

Ep #348: Emotionally Immature Partners Part 1



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With Your Host

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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. Picture this. You ask your partner if they can help with the dishes because you've had a long day. Instead of a, "Sure," or even a, "Ugh, not tonight, I'll do it in the morning," they snap back that you're attacking them, that you are selfish, that you never appreciate how hard they work. And suddenly you're standing there, sponge in hand, wondering how asking for a little bit of support turned you into being the villain.

Or maybe you bring up something tender, like how lonely you've been feeling lately, hoping for connection. Instead, what you get is, "Ugh, you're too needy. Nothing I do is ever enough for you. And now this?" And the sting of those words makes you question whether you should have said anything at all.

Or you try to recall a conversation that you know happened. You repeat back their words, but they swear they never said it. Now you're left second guessing your memory, scanning your brain like a faulty hard drive that got dropped on the sidewalk one too many times.

That's what it feels like to be with an emotionally immature partner. It's confusing, it's disorienting, and it's exhausting. You walk into these conversations with a simple hope of being heard, connecting, maybe finding a solution together. But instead, you leave feeling smaller, shakier, like you've lost track of what's real, full of self-doubt and confusion.

Let's define terms, my nerds. Emotional maturity is not about chronological age. You can be 40, 50, 60 years old and still have the emotional coping strategies of a wee child. It's about underdeveloped emotional regulation and communication skills, teamed often with nervous system dysregulation, limited capacity to tolerate stress and discomfort, a very narrow window of

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tolerance, and a lack of accountability. These are the folks who, when conflict arises, default to blame, defensiveness, withdrawal, or outright denial, instead of staying present, listening, and repairing.

I'm talking here in this episode and the one to follow about emotionally immature partners specifically, but this can be applied to parents, coworkers, friends, etcetera as well. Also, we've talked specifically about emotionally immature parents in episode 167. So listen in there for more specific to that scenario.

Now, let me give you some real-life textures of this. You come to your partner and say, "Hey, when you interrupted me in front of my friends last night, I felt dismissed and hurt." An emotionally mature person might pause, breathe, connect inward, and say, "Oof, I didn't realize I cut you off. I'm so sorry. Thank you for telling me. In the future, I'll be careful to be more thoughtful. Is there anything I can do now to make you feel better?"

Hey now. All right. That's acknowledgment. That's repair. That's growth. Right? Yes, please to that sort of an apology, that kind of, well, just adult-level recognition, right?

But the emotionally immature partner, they're likely to snap back. "You are too sensitive. I was just joking. You're remembering it wrong. People interrupt each other. It's not a big deal. Why are you making this a big deal? God, you make everything a big deal." And suddenly, you're not just talking about the interruption. You're defending your own perception of reality, your own character.

This is where the confusion creeps in. You walk away wondering, am I overreacting? Did I make that up? Is this a big deal? And that's the gaslighting effect, whether intentional or not. And the biggest impact of being in a relationship like this is exactly that: chronic confusion. You get so dumbfounded by what they're saying and what they're doing that you hardly know how to respond.

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My term for this is brain scramble. You're trying to have a conversation, to be honest and direct, to tell them how you feel, and before you know it, you're practically speechless. Their answers don't make sense. They're not connected to what you're saying. And suddenly, they're off spinning their pet narrative that exonerates them and blames you.

The focus isn't on you and the hurt you brought to the table. It's on them. And suddenly, wait, what? You are the bad guy and they're the victim all over again? Huh? You feel like you're losing your mind, and whether they mean to or not, that's part of their defense strategy.

Let me paint this picture more clearly. You walk into the kitchen, and your partner has left dirty dishes everywhere again, spaghetti sauce on the wall, even though you've talked all about this before. You take a breath. You use, you use all your best nervous system skills, and you say, "Hey, can we talk about the dishes? I feel overwhelmed when I come home to a messy kitchen, especially after we agreed to clean up after ourselves."

But instead of, "Oh, you're right, I totally forgot. My bad," you get, "Well, I was going to clean them later. Ugh, you're so controlling. I can't even relax in my own home without you nagging me. You know what? I do plenty around here that you never notice. Remember last week when I took out the trash without being asked? Where was my parade for that?"

And suddenly you're sitting there thinking, wait, how did my simple request about dishes turn me into being controlling, ungrateful, and a nag? And what does taking out the trash once last week have to do with today's dishes?

That disorientation, that feeling like you're losing the thread of reality, that's brain scramble in action. It's like trying to follow GPS directions while someone keeps spinning you around in circles.

And here's the wild part. Those kinds of interactions really do shift how your brain is working in the moment. Conflict or invalidation activates your threat response circuitry. The amygdala and other emotional centers fire up, and

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your nervous system moves into a defensive state. I mean, of course, it does. Meanwhile, the part of your brain that helps you reason through things and stay grounded, know who you are, remember that you're not a moron, the prefrontal cortex starts running less efficiently under stress. It doesn't shut down completely, but it takes a back seat as it were, while your body gears up for protection. The result? You lose track of your thoughts. Your working memory falters. And suddenly, the words you wanted to say just kind of like, poof, disappear.

You walk away from the conversation feeling small, shaken, off-balance, and less confident in yourself. Not because you're weak or like somehow didn't communicate so goodly, but because your brain got pulled into survival mode. And your body takes note too. You might notice you're getting headaches more often, your stomach is constantly in knots, you might find yourself walking on eggshells so much that your shoulders are permanently tense, your neck hurts, your jaw hurts. Some people develop insomnia because their nervous system can't seem to settle down, always scanning for the next conflict, because conflict becomes part and parcel of everything in your life. Others find themselves getting sick more frequently because chronic stress suppresses your immune system.

