Ep #334: Somatics Q&A: Paradoxical Nervous System Responses Explained

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Feminist Wellness with Béa Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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This is *Feminist Wellness*, and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, somatics and nervous system nerd, and life coach Béa 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. So, picture this. You're at a moment that ostensibly should feel tense. Your body knows something's off, and it's trying to tell you, something's off, something's off. But instead of heeding it and panicking, you start giggling, or yawning, or feeling like you could fall asleep right there on the spot. Or maybe you just go blank. No name for what you're feeling, no clue how to respond, just roboto, just fuzz, just checked out.

Today, we're talking about those paradoxical nervous system moments and why it can be so incredibly hard to identify your emotions in real time. These are some of the rich, layered questions that come up all the time in Anchored and The Somatic Studio, places where folks are learning to actually live this work, not just think about it. And this is what I love most about the work we do in my programs. The questions participants bring, oh my goodness, they are brilliant. And the support, it's deep and steady. That's my commitment to my people, to mi gente.

These programs are not just information hubs. They're a true container for your growth. You're never alone in this work. You've got my care, my guidance, my years of nervous system and somatic nerditry walking right beside you. Plus, of course, a gorgeous, loving, generous, kind, incredible community to witness and cheer you on every single step of the way.

So this week, I'm going to be sharing some questions from my clients and my answers, both because this information is useful and interesting and because I want you to get a taste of what happens when you work with me, a taste of the depth and power of the work we do. It's pretty frigging amazing.

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And I do that because there's a lot of you out there who want this work, need this work, and have this block, right? This thing inside you that's saying maybe you don't deserve it, maybe not now, maybe all sorts of things. And so I want to invite you to feel into your body how it would feel to ask me questions like these and then to get my answers in a private podcast you can take with you anywhere and learn from anywhere in the world, like while you're walking the dog or doing the dishes or loading the dishwasher, you can learn, you can grow, you can get direct answers from me. And I think that's pretty cool.

Oh, and if you're someone with ADHD who's ever been shamed for needing to move your body in order to focus, my love, we're going there too, because stillness is not the gold standard for presence, and your neurodivergent brain and body deserve real support, individualized support, care and support that takes all of your neuro-magicalness into account, and you do not need more rigid spiritual rules, right? Right.

So, let's get into the science, the somatics, and the sweet, compassionate truth behind these so-called paradoxes. You ready? Let's get into it. It's going to be a good one.

“Why do I sometimes react in ways that surprise me, like laughing when I'm scared or getting sleepy when I'm anxious?” Okay, this is such a juicy question because it gets right into the heart of why the nervous system doesn't always behave the way we expect it to.

If emotions were neat and logical, we wouldn't find ourselves giggling when terrified, suddenly exhausted in moments of high stress, or feeling a bizarre sense of calm when we like should be panicking. I mean, not that we ever should be panicking, but when we should be taking action. How's that? Or when a lot of people would be panicking. Anyone out there working in medicine? I'm talking to you. You know what I mean, right? Any kind of first responder? But we do, right? We find ourselves having these seemingly

paradoxical reactions, and it's not random. It's your nervous system running its most practiced protective programs. Let's break it down.

One. Mixed autonomic states. When your nervous system hits the blender button. So, your autonomic nervous system, ANS, isn't just flipping a light switch between calm and stressed. We talk so much about this here in The Somatic Studio, that it's more like a soundboard with multiple channels playing at once, and sometimes those channels mix in unexpected ways.

For example, laughing when scared often happens when sympathetic activation, fight or flight, is paired with ventral vagal engagement, social engagement system. Your body is prepared to mobilize, but your system also senses its social connection might help. So instead of running or fighting, you laugh, a way to signal, "I'm fine, right? This is fine. Somebody tell me I'm fine, please." It's a nervous system hedge towards social connection.

Getting sleepy when anxious can happen when your sympathetic charge, anxiety, hits a wall of dorsal vagal, that collapse or shutdown, or that mixed freeze response. If the system perceives the stressor as overwhelming or inescapable, it pulls the emergency brake, cue sudden exhaustion, fogginess, or even dissociation.

When I was in an abusive marriage, this happened all the time. I would tell my ex, “I can't, please stop yelling at me, please don't tower over me, please come talk to me on the same level, please stop screaming or using whatever abusive language,” and they wouldn't, right? They would double down, they'd keep pushing and pushing, and there were times I literally fell asleep. Like I would dissociate first and then was just gone. And that was my nervous system doing its deepest, most potent protection. This isn't dysfunction. None of this is dysfunction. It's adaptation, sometimes to situations we really need to get out of, and sometimes to life being life-y.

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Two. Your nervous system has learned what's safe, even if it's not logical. So, your nervous system isn't responding to just the present. That's the whole thing of it. It's reacting based on your entire life's worth of experiences. If laughing in stressful moments kept you safe as a kid, for example, diffusing an angry parent with humor, your nervous system may have cataloged humor equals safety, and now pulls that card when things get tense. If shutting down and getting sleepy helped you avoid overwhelming conflict, your nervous system may still rely on that pattern. These responses are not choices. They're deeply ingrained survival strategies. They don't always make cognitive sense, but they do make nervous system sense.

Three. The role of social conditioning. What emotions were allowed? So your culture, family, social environment shape how emotions are processed and expressed. Social determinants of health are a huge part of how we experience all of life.

Some examples. If expressing fear was unacceptable, maybe it was mocked, negated, ignored, or got you in more trouble, your nervous system might redirect a fear response into humor, anger, numbness. If anger wasn't safe, your nervous system might convert it into fatigue, people pleasing, anxiety, instead of a direct response or setting a limit, boundary. If you grew up needing to perform emotional regulation, for example, smiling when uncomfortable, staying cheerful to avoid conflict, those patterns may persist even in adulthood. So when your body reacts in ways that surprise you, it's likely following a script it learned long before you were even aware of it.

Four. Your nervous system is always, always, always, always, always, always trying to protect you. This is the key takeaway, not just to this question, but in so many ways to all my work. Every seemingly incongruent response is your body's best attempt to regulate itself. If you laugh when

scared, your system is likely trying to downregulate threat. Don't attack me, I'm hilarious.

If you get sleepy when anxious, your system is likely trying to protect you from overwhelm, as mine very beautifully did for me. If you suddenly feel calm in a crisis, your system may have learned that numbing out is safer than feeling the full intensity of danger. I'll also add that if it's your job to stay calm in a crisis, that identity and that role may supersede a nervous system reaction.

So, at the end of the day, your girl's a nurse practitioner. Let's get practical. How do we work with this instead of fighting it? Since these patterns are wired in the nervous system, logic alone won't even touch them, definitely won't change them by brain muscling your way through it. Meanwhile, awareness plus somatic body-based practices can.

One. Get curious, not judgmental. Instead of berating yourself and beating yourself up, then driving yourself into sympathetic activation by thinking, "Why am I like this? What is wrong with me?" Try. What is my super smart, absolutely amazing, incredible nervous system trying to accomplish here?

Two. Track the earliest signals. If you know you tend to laugh when scared, notice the first hint of humor rising and pause. Can you feel the underlying energy before it turns into laughter? What does that teach you about the moment you're in? Did you even realize that you were feeling scared or did you just experience the cover-up? Curious, right?

Three. Expand your regulation toolkit. If your default is shutting down under stress, experiment with gentle movement, breath, or vocalization to keep your system engaged.

Four. Practice naming the pattern out loud. Wow, I just laughed, and I think I'm actually really nervous. This signals to your nervous system that you

see what's happening, which can help loosen the automatic response over time so that you can start to create a new patterned response.

Finally, your reactions are wisdom, not malfunction. My beauty, I'll say it day after day till I'm blue in the face, your nervous system is always on your side. It's running patterns that once helped you navigate the world, even if they don't quite fit your current life. The goal isn't to fix them, it's to understand them, work with them, and when needed, expand your range of responses. Because the more you bring awareness to these patterns, the more choice you have in how you show up in the world.

Our next question is, “Why do I sometimes struggle to identify my emotions in the moment, but later realize exactly what I was feeling?” It is so frustrating and I get so mad at myself because it means I don't speak up, I don't do anything to take care of myself, and then I get so mad at me.

Okay. So let's answer the why of this to get us started, because this is so common. It has everything to do with how emotions are processed in the brain and body, not just conceptually, but somatically, through the nervous system and interoception, your ability to sense internal states. If you've ever walked away from a conversation feeling off but couldn't put your finger on why, only to realize hours later, "Oh, what he said was really rude. That really hurt." Let's break down why this happens.

One. Your nervous system prioritizes survival over awareness. It actually prioritizes survival over like pretty much everything. I mean, survival of the species, right? Right. So, when you're in a heightened autonomic state, whether that's sympathetic activation, fight or flight, or dorsal vagal shutdown, your brain is focused on action, not introspection. In sympathetic activation, the body is prioritizing movement, getting ready to argue, defend, escape.

The prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain that makes sense of experiences in real time, is partially dialed down, because deep reflection is

not a priority when your system thinks you might need to fight or run, or you're going to get lunched by a lion. And dorsal vagal shutdown, the system is prioritizing conservation. It's pulling energy inward to protect you. Here, emotions can feel fuzzy or numbed out in the moment, only surfacing when the body emerges from that state. This is why emotional clarity often comes after the fact. Once your nervous system has regulated and your cognitive processing has come back online.

Two. Your interoceptive awareness may be delayed or blunted. So, interoception, the ability to feel and interpret what's happening inside your body, varies widely from person to person and situation to situation. If you've experienced chronic stress or dysregulation, which can blunt bodily awareness, a history of emotional suppression, where recognizing emotions didn't feel safe or useful, especially if you were living in an environment where certain emotions were ignored or dismissed, so your system learned to shut them down, or you grew up in emotional outsourcing, our codependent perfectionist and people-pleasing habits, then your ability to register emotions in the moment might be lower than your ability to recognize them later when you have time and space to reflect, because that's what your nervous system learned. It's not that the emotion wasn't there, it's that it wasn't accessible in real time, and that doesn't mean anything's wrong with you.

Three. The brain processes some emotions slower than others. So, emotions don't all emerge at the same speed. What some researchers call primary emotions, like fear, anger, surprise, are quick because they're biologically wired for immediate survival. If something threatens you, your body needs to act before you have time to analyze it. My favorite question is, if you were being chased by a lion, would you want to stop to do calculus? I'd hope not.

This rapid processing is linked to survival instincts, allowing for immediate reactions to potential threats or important stimuli. The thalamus and

amygdala play crucial roles in this fast emotional pathway, enabling quick bodily responses, like moving a foot to the brake pedal when a car suddenly pulls out in front of us.

Meanwhile, what's called secondary emotions, like shame, regret, resentment, more, I think of them as more nuanced, more layered emotions, and also ones that aren't like, "Am I going to die right now?" They often require more cognitive processing. They are influenced by our thoughts, beliefs, past experiences, socialization, conditioning, social location, and they emerge after the brain has had time to interpret the situation, which means they might not show up until later.

And depending on how complex the feeling is, the emotion is, it could be the next hour, the next day, the next week, the next year. They are processed through a slower pathway involving the frontal lobes of the cortex, allowing for more nuanced interpretation of situations. This distinction between fast primary emotions and slower secondary emotions is supported by neurological evidence and psychological theories. This difference in processing speed serves important evolutionary and adaptive functions, allowing for both immediate survival responses and more complex emotional experiences that shape our behavior, social connection, and decision-making over time.

For example, you might snap at someone in a meeting and only later realize, oh, that was actually embarrassment, not just frustration, because the embarrassment needed more processing time. You might feel fine after a tense interaction but wake up the next day feeling deeply unsettled, because your brain was still filing away the emotional data overnight.

Four. Your brain needs a narrative to recognize an emotion. So, emotions don't just come from raw sensation, they're constructed by your brain using both bodily cues and contextual interpretation. In real time, you might feel a racing heart, a tight chest, a wave of heat, but without a clear narrative, your brain doesn't immediately categorize it as anger, fear, grief. Later,

when you have time to piece together what happened, what was said, what you remembered, what it reminds you of, how the tone impacted you, what was going on around you, your brain can retroactively label the emotion.

This is why journaling, talking through events, working with a coach or a therapist, talking to your buddies, or even just revisiting a memory internally can suddenly bring more emotional clarity and can be a really important part of having a vibrant inner world and ever deepening connection with self.

Five. Your nervous system might be delaying the emotional response to keep you functional. And we're using the word functional in the medical sense, meaning like, I can get up, I can put on pants. I remember to have at least one glass of water in a day, right? I know where to pee and I go pee there. Functional. Sometimes your body intentionally postpones an emotional reaction because dealing with it in real time would be way too overwhelming or inconvenient or just not smart.

So if you're in a high-stakes situation, like a work meeting, a family gathering, a medical emergency, your nervous system might mute the full intensity of your emotions until later when you're in a safer or more private space. If you have a history of needing to hold it together for others, hello emotional outsourcing, your system may automatically delay emotional processing until you're alone or in a setting where it feels safer to let your guard down.

Have you ever had the experience of bursting into tears the moment you're finally alone, even though you felt totally fine all day? That's this in action. So, let's talk about remedies. How do we strengthen real-time emotional awareness? If you want to bridge the gap between feeling something in real time and recognizing what it is sooner, here are a few things to try.

One. Pause and scan your body more often. When something feels off, do a quick check-in. Where do I feel activation or sensation? If I had to name

one word for what I might be feeling, what would it be? If someone else were experiencing this, what might I guess they were feeling? This last one helps when emotions feel slippery in your own body but obvious in others.

Two. Name any emotion, even if it's wrong. So instead of waiting for the perfect emotional label to appear, experiment with naming what it might be. Your nervous system will start getting faster at making connections when you offer it a menu.

Three. Use sensation-first language. If emotions feel unclear, try describing what's happening in your body before trying to name the feeling. For example, my chest feels tight, my feet feel red and achy, my stomach is churning, my shoulders are up near my ears. Often a feeling name will emerge after the sensations are described.

Four. Revisit emotional moments before bed. If you often realize emotions after the fact, try setting aside five minutes at night to scan your day and ask, "What emotions were present today that I might have missed in the moment?" Over time, this practice helps shorten the delay between experiencing and recognizing emotions.

Obviously, if doing that is going to get you too revved up or too emotional and you don't feel like you have the skills to put that to bed so you can go to bed, set a different time in your day to pause and do this work. Transition times tend to be most useful. So, during your commute home, or if you drive home from work in the parking lot or the driveway before you go in the house, find another transition moment and take five minutes to write.

My final thought is this, and if you've heard me say it once, you've heard it a thousand times, my beautiful, tender, perfect ravioli, your nervous system is working for you, not against you. If you struggle to identify emotions in real time, but can figure them out later, it's not a flaw. It's just how your nervous system has learned to process and prioritize information. The goal isn't to force yourself into instant emotional clarity, but to gently build the

pathways that allow you to notice, name, and integrate emotions a little more fluidly over time. As always, I'll remind you, please, be gentle.

"My last coach was a meditation teacher and she kept telling me that I need to stop fidgeting and, I quote, just sit still if I wanted to be present. I'm having feels just reading that. But I have ADHD and sitting still feels like wild torture. She said my movement was a sign I wasn't doing the work. Is that true? Am I just bad at mindfulness? Am I doomed?" Oh, my darling, my sweet love. Okay, first of all, F that. Like, truly, truly, truly, truly from the bottom of my nervous system loving heart and my neuro-magical, amazing ADHD having brain, F all of that. So much. That is really problematic and just not kind.

I created this whole guide that I called the Ultimate Guide to Hiring a Somatic Practitioner. It's free. It's a free private podcast that you can get on my website, BeatrizAlbina.com/somaticguide. And I bring that up because I talk about things like this. So, I've hired coaches who were mindset only and didn't understand somatics or the nervous system or ADHD. And one of them was obsessed with time blocking, and working with her and her rigidity around the right way to do it, I felt so bad about myself because my brain doesn't jive with that kind of time blocking and the follow these rules and set it up the week before and have set times. Oh no, that's not my dopaminergic system. No.

And so trying, working with a coach who doesn't understand you or your brain or your nervous system, it can be so painful. I mean, this coach also, there was a lot of like that kind of like spiritual bypassing and emotional bypassing and kind of shaming around not being able to change my thoughts about a situation, but what I really needed was to feel safe in my body. And once I felt safe in my body, I was able to change my thoughts. So, I bring up this guide because I spent hours and hours making it and it's free, I'm proud of it, and because it's super relevant here because it's so vital that we are really thoughtful and careful around who we hire to take

care of our brains and our bodies and our past and our present and our future.

So, I'm really sorry, like lo siento, I feel it so deep in my bones, lo siento that you worked with that person and that you weren't taken care of in a kind, tender, loving, gentle, compassionate, empathic, and like awake and aware to difference kind of way. That wasn't exactly English, but I think you know what I'm saying. That person wasn't atenta. They weren't attentive to like, there's different kinds of brains and yours doesn't sit still. Your brain body doesn't sit still the way hers does, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with you because there's nothing wrong with me.

So let's go back to the very premise of the question. Presence does not require stillness. My wife is a Tibetan Buddhist who like, yes, will sit on a cushion for like hours and hours and days and weeks and months. It's wow for her. She'll just sit. And in her lineage, they don't just sit. Right? They'll do like a 45-minute or an hour sit or even a half hour and then they'll do a walking meditation and then they'll sit and walk and sit and walk.

I mean, even when I worked at the Zen Hospice in San Francisco, I loved them so much. I was a hospice nurse there, and when we would do meditations, yeah, we would sit and then walk and then sit and then walk. So, presence does not require stillness, and stillness does not mean more better, more regulated, more virtuous because this sounds like some virtue, morality, like, "Poor baby, you can't sit, you're not as good as me," kind of vibe. Fully aware that I may be projecting that, totally owning it, but that's what's coming up for me.

That idea is profoundly rooted in ableism and this notion of spiritual perfectionism, not in actual nervous system science, or in ancient lineage. It's not ancient lineage. So, if you are a human with ADHD, brag on it. Your body might actually need to move in order to focus. So too when we have a lot of residual trauma in the body. Sitting still with it or just journaling or just talk therapy can feel stagnant.

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But for us with ADHD, fidgeting, doodling, walking while thinking, playing with putty, it's not a distraction from your attention. It might actually be your attention. Right? So I knit, I crochet, I draw, I doodle. Often when I'm coaching, I play with like blue tack or silly putty. I keep my hands moving and then my brain is laser focused. Right? So movement might be the very thing that helps you actually orient to the here and now. So you can actually be in the here and now and not spinning, ruminating, going to a thousand places. Right? Movement might be the best way for you to feel your breath, to stay with yourself, to be present, to actually be in the room.

I am the calmest I've ever been when I'm pacing around with a pen in my hand, when I'm lying on the floor, rolling a ball under my back, when I'm letting my body do what it needs to do to stay in contact with the now. Silly putty equals now for me, right? Because I'm present when I'm moving. I'm present when my hands are occupied. And I'll shout this from the rooftops. Give me a rooftop. I'll be there to shout. Presence is not a shape. It's not a particular posture. It is a relationship with your own aliveness and demanding that it look a certain way is disrespectful to aliveness, simply put.

So please, my beauty, my darling, my love, lo siento that you worked with that person. It hurts my heart. It happened to me too, or shake it off, the way we do, and let that rigid old story go because it's baloney. You are not bad at mindfulness. Your nervous system, your limbic system, your body, your systems writ large, just need a different language that's not stillness, it's movement.

And thank goodness we get to honor that. We get to seek out the people who understand us, who love us, who care for us, and who are pleased to create space for us to walk, for us to move, for us to stretch, for us to play, to doodle, to crochet, to knit, to be ourselves, knowing that us showing up in our fullness is facilitated by movement. It hampers nothing. You're doing great, and that kind of ableism has got to stop.

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Thank you for this question, my love. Thank you so much for joining me for this episode. I love sharing these questions and answers. I love answering them every week. It is really one of my greatest joys to get to nerd with you, to support you, to love you up, and help you to feel a little more grounded, a little more cared for in this world. So, if you enjoyed what you heard here, and if you'd like my support, either in the self-paced community-based programs within The Somatic Studio, or for six months within Anchored, I'd be delighted to be your coach.

All right, my beauties, 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. Ciao, ciao. Talk to you soon.

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.