

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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This is *Feminist Wellness*, and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine expert, and life coach B ea 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. Welcome back to *Feminist Wellness* and this series about why we struggle to allow others to have their feelings unencumbered by our feelings and thoughts and experience of their feeling. And this one's tender. It cuts deep. Because this isn't just about like personal quirks or bad habits we picked up along the way. It's about the air we breathe.

The way we respond to other people's emotions and experience of life is shaped by the way we experience ourselves, what we believe we are allowed to experience. So if you're like, well, I'm not allowed to get mad, so you're annoyed when other people get mad. It's all shaped by the systems we live under, the roles we've been trained to play in society, in our culture, in our family of origin, and of course the survival patterns our bodies, our brilliant and amazing nervous systems have learned over time.

If you've ever thought, I just don't have the energy for their feelings right now, or why can't they just get over it, or whatever, I like experience the same thing and I'm not upset. This episode is for you with no judgies, no shame, just naming what is so we can make decisions about whether we want to keep living these ways or not. Right? That's all we're ever doing around here.

Today we're exploring two powerful interconnected forces that shape how we react to others' emotions. And if this is your first time listening to *Feminist Wellness*, welcome! This isn't the best place to start. This is episode 317. I would go back, I think it's like five episodes, to where we start talking about feeling our feelings and emotions and listen through till you get here. Okay? All right.

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

So those two powerful interconnected forces are systems of oppression like patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and how they teach us to suppress emotions both in ourselves and others, and how burnout and emotional exhaustion, which generally tied to systems of oppression, leave us feeling too drained to hold space for anyone, often including ourselves, right? Even when we actually want to.

And because I never leave you hanging and your girl is a nurse at the end of the day, we are practical people around here, my taller toddlers, we will close with a remedy. Practical somatic tools to start shifting these patterns in our perfect sweet tender ravioli lives. Are you ready? I am, let's get into it.

One, how systems of oppression shape emotional suppression. Let's zoom out. Neither you nor I live in a vacuum. It would be hard to live in there, what with all the dust and also there being no air. God, I crack me up over like the dumbest things and I love that about me. I really do.

The way we relate to emotions, ours and others, isn't just personal. Of course it's not. Nothing is. It's cultural, systemic, inherited in the way of like mirror neurons, right? Monkeys see, monkey do. We saw our big monkeys relating to their feelings and our feelings and other people's feelings these ways, and so we take that on as fact.

Let's start with capitalism, late stage capitalism to be more specific. Emotions are an inconvenience. So I want you to imagine something. You're at work. Wow, I just like sat up straight. It happened automatically. Somatic awareness is an amazing thing.

So you're at work sitting in a meeting, sitting up very straight, and someone across the table suddenly gets teary-eyed. Maybe they just got difficult feedback. Maybe they're overwhelmed. Maybe their cat just died. What happens in a corporate setting?

The room gets tight. People shift in their chairs, exchange quick glances, people start getting that you can feel the anxiousness, the discomfort. It's

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

palpable. Someone coughs, someone clears their throat, and finally says it. The thing that's like always said in these moments, let's just focus on solutions.

And that's what's said because the focus is... The focus. Let's get back to work, right? Let's move past this quickly. What you don't hear is, sweet pea, what's going on? Not, I see you're upset. Do you wanna talk about it? Not human to human interaction. Not, your feelings matter. Your feelings are important. Your experience is an important thing.

Instead, it's like hush it up, let's keep moving because your worth is measured in output under capitalism. Time is money. Emotions, whether yours or someone else's, are seen as distractions, inefficiencies, interruptions to the machine of productivity.

But here's the truth, and I'm going to put it in capitalistic terms. Emotions are productive. Not in a, like, maximize your quarterly output kind of way, not in a KPI kind of way, but in the way that in my world matters most. Because they help us process experience, connect with others, be a more vibrant, living human in the world. Not really capitalism's goal, but emotions help us to make meaning. And humans are meaning-making machines.

So when we shut down emotions, ours or anyone else's, we lose access to that deeper wisdom. And some might say that that is a goal in capitalism is to keep us moving forward, increasing the bottom line for shareholders and the fistful of billionaires out there, and not in this deep and powerful connection to our inner wisdom, right? To that inner voice that knows that we really should just be, I don't know, eating berries in the woods.

Let's look at the patriarchy. Emotional care is women's work in the patriarchy, right? So let's go back in time. You are eight years old. I feel like that's a particularly tender-on-y moment where we are aware of self, a self to some small degree. We're aware of the world, of others.

You're eight years old. You're sitting at the dinner table watching your mom attempt to hold it together. Your dad is frustrated about something work

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

bills, golf, the factory where he works, whatever it is, and he's ranting. And your mom, she's doing what she was raised up to do, not what's intrinsic, instinctual, natural BS, what she was trained to do as a human socialized as a woman in the world, particularly in her time and place.

She's nodding, murmuring soothing words, holding space for his feelings. And you notice she's not expressing her own. She's probably not even allowing her own. There's probably no room for her own. She looks tired, worn down, over it. But meanwhile, she's managing him.

Later, when you ask, mom, are you okay? She forces a tight smile, perhaps tears coming to her eyes and says, I'm fine, sweetheart. Through that, you know like that sound that a mouth makes when like the jaw is like clenched, but smiling, I'm fine.

And right there in that tiny seemingly unremarkable moment, something gets wired in to little kiddo you. That emotions, especially men's emotions, are women's work to handle. That taking care of other people's feelings makes you good, worthy, valuable, especially when you subsume your own. Push them on down! And that your emotions? Maybe they're too much. Maybe there's no room. Maybe it's selfish for women to create room. Maybe they're better left unsaid, unfelt, unexperienced. Maybe you should just keep rolling.

Because under the patriarchy, emotional labor isn't just encouraged for women, it's demanded. Be the caretaker, be the peacemaker, soothe things over, but here's the catch. Express your emotions too much and suddenly you're too sensitive. Cry and you're hysterical. Get angry and you're unladylike. Women are way too emotional to be in leadership, running things, you know, because anger and putting a hole in the drywall with your fist is not an experience of an emotion, right? It's an impossible double bind.

You've learned that emotions make you weak, unlovable, a problem. And so you might habitually shut them down in others too, because somewhere

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

deep down you absorb the message that emotions are a liability. And for way too many women, dealing with abuse in the home, intimate partner violence, or the threat thereof, and not managing a man's feelings, especially really big ones, right, or ones tipping over towards sympathetic is just not a wise choice. And you're way smarter than that. So you continue to manage.

I'll just make a little note here that I'm talking within this, you know, when we're talking about the patriarchy, I chose to talk about a man and a woman. But this same scenario was my life in my first marriage with a person who was socialized as a woman but had no capacity to manage their own feelings and demanded that I do it for them, or there was a pretty high price to pay in that emotionally and unfortunately otherwise abusive marriage.

So yeah, patriarchy man-woman, but masculine person, femme person, the same thing happened. So just naming that, because if you're out here and you're like, oh, this is me, but you know, I'm not with a cis dude. The patriarchy comes in in all sorts of forms, right? And queer misogyny is, is just as real as any other kind. So naming it as I have, not just as I see it, but as I've lived it. So shaking that off.

Next, moving on in white supremacist systems, control is a key theme. And we're seeing that play out in our government in the US and sadly in other places in Argentina where I'm from. Control over bodies, control over expression, control over emotions, control over thoughts, and control over experience in the world.

Black, Indigenous, and other people of color are often hyper-policed for how they express emotions. Anger in particular is weaponized against them the way it's weaponized against human socialized as women under the patriarchy. So here, the double whammy of the angry black woman stereotype or the loud emotional Latina. This isn't just about individuals, it's about the collective trauma of living in systems that prioritize control over connection.

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

Imagine you are a Latina in a workplace meeting. A white colleague repeats an idea you just said. And when you calmly point it out, hey, Chad, I actually just shared that exact same thought, the energy in the room shifts. You see the subtle recoil? The way their posture stiffens, the unsaid message in their eyes, she's being difficult again, she's angry, except you're not angry. You're just naming a truth and you're doing it directly. And whiteness doesn't like directness. It likes passive aggression. It loves sideways, right? It's rude to be direct.

God, the number of times I've heard that. I actually got called into my medical director's office once when I worked at a large primary care network in Manhattan because a patient, actually a Latina patient, complained that I was being too Latina because I was like being too direct in talking about her health. Fascinating, and I'm a white Latina with so much privilege, but anyway, I won't go off on that tangent. Let's do that another day.

But you name a truth, you speak up for yourself, and you're angry. You're a problem. And this is how white supremacy polices emotions. BIPOC folks are disproportionately judged for how they express their feelings, especially anger.

If you grew up seeing this, experiencing this, navigating it, you may have learned that big emotions are dangerous and that keeping your feelings in check is the only way to stay safe. And so we absorb these rules, we internalize them, and then we pass them along. We judge ourselves, we negate ourselves, we suppress ourselves, and we do it to others without realizing.

Now, let's bring this down to the personal level. Even if you know all of this, even if you're actively unlearning these systems, there's another layer that makes it hard to hold space for others, and that's burnout.

So burnout isn't just a mental state. It is a full body experience. When your nervous system is stuck in a chronic stress response, whether that's

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

sympathetic overdrive, fight or flight, or dorsal vagal shutdown, freeze or collapse, you don't have the capacity to hold space for anyone else's emotions, not in like a real way.

So imagine your nervous system is a battery. If it's already drained from work, stress, family responsibilities, the emotional labor you've been carrying for years, dealing with politics and the stress of that, someone else's feelings can feel like way too much to handle. Not because you don't care, because your body is saying, I'm running on empty.

Ever sat in your car after a long day, gripping the steering wheel too drained to even turn the key? Or stared at your phone as a friend's name lit up on the screen knowing you should answer and a part of you wants to answer, but feeling like if you have to listen to one more person's feelings you'll just scream? My baby, that's not you being cold or selfish or a problem that's your nervous system saying I can't take any more stimuli right now. Like it's full.

When I think of capacity, it's like a swimming pool and it fills up when there's too much stimuli and nothing else can get in without something flooding over. For folks with emotional outsourcing habits, our codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing habits, burnout often comes from years, often decades, of putting others' needs before our own.

This creates a cycle where you give and give, ignoring your own emotions to take care of others. You reach a breaking point where even the smallest emotional request feels overwhelming. You shut down others' feelings, not out of malice, but out of sheer survival.

This cycle isn't your fault, my love. It's a natural result of a system that teaches us to prioritize others over ourselves without ever teaching us how to refill our own cups. Let's look at an example.

So Janice was a client of mine. She's a nurse and a mom who came to anchored feeling completely drained. "I just can't handle one more person's emotions," she told me. For years she'd cared for everyone, her patients,

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

her kids, her partner, with like full caretaking. And in so doing there was no space for her own needs. She also was the eldest daughter and grew up pretty much being the parent to her own parents to her own siblings. "It's like my brain is stuck in overdrive and every time someone tells me how they feel these days, I just want to scream."

She's acknowledging where she was coming from, normalizing that so many people feel this way. I started to work with Janice using somatic practices so she could begin to work with her physical body to release the tension she'd held for years while thought work offered her new ways to think about herself, her body, her mind, her capacity.

And she learned how to set boundaries that honored that capacity. And slowly, the exhaustion began to lift, not by necessarily even doing different things in life, but by relating to them differently through the stories she was telling about them and the way she was experiencing life through her body and her soma.

So let's talk about remedies. My beauty, we live in a world that benefits from our exhaustion. I do not share these remedies as a way to bolster us to take on more BS. Absolutely not. I share these remedies always, every time, every week for the last, you know, 300 some odd, 317 weeks, which is kind of bananas to pause and think about. But anyway, I share these remedies, not so we can be more resilient to suffer more within systems, but so that we can have more space, more capacity for joy, for interdependence, to show up for the people, communities, places, movements that really matter to us.

Capitalism tells us that emotions slow us down, that we should push through and stay productive. Patriarchy tells women and femmes that our values and how well we soothe others, not in expressing our own needs. White supremacy polices emotional expression for all of us, and particularly forces BIPOC to suppress their natural emotional responses just to stay emotionally, physically, financially safe.

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

These systems don't want us to reclaim our nervous system. They don't want us to build capacity because when we do, we become harder to control. We become ungovernable. We stop abandoning ourselves to keep the machine running.

So when we talk about unlearning these patterns, we're not just talking about feeling less stressed. We're talking about interrupting these cycles that Systems have forced on us. Reclaiming your right to feel, to set boundaries, to stop emotionally over-functioning is an act of defiance. It's time to come back home to yourself, and thus to your interdependent communities. And here's how we start.

One, anchor yourself in the present moment. Before responding to someone else's emotions, take a moment to ground yourself, to orient your nervous system to come home. And if you don't know how to orient your nervous system, no shame, no blame. I have a set of free meditations, orienting exercises. It's a whole suite. It's for free because I love you and this work matters. You can head to my website, Beatriz, my first name, B-E-A-T-R-I-Z-A-L-B-I-N-A.com/317. That's the website for this episode. Put your little name and your email in and you'll get that sweet sent to your email inbox for free. Isn't that fun?

So before you respond to someone else's emotions, orient your nervous system ground. Maybe just maybe you've been conditioned to fix emotions fast, to absorb someone else's distress like it's your job, like you're the emotional sponge of your entire family, community, job site. Maybe your heart rate spikes when someone raises their voice, or you instinctively shut down when you sense conflict.

This is normal. This makes sense given where you came from. Nothing's wrong with you. Nothing's broken. You're fine. You don't need to be fixed and being able to stay grounded in yourself when life gets lifey can only benefit you. So I'll invite you to pause to take a breath in long slow out, feel your feet on the ground. This is what we do in the embodied learning lab in The Somatic Studio every day.

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

We orient, we find our feet, we find the ground. Press your feet gently into the floor before you say anything. Notice the sensation of the floor, the ground, the earth coming up to meet you. Solid, steady, real. As you do that, and I want you to do this when you're not in a stressful moment, do it once a day, twice a day, every day.

Feel the ground, I am here, I am supported. It is safe in this moment to be here. When systems have trained us to prioritize others over ourselves we have to rebuild the muscle of self-presence. It is vital you get to take up space here and it is imperative that you do.

Two we check in with capacity. So if your default mode if your habit, if your survival skill is to jump into emotional caretaking, I want you to ask yourself something pretty radical. Do I actually have the capacity to hold space right now? Not should I, not will they be mad if I don't, not but they need me. No, no, do I have it to give? Do I have it to give and if I don't, is this a situation where I want to get to there, right?

So like is this a person who matters deeply to me that I'm interdependent with that I care about so much? Or is this some dude at work coming to my desk and saying, oh, you're a mom, right? I bet you're really good with feelings and I'm just dumping his feelings all over me day after day.

So we're gonna come to different answers in different situations, right? So if this is your best friend who you love and you're like, I don't have the energy to give but I love her so much I want to get to there, that's one thing. Put that aside. We're coming back to that in an episode soon. Make sure you're subscribed to the show, you're following the show.

But if it's like, no, I don't have the energy to listen to dude right now, that's okay. You don't have to listen. You don't have to give your time and energy there. Who says he has to do that? You're not gonna get a medal for suffering the most listening to someone and draining yourself. But you can still respond with kindness and I recommend kindness pretty much all the time because why not?

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

And you can respond with kindness without overextending yourself. So try saying, I care about what you're feeling and I don't have the bandwidth to be fully present right now. Can we talk about this later? Or I hear you and I want to give this the attention it deserves. I need some time first. Can we come back to it? Or Chad, I'm really glad that you feel like you can trust me and I really need to focus on my work while I'm at work. I hope you can find a friend to talk to.

Now, I can already hear you bristling. And I want to tell you that setting these kinds of limits and saying no in gentle, loving, kind ways isn't selfish in some bad way, right? It's a radical act of valuing yourself, of self-trust, of honoring your own capacities, one that dismantles the lie that you must abandon yourself to be worthy. So actually, maybe it is a little selfish. And what if that's okay, though?

What if learning to be a little selfish is a vital stop on the way to being able to regulate your nervous system enough to show up for the people you love when you want to because you're not absorbing so much BS in other places. Just like, maybe that's not a problem. Maybe in fact, it's amazing and laudable and a wonderful goal to have for ourselves.

Three, regulate your nervous system. Sometimes other people's emotions can activate our own unresolved survival responses. Because science, right? Maybe when someone raises their voice, your stomach tightens and your breath gets shallow. Maybe your chest constricts when someone cries because your brain still registers tears as a danger signal from childhood.

Instead of forcing yourself to override your body's response, try soothing your nervous system in real time. Focus on your exhale. Inhale for four, exhale for six to eight. You've heard me say it a thousand times. Longer exhales activate your parasympathetic nervous system, which signals to your body, there are no lions here, you are not under threat. Place a hand on your chest. The warmth and pressure of your own touch can send a signal of safety to your nervous system, especially if you've coded it as

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

such. And we all learn about Pavlov in high school psychology, Psych 101 in college, right?

Ring the bell, dog salivates. If you practice, hand on my chest is a signal of safety. And you just do that like when you're brushing your teeth or before you turn the car on or like before you swipe onto the subway, it will become that in pretty short time. You could also hum or sigh deeply which stimulates the vagus nerve and can help shift your body out of fight or flight. It's not going to do it on its own like a little hmmm. It can be soothing but like we got to do a couple two, three things, you know, depending on how activated we are.

And it's vital to say that your job is not to override your nervous system. And that's not the goal of these exercises. It's to listen to it, honor what it needs, and slowly teach it that you are safe to feel. It's okay to feel. It's a safe thing. You can do that and you won't die. And I know it feels like you might. I get that, I've experienced that, but you won't.

Next, once you're regulated, then you can hold space. If you want to, if you choose to, if you really are like, yeah, you know what? This is a friend I love so much. This is a reciprocal, mutual, loving, interdependent relationship, you can hold that space without collapsing into fixing mode.

So most of us were either raised to either shut emotions down, you're fine, it's not that bad, all of us get lonely. Or immediately try to solve them. Ugh, I hear you. You know, I hear that you're lonely. Have you considered joining groups? Have you considered what you should do? Once again, our emotions don't actually need to be solved. They need to be witnessed.

Unless someone's saying, hey, I've been really lonely lately, do you have any suggestions for me? They don't want you to jump in and try to fix their life for them. So instead, try responding with things like, Oh, bear, that sounds so hard. I'm here with you. Gosh, you know, it makes sense you'd feel this way. I would feel that way too in that kind of a situation. Oof, thank you for sharing this with me. I hear you that it's not easy.

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

And so what we're not doing is saying, I know how you feel. We're not saying what you should do is. We're not saying, well, I feel. There's no like, well, or you know in the office that Oscar, well, actually, like if you're in that energy, take a breath, take a beat, go to the loo, go away. You're not in the loving energy we're working to step into here, right? This kind of loving active energy is compassion, passion with, calm, right? I'm with you. That's all we want when we're having big feels.

And this is how we break the cycle. By showing others and ourselves that emotions are not something to be fixed, erased, negated, but rather held and honored.

And finally, emotional capacity isn't endless. It needs to be restored and replenished. After holding space for someone, check in with yourself. What do you need? Maybe you need silence. Just a minute, five minutes, five hours, I don't know. Maybe you need movement, stretching, shaking, going for a walk, loosening the tension of your body that you may be held during that interaction.

Maybe journaling, a space to process your own feelings that came up. Or maybe you need to talk to someone else about how you felt while they were sharing how they felt. Or maybe just some time with your breath, right? A deep sigh to signal completion to your nervous system.

Ask yourself, what do I need right now to feel grounded? And then honor that answer, no matter how small, because remember, kitten steps, kitten steps.

So finally, my love, this work is not easy. It takes courage to reclaim your right to feel, to stop defaulting, to fixing, managing, absorbing, to recognize that you are not responsible for carrying everyone else's emotional burdens at the expense of your own well-being.

Because here's the truth, you deserve to have capacity. You deserve to have space for your own emotions. And when you reclaim that, you don't just heal yourself, you disrupt the entire system.

Ep #317: How Systems of Oppression and Burnout Shape Emotional Suppression

Next time, we'll talk about how to reclaim emotional space for yourself and others with even more practical tools to support that process. Until then, be gentle with yourself. You're doing brave, beautiful work. And consider sharing this episode, this podcast, with the people you love. I work so hard to bring you thoughtful, evidence-based, smarty-pants science and psychology-based feminist frameworks for thinking about our psychology, our codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing habits, and the way we move through the world.

This podcast is a labor of love, and my goal is that it gets in as many ears as humanly possible. So please make sure you're subscribed and following the show, please leave a rating and a five-star review. Please share it with the people you love, share it on social and tag me @beatrizvictoriaalbina. It's a lot of names, it's a lot of vowels, but you know, here we are, NP.

All right, my beauty, go have a beautiful day, take gentle care of you. But first, 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. Take care. 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 BeatrizAlbina.com/somaticswebinar for a free webinar all about it. Have a beautiful day, my darling, and I'll see you next week. Ciao.