I know all of this not just from my clinical and my coaching work, but from my own life. My ex-spouse was like this: reactive, entitled, mean, gaslighting. Any need I had was seen as an attack on them. They turned everything around to make it my fault. And the things they twisted, they were so basic, like me asking for help with a housework. That became wrong and bad and terrible of me to ask for because according to them, they needed to relax after work. And I was being a nag for not wanting to do everything. Meanwhile, I was seeing more than 20 patients a day as a primary care provider in Manhattan, but sure, you go relax my dude.

Go on then. Living in that dynamic eroded my sense of reality little by little until I felt underwater all the time, like my nervous system could never fully rest. Luckily, I had some of the most amazing friends in the world and I

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want to give a shout out to those who helped me to see just how much I was contorting myself to survive the confusion. And my wonderful friend Andrea, who's a trauma therapist, who called this abuse what it was, abuse, and helped me see just how much I needed to get out.

This kind of relationship chaos takes a toll in many other ways too. Another hallmark? They make everything about themselves to the point where you feel like you simply don't matter. You might share, "I've had such a stressful day at work," hoping for empathy or a hug or some love or like, I don't know, your partner to be a partner. And so they jump in with, "You think your day was bad? Listen to what happened to me."

Your need for support, to be seen, to be heard, it gets sidelined again. Sometimes instead of fighting back or deflecting, they'll go the opposite direction and will completely shut down. This is stonewalling. They'll give you the silent treatment, walk away mid-conversation, or go completely cold and unresponsive. You might be trying to work through something important to process something that really matters, like really trying to improve or even save the relationship, and suddenly they're staring at their phone, or they'll say, "I'm done with this conversation," and refuse to engage further. This leaves you hanging in emotional limbo, unable to resolve anything, often feeling like you're the one who did something wrong by bringing up the issue in the first place. Oof, I felt that all the time.

Whether they're exploding or imploding, the message is the same. Your needs and feelings don't matter enough for them to show up and work through things with you. Or, they might oscillate wildly: sweet and loving one moment, cold and distant the next. And so what happens, your nervous system gets caught in a loop of hypervigilance, scanning for signs of which version of them you're going to get. That unpredictability can leave you with symptoms that look an awful lot like living with trauma: difficulty relaxing, trouble trusting, constant knot in your belly, the aforementioned neck, jaw, hip pain.

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And here's the kicker. Emotionally immature partners often present so well to the outside world. Oh, they can be charming at parties, hilarious at dinner, beloved by all of your friends, which makes it even more confusing when behind closed doors, you're the one absorbing their tantrums, their anger, their defensiveness, their refusal to engage with reality, their refusal to grow up.

This Jekyll and Hyde dynamic makes it hard to trust your own experience. So if you're wondering whether you're dealing with emotional immaturity, some signs you might be include: you consistently feel confused after conversations like you're the problem, even when you brought something up calmly. They deny things you both know happened, or they shift blame so fast, you're left utterly dizzy. They can't handle feedback without melting down, lashing out, or shutting down, or making personal attacks on you, your character, who you are. You rarely feel seen or understood because they center themselves in every discussion. You find yourself working overtime to regulate not just yourself but them too. You're tiptoeing around moods, cushioning your words, or managing situations so they won't explode, because they will explode.

Now, if you're hearing this list and you're thinking, this sounds familiar, but I can't figure out why I keep ending up in relationships like this, there's two really important things we need to talk about: reenactment, which we're going to get into detail about, and attachment style. So, attachment style, we talked about in episodes 183, 184, 185, and episode 135. I would listen in that order. And attachment, we'll talk about here. So this is one of the most powerful forces shaping who we choose as partners. When we grow up with emotionally immature parents or caregivers, our nervous system can wire itself around that experience. It learns this is what love looks like. This is what connection looks like. This is what I should expect.

So as adults, without even realizing it, we're drawn back into the familiar, choosing partners whose chaos, defensiveness, indirect communication, lack of repair, etcetera, echo the dynamics we knew as kids. Maybe your

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mother never apologized when she hurt your feelings. So now you find yourself with a partner who can't say sorry either. Or your father raged when stressed, and suddenly, you're tiptoeing around someone else's explosive moods thinking, "Well, jeez, I mean, this is just how relationships work. It's how they've always worked."

My darling, that's your nervous system doing what it's designed to do: repeat what's familiar in the name of survival. Because all of that yuck you went through, it didn't kill you. So let's go again. And it's exactly why so many of us with codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing habits, what I call emotional outsourcing, find ourselves drawn to these partnerships over and over again.

Emotional outsourcing is when we make someone else's emotions our responsibility, prioritizing their comfort over our own truth and losing ourselves in the process of keeping the peace. In part two, which is next week, we'll talk about what to do once you recognize this, how to ground yourself in the reality of what's happening, how to stop taking the bait when they twist things around, because that's really vital. And of course, how to know when it's time to walk away.

This is such important work. So make sure you're subscribed to the show, so part two downloads automatically to your phone and you do not miss these crucial tools for navigating these challenging dynamics. Because my beauty, you deserve a love that loves you back, and a life you love.

Thanks for listening. 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.