

Ep #349: Healing from Emotionally Immature Partners Part 2



Full Episode Transcript

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. Last week we talked about what it looks like to be with an emotionally immature partner. Those confusing conversations where you walk in hoping to be heard and walk out somehow feeling like the villain. We explored that sensation of brain scramble, that feeling when they twist things around, deny what happened, or make everything about themselves once more. And we touched on how our nervous systems can get wired for these familiar but painful dynamics. We also made note that all this need not just be about romantic relationships. As always, it's applicable to parent-child, coworker, friend, etc. relationships. And for more on emotionally immature parents specifically, check out episode 167 from the way back machine, 2022 in fact.

So, to refresh your memory, emotional immaturity means having underdeveloped emotional regulation and communication skills, regardless of chronological age. Essentially, the emotional coping strategies of a child in an adult's body. When conflict arises, these partners can't tolerate discomfort or feedback, so they default to blame, defensiveness, denial, or making everything about themselves and what they meant to do, rather than staying present and working through issues together, like grown-ups. They'll gaslight you, twist reality, and turn your reasonable needs into being too sensitive instead of taking accountability for their impact and engaging in genuine repair. They also shut down when confronted or uncomfortable, when something doesn't align with their thought about how it should be, stonewalling any chance of connection.

Now that we understand what we're dealing with, let's talk about what to do when you're in it. Because once you see it, you can't unsee it. And then

Ep #349: Healing from Emotionally Immature Partners Part 2

comes the harder question. Can I stay and work with this, or do I need to go? And I want to be clear here. Sometimes it's not as simple as packing a bag and leaving. There are real reasons why you might not be able to walk away right now. Economic constraints, shared kids, immigration status, family entanglements. Maybe you're finishing grad school or you don't have another place lined up yet, or you just don't have the funds to hit the road. So if that's you, this isn't about shaming you for staying. Nothing on this show is ever about shaming you for anything. This is about giving you tools to preserve your sanity and sense of self while you figure it out. Think of it as emotional survival gear for navigating the wilderness of confusion.

And I need to say this clearly. If your situation has escalated to physical violence, threats of violence, or if you feel genuinely unsafe, please prioritize your immediate safety above all else. The tools we're talking about here today are for emotional and psychological dynamics. Not that those aren't terrible, but you know what I mean, that not for situations where your physical safety is at risk. Right? Like I'm not ever out here saying, "Set a boundary with someone who might hit you." No. No, no. If you're in danger, reach out to intimate partner violence or domestic violence resources, trusted friends, family, or professionals who can help you create a safety plan and get out. The US National Domestic Violence Hotline is 1-800-799-7233, and they have trained advocates available 24/7.

Now, let's start with what you can do right now in the thick of it to try to help yourself get a little more clarity, a little more grounding, a little bit more you back while you're in this situation, living with, dating, partnered with someone who's emotionally immature. So let's start with what you can do right now in the thick of it, whether you are planning to go or you want to work on it.

Picture this. You're in the middle of one of those conversations where your partner spun things around and suddenly, you're the problem. Your chest tightens, your breath gets shallow, maybe your face is burning with

Ep #349: Healing from Emotionally Immature Partners Part 2

frustration. Maybe you're turning 27 shades of grape. Your nervous system's on high alert and your prefrontal cortex, the part you need most for clear thinking, it starts going a bit offline, as it were.

So the first thing to do is to orient and ground in your body. Before you try to argue your point, pause. Feel your feet on the floor, press your toes down. Let your eyes track around the room and land on something neutral or even positive. Lengthen your out breath. When someone's gaslighting you, your body goes into threat detection mode. Of course, it does. Your heart rate spikes, your peripheral vision narrows. You might feel that familiar tight sensation in your throat. This is your nervous system saying, my beauty, danger, danger. But what we need to remind it is that you're not in physical danger. You're in emotional danger, and your body has trouble distinguishing between the two.

When you press your toes down, even inside your shoes, you're activating proprioception, your body's awareness of where you are in space. When you let your eyes track around the room, you're using your visual system to remind your brain, I'm here, I'm grounded. I'm an adult and I have options. That lengthened exhale stimulates your parasympathetic nervous system, helping you access higher order thinking as you go back towards ventral vagal, the safe and social part of the nervous system.

Once you've gotten your nervous system settled, the next step is to name what's happening to yourself, even if you can't say it out loud. This is gaslighting. This is brain scramble. This isn't about me being too sensitive. This is them deflecting. When you can label the pattern, you give your brain a breadcrumb trail back to actual reality. But naming it isn't always enough because emotionally immature partners are masters at making their tactics look reasonable and you look bonkers.

They'll say, "I'm not gaslighting you. God, always throwing these therapy words around. I'm just trying to help you see another perspective." Okay. This is where you need what I call your internal validation system, your own

Ep #349: Healing from Emotionally Immature Partners Part 2

personal reality check made up of your body's signals, your memory of events, your values, and your emotional truth. My beauty, your body doesn't lie. If you feel dismissed, you felt dismissed. Your memory isn't perfect, but it's yours. If you remember them raising their voice, trust that. If you remember what they said, trust that. Your values matter. If kindness and respect are important to you, their cruel words don't become okay just because they're saying you're too sensitive.

Speaking of trusting your own reality, I want to share something that saved my sanity during my first marriage. I was so confused by the constant gaslighting because it was particularly well-played. It was always around this framework of me being the bad guy, right? Me needing to work on something, me being the problem, which is a script that I clearly was already running from childhood. And so they grabbed onto that and twisted everything around it, right? That was quite cruel and very sneaky. And it worked super well on me. Of course, it did. And so I felt constantly befuddled, like my brain was in a fog.

So I started doing something that felt almost secretive. I began writing down verbatim what I would ask for and what they would say in response. Right? So I'm talking real-time documentation. If I said, "Hey, could you help me with the dishes tonight?" I'd write that down. Then I'd write down their exact response. "Ugh, I'm too tired. Why are you nagging me? I worked all day. I shouldn't have to do something like that." Then the next day when they'd say, "I always help with housework. You never appreciate what I do. You never see it." I had it right there in black and white what actually happened. This practice was absolutely illuminating. It was a true lifeline for me. I started to see patterns I couldn't see when I was just trying to remember conversations later and was being told I was misremembering. I could see how they'd agree to something in the moment, then later claim they never agreed. "Not me. Wasn't me." I could see how my reasonable requests were getting twisted into me being demanding, nagging, a problem.

Ep #349: Healing from Emotionally Immature Partners Part 2

Keep a small notebook or use your phone's note app. For safety, if you need to, don't let them see you doing it. This is for your clarity, not for evidence in some future confrontation, right? That's not what we're up to here. We're not doing the tit-for-tat. Write down requests you make and their responses. Write down promises they make and whether they follow through. What you'll find is that the confusion starts to clear. You'll see that your memory isn't faulty. Their version of events just doesn't match what actually happened.

Now, while you're building this evidence base for yourself, there's another crucial tool. Don't chase clarity from them. One of the biggest traps is thinking, "If I can just explain myself the right way with the right language, they'll finally understand and care and see my part of it." Oh, my love, that's the hamster wheel. You could write a dissertation on your feelings and they'd still find a way to make them somehow wrong and make it all your fault. Here's how it happens. You make a simple request like, "When you interrupted me during dinner, I felt unheard or disrespected." They respond with, "I didn't interrupt you." So you feel compelled to provide evidence.

"You did, right when I was talking about my meeting." Then they say, "That wasn't interrupting. That was just me adding to the conversation. Wow. Okay. So you don't want me to add to the conversation?" Right? That question that turns it around. So you try to explain the difference. Before you know it, you're 30 minutes deep in a circular argument around the definition of interrupting and your original need to feel heard, seen, respected has been completely buried.

This is the explanation spiral. It happens because you're trying to get water from a dry well. You keep thinking, "If I can just say it in the right way, they'll understand and care about how I feel." Oh, baby. Oh, I wish, right? Emotionally immature people often don't want to understand. They want to be right, the way six-year-olds do. They want to avoid the discomfort of

Ep #349: Healing from Emotionally Immature Partners Part 2

seeing how their behavior impacts you because they're focused on themselves.

Instead, say your piece once, clearly, and then step back. "When you interrupted me, I felt unheard." If they deny it, deflect it, or turn it around on you, you don't have to keep explaining. You can say, "I've shared how I feel. I'm not going in circles about this." And then you disengage, which they're not going to like, but here we are.

This brings us to one of the most important tools you'll need. Let's talk about boundaries, because this is where things get really tricky and sticky for us. A boundary isn't about controlling them. It's about protecting and taking care of yourself. It's resentment prevention. It's saying, "If you raise your voice at me, I'm leaving the room." Or, "If you bring up my past mistakes when we're talking about this current issue, I'm ending this conversation."

But here's what often happens, especially deep in emotional outsourcing with emotionally immature people. You set a boundary and they test it immediately. You say, "I won't discuss this with you if you're going to yell." And they respond with, "I'm not yelling," but they're actually yelling. I just don't want to yell here and activate someone's nervous system. "I'm not yelling, I'm just passionate. You're trying to control how I express myself." This is boundary testing. They're seeing if you'll fold like an origami swan, if you'll explain yourself into a pretzel, if you'll doubt your own limit. You have to get comfortable with being seen as the difficult one, because maintaining a boundary with someone who doesn't respect boundaries will always look unreasonable to them. Of course it will. They'll call you controlling, rigid, dramatic, crazy, whatever it takes to get you to drop your limit and let them back into your space without accountability.

But my beauty, my beauty, my beauty, this is the thing. Your boundaries aren't suggestions. They're not up for debate. If you'd said you'd leave the room if they yell, and they yell, you leave. Even if they chase you saying,

Ep #349: Healing from Emotionally Immature Partners Part 2

"See, you can't handle a real conversation," you still leave. You're not maintaining that boundary to punish them. You're maintaining it to protect your nervous system.

But my beauty, your boundaries aren't suggestions and they're not up for debate. This is so challenging, but if you said you'd leave the room if they yell and they yell, you leave. Even if they chase you saying, "See, you can't handle a real conversation," you still leave. From personal experience, my ex would chase me into the bedroom. I'd have to barricade the door. I'm not saying this is easy. I mean, it sucks, in fact. But I mean, we're here. The situation already sucks. So, you might as well start to make some room for yourself to breathe. Remember, you're not setting or maintaining that boundary to punish them. You're maintaining it to protect your nervous system and to regain some sense of self.

Now, once you have these survival tools in place, you might be wondering, if you're considering staying, what should you ask? I'd start with, "Do they have the capacity and willingness to grow? Do they actually want to see the problems and change how they show up?" My ex didn't, not at all. And I was banging my head against the wall, "Hello, emotional outsourcing," trying to make them want to change. Because emotional immaturity isn't a life sentence if someone's willing to do the work, if they want to change. But many people who are deep in this habit don't actually want to change. Because change requires facing their own shame and fragility, especially if they're living with a lot of entitlement or privilege, then they might not see why they would even want to begin to change. Why should they be different, right?

So what are the signs that they may actually be capable of growth, real growth, not just putting on a performance when they smell danger, like you say you're going to leave and then they like behave for two weeks? Well, they can pause when you give them feedback, even if it's uncomfortable. An emotionally mature response to, "I felt hurt when you dismissed my

Ep #349: Healing from Emotionally Immature Partners Part 2

concern," might be silence for a moment while they process, followed by, "Oof. I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to dismiss you and I apologize that I did. Can you tell