fault. I did this. It's my fault. They hate me."

Or the flip, "Oh my fricking God, they're doing this again. I cannot stand this. I have told them this is not acceptable." And then you go into being angry at them, attacking them, demonizing them.

Your brain is racing to interpret their silence, imagining worst case scenarios, ramping up your anxiety and making any underlying stories that stand between you, or that are challenging between you, all the stronger, right? Know that this reaction, this surge of anxiety, the need to fill the space to fix things, is your body's way of trying to regulate, of grasping for safety and connection in the midst of the unknown.

Your system is doing exactly what it's meant to do. It's working to bring you back into what feels like a safe, relational space, even if it means overexerting yourself. Whew. Yeah, it's a lot, right?

So the first thing we get to do, I'm always going to invite us to orient. Always, always. And this is my nervous system training. This is my training in somatic experiencing, sensory motor psychotherapy as a coach. This is what our nervous systems need.

And if you're like, "What is orienting?" I'm going to teach you. It's quite simple. We can complicate it, but it's simple. Also, you can go to victorialbina.com and right at the top of the page, there's a little teal bar.

If you click on it, you can put your name and your email in on the next page and download a suite of meditations, nervous system exercises, including

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an orienting exercise, totally for free, on the house. And it gets you on my email list. That way you won't miss a free webinar, huh? Win-win-win-win, huh?

But orienting. So you're in this conversation, you said something, they went to 12... they might not even show it on the outside... but all of a sudden, they're dead silent. You want to die/ maybe jump off a bridge. You don't know what's going on, and your brain is freaking out. Orient.

Look over your left shoulder and take in the room you're in. Just look around and take it in. Don't make it any more complicated than that. Just look at the couch, look at the desk, look at the window, look at the table. Just look and let your nervous system ground in the here and now.

You're not eight years old, when your mom would do this and then your dad would start screaming. You're not 22, in college. You're now. From there, find something solid to connect to. Push, with your hand, on the table. Push, with your butt, into the chair. Push, with your feet, into the ground. Push, with your hand, on your own thigh.

Connect. Squeeze your own thigh. Connect with something that is sturdy, that is ground, that is here and now, to help your nervous system come into real presence in this moment, so you stop spinning.

If the spin continues, drop out of the limbic system, come back into prefrontal cortex by counting. So take your thumb and tap your first finger and say one, your second finger and say two, your third finger and say three, your pinky finger and say four. Come back. Pinky four, ring finger three, New York finger two, pointer finger one.

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And just keep going, tapping your fingers slowly. Count under your breath, count in your brain. If you and your partner, if this is a thing that happens, you can have this preordained. Like, “Babe, if you do this thing, I'm going to do what I need to regulate my nervous system so I can stay present and can stay in the room. And counting my fingers is one of the things I'm going to do. It works best for me out loud.” If that's true, do it. Right?

Meanwhile, know that that surge of anxiety, that need to fill the space to fix things, is your body's way of trying to regulate, of grasping for safety and connection in the midst of the unknown. Your system is doing exactly what it's supposed to, to try to bring you back to what feels like a safe relational space, even if it means overexerting yourself. So take a breath and start to attune to your body.

Let's take a moment and lift/shift focus. I'm going to let you keep tapping your fingers, touching your fingers and breathing, right? Being here and now. And let's talk about your partner.

So when they go quiet, in these moments they may be having... what they likely are having, if they're actually shutting down... they're having a nervous system reaction of their own, right? Silence can be a sign that they're entering a freeze state. A state where their system, feeling overwhelmed or unsure, goes into a kind of emotional pause.

Freeze is a protective mechanism about stillness, withdraw and conserving energy. And it's a combination of fight or flight. “I'm anxious. Oh my God, they need a response. They need me to say something.” With the dorsal disconnect, your foot's on both the gas and the brake at the same time. It feels like crap.

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And this has happened to me so many times. It really feels like your brain's off. You're like, "What?" And then I would just forget what came before. I would forget. I didn't know anything, right?

So if your partner isn't actively avoiding you in the conflict, but seems to be really shutting down, they may be struggling, like I often was, with how to stay in the conversation while also managing their own internal overwhelm. In other words, their silence might not be about you, and likely isn't, but rather a reflection of their nervous system's need to retreat in order to process what's happening.

This could stem from a history of feeling unsafe in conflict, from a lack of emotional bandwidth in the moment, from a combination of toddler things, and a trigger from the past. We don't know, only they know and they may not actually know, which can be really challenging.

And so here's where things get tricky. When your system senses their withdrawal, your anxiety spikes, which may lead you to over-function; talking more, filling the space with words, trying to pull them back into the conversation to avoid the discomfort of their silence. But this can inadvertently push them deeper into their freeze response as their system perceives your increased energy as overwhelming, even if your intention is to connect.

Psychologically, the silence triggers something deeply uncomfortable for most of us tied to attachment needs. As humans, we are pack animals wired for connection. And especially in conflict, we need signs from our partner that they're still there, still with us. Silence can feel like emotional abandonment, even if that's not at all what's actually happening. This can tap into attachment anxiety; the part of us that fears being left alone, emotionally disregarded or dismissed.

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In these moments, your brain is working overtime to interpret what your partner's silence means, often defaulting to worst-case scenarios because ambiguity can feel like danger, right? And the brain kind of thinks, "If I'm anticipating the worst, I won't be blindsided, right? If I assume that that is a lion, there's no way it's a tabby cat, and we run the hell away from here, then there's less of a chance we're going to get lunched."

But while it's doing its best to keep you safe, it's also escalating the sense of disconnection, anxiety, and unsafety. So what we need to do is turn towards our experience with a deep dose of compassion and curiosity. That anxious, worked-up feeling that you described, the question asker, it's completely valid. It makes so much sense that you'd feel rattled and like you need to fill the space when faced with silence.

The question to explore here is, what is your anxiety asking for in these moments? Is it seeking reassurance? A sign of connection? Perhaps it's trying to ensure that you're not left alone to navigate something difficult. The urge to fill the silence is your nervous system's way of seeking a tether, right? Some grounding in an experience that feels like it's otherwise slipping away from you.

Recognizing that when this anxiety spikes, it's because a part of you, maybe an old younger part, feels deeply unsettled by the silence. You might take a moment to check in with yourself. What am I feeling in my body right now? Where do I feel anxiety? Tightness? Is there a story I'm telling myself about this silence that is making me feel more, potentially more, and potentially more panicked?

Am I ramping myself up now? What do I need to ground? By acknowledging these reactions with gentleness, you give yourself the space to understand that your body and mind are working so hard to

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protect you, even if they're doing it in a way that feels wicked uncomfortable.

Next, I would really invite you to extend this same compassion towards your partner. If their silence is triggering your anxiety, it's possible that their quietness is being triggered by something too, right? Because we already established this isn't a situation where someone's just avoiding, they've just left the room energetically, right?

So instead of filling the silence right away, what if you brought gentle curiosity into the space? You could start by checking in with them, not from a place of fixing or filling the silence, but from a place of understanding and really a desire to understand.

That could sound something like sweetness, or like whatever one of your cute, disarming pet names is. "My tender ravioli, I notice you're quiet right now. What's going on for you? Sweetness, I feel a bit anxious when things get really quiet like this, especially in the middle of a big conflict. Can you help me understand what you're feeling? Let me know if you have space to hear what I'm feeling."

This can open a door for them to share what's happening in their inner world. It can allow you to share a bit of what's happening in yours without rushing to fix the discomfort. And what it's also doing, is helping your partner to see and sort of get present to what's going on.

Because when you're in a freeze, when you're checked out, when you're not there or dissociated, you don't realize it. I never did. I never realized that I wasn't in the room. I just was like... I don't have words. Remember, sometimes that silence can be your partner's nervous system's way of saying, "I need a minute."

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Remember, trauma is too much, too fast, too soon. We heal trauma with slowness. Slowness, patience, time. And so their nervous system can be saying, "I went towards trauma. Towards the experience of trauma, the energetic of trauma in my body. And to come back towards ventral vagal, I'm going to need a minute."

So it may not necessarily be a sign of disconnection or withdrawal from the relationship. It could just be a pause, a breath, a moment of processing, right? When you allow silence to exist without immediately filling it, you create space for deeper understanding and connection. To move through it together instead of for it to become a, 'you're doing this, so I have to do...' right? You don't move into ultimatum.

Now, look how we're bringing everything full circle. That was pretty good, right? Cool, cool philosophy. Let's get practical; this is what we do here. This is why you're listening to the nurse, right? I don't know why that accent's coming out. I think I miss New York.

We've been in Toronto for a month and a half now, almost two months. Oh my God, wait, no, is that true? Wow. I miss New York, so my New York accent's coming out. It's a good one. It's one of the best accents I like to do. Listen, I'm going to refocus.

When we get activated towards trauma, when the body feels like it has to react as though we were in trauma, we forget that we are, today. We are here, we are now, we are safe in our home, in our car, in our office, we're now, right? And our body and nervous system goes to, "We are then! Panic!" We are six or eight or 24, and we don't have capacity.

And so what do we do? We show the nervous system we are now by orienting. I mean, complicate this if you want to, you're an adult, but I

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wouldn't. Simply look around the room you're in, the space you're in and name the things you can see. Thermos, maté, door, water, plant, plant... lots of plants... art, trampoline... love my trampoline... computer, calendar, window, lamp, plants, crystals, lamps, etc.

Don't complicate it. When you feel the anxiety rise, take a moment to pause. Notice what's happening in your body. Maybe place a hand on your chest or your belly. Take a few slow breaths with a long slow out. Remind yourself that you're safe, even in the discomfort of not knowing what's happening now or what's happening next.

Two, ask yourself what story your mind is telling you about the silence. Are you assuming the worst? How might this story be fueling your anxiety, your stress, your worry, your fear, your anger?

Three, instead of trying to fix the silence by talking, like talking at your person, try asking your partner what they need. "My love, it seems like you've gone quiet. What's happening for you right now? And if you know, how can I support you, if you feel available and able?"

One of the things I do a lot with my clients is I offer a menu. Billey and I do this for each other all the time too. I offer a menu, right? "I'm here to support you. Would you like a menu of options?" And talk about this before you're in a stressful moment, because if not, they're going to be like, "You want to order Chinese? What do you mean? You want to order tacos? What do you mean you offer me a menu?"

It's not takeout, it's feelings. But a menu in this kind of setting means "I am grounded. I am regulated. I am in ventral vagal. I have full cognitive capacity, and I can create a list for you, and offer it to you, of options,

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things that might maybe would be nice right now. You get to decide if you want those.”

So I could say, “My love, I’m here to support you. I would love to offer support if you’d like it. Would you like some support or would you like some space?” “Support.” “Okay, great. Do you know what you need or would you like me to menu?” “Menu.” “Great.”

We could start with touch, like a hug. We could start with deep touch, if you’re a person who needs that. Those of us in the neuromagical community, deep, heavy touch can feel really great. Lying full-body weight on someone can be super grounding.

Would you like to go for a walk? Would you like me to put you in the shower or the bath? Would you like some water? Would you like to hum or sing? Would you like to put on an episode of *The Office* and then come back to this? “Bears, Beets, Battlestar Galactica”? Would you like me to try to make you laugh?

You see where I’m going? Offer up a menu. If you’re a person whose brain might not be able to come up with a menu in the moment, don’t expect yourself to. That’s not kind. Stop, put some time aside with your partner. This is your homework. Stop, if this tends to happen in your relaysh, or whatever other issue, where support would be helpful and menus would be helpful.

On a beautiful Saturday afternoon, when things are feeling really great, get a wee blanket, go to the park, have a little iced tea, whatever you want to have, but make some time. Give it 20-30 minutes. And I recommend the “notes” section on your phone, because most people have their phone with them most of the time.

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Write down what the menu items are for: I'm furious. I'm checked out. I'm silent. I'm frozen. I'm stressed. I'm overwhelmed.

And start to really brainstorm with each other. Do this for yourself. Do this for and with each other. It's a beautiful thing to do. And if you're like, "But I'm not in a relation," great. Go with your best friend. Go with a new friend. Do this with your therapist or your coach. Do it with your dog. Just for you.

But the point is, do it. Let yourself get to know what it is that is most supportive when your nervous system is in a moment of dysregulation and it feels challenging to come back home to yourself. Okay?

So yeah, that was three. Check in with your partner gently. And remember, humans, it's not what you say, it's how you say it. That old adage does hold some water in terms of the nervous system. Prosody of voice, or the tone of our voice, plays a huge role in how we hear information, how we hear offers.

Remember, you're not accusing them of anything. You're just opening the door for them to share. And just using whatever gentle tone tends to be most supportive when they're dysregulated. And if you don't know, try what works for you. It may work. You got a 50/50 shot here, buddy. You might as well try it, right?

If you don't know, you're just getting to know someone, it can't hurt. The worst thing that happens is they tell you, "Oh, that tone doesn't work for me." Then you get to try again.

Four: Consider letting the silence breathe. Because sometimes silence is okay. I feel like we live in such a culture and such a moment where it's go-go-go. Everyone's got a show on the TV. They're doom scrolling the

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phone with the radio on. It's a lot, right? And so we're used to having the void filled, the silence filled.

But I want to remind you that it doesn't have to be. By letting it be, you create the possibility for your partner to come back when they are ready. So consider just tuning into your breath, finding your feet, getting present to the textures around you. In that silence, explore the texture of the couch, the table where you're sitting.

What does it feel like to be your feet right now? Get present in your own body to come into greater awareness of what's actually going on for you right now.

Side note, orienting and body scanning are totally new things for many of us, and they can be old hat for us, but it would be nice to have someone guiding us in a new way. And so I have a suite of meditations and nervous system exercises available for you for free on my website, VictoriAlbina.com.

Right at the top of the page, there's a little bar that says something like, "Get your free meditations here." Click it. On the next page, you put in your name and your email address, and then you get those sent to your email inbox for free. It also gets you on my email list, and so you'll be the first to know about free things like webinars and retreats and the book, and all the things. How fun, right?

Five: Express your needs. So you can still share how the silence affects you, but from a place of vulnerability rather than urgency. "I feel anxious when it gets really quiet, especially when we're in the middle of a conversation. It would be helpful for me to understand what's going on so I

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don't feel so unsettled in the energy between us. I can take care of myself. I can go to the other room, do my practices, go for a walk.”

And, “I would like to feel a reconnection with you in this moment. Are you available for that?” In this way, you're offering your own kind of boundary. Not as a way to control or avoid the silence, but as a way to bring awareness to what you need to feel more grounded. Yeah, to feel more connected, reconnected, to come back home to one another. Right?

Finally, and I'll close with this, silence, though uncomfortable to be on either side of, can also be an invitation. It's an invitation to notice what's happening inside of you. To get curious about your partner's experience, and to stretch into deeper, more compassionate communication instead of rushing to fill the space, which most of us do. I get it.

You can approach it as an opportunity to sit with a discomfort, to breathe through the anxiety, and to trust that you and your partner can navigate it together. And if you can't, that is some really useful information about your relationship. Right?

Remember that relationships are built not just in the words spoken, but in the pauses between them. And you get to get present to those pauses and to learn everything that they have to share with you, and have to show you about who you are, who your partner is, your different nervous systems, and how they work together and how they don't.

These are all just moments where we get to choose to come into presence and compassion, and choose to continue to grow in and with ourselves, and with one another.

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Finally, if your partner is often freezing, this could mean that there's some trauma in their body that could really benefit from support. So working with a trained and licensed trauma therapist, or a coach with extensive training, such as my training in somatic experiencing, could be really helpful in this instance.

It's a conversation you all can have, if that fits within the scope of where you're at in your relationship. If it's your third date, maybe not. But it could be a loving conversation that you could have that could offer some great relief and support to both of you.

My loves, my goodness, it's been like 40 minutes. I had every intention of answering a third question for you, which is a really great question, but you'll have to make sure that you're following the show so that you don't miss that question. Because I think it's time to wrap up for this week.

In closing, be gentle with yourself, be compassionate, be curious, be open. There's always more to learn when we are curious than when we jump to conclusions and let our nervous system reactivity take us out of presence.

Anchored is available, should you want it. It would be an absolute delight to have you with us. I have lots of webinars, a live coaching call... free live coaching calls... so much coming up in this beautiful month of October. Make sure you are on my mailing list so you don't miss a darn thing.

And you can get that by going to VictoriAlbina.com and signing up for those free meditations and nervous system orienting exercises. What a delight. Well, thank you, my beauty, for tuning in. This has been really fun. I love answering your questions. Keep them coming. I'll keep doing these shows. They're really a blast.

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Alright, 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. Be well, my beauty, and I'll talk to you soon. Ciao.

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you want to learn more all about somatics, what the heck that word means, and why it matters for your life, head on over to VictoriaAlbina.com/somaticswebinar for a free webinar all about it. Have a beautiful day, my darling, and I'll see you next week. Ciao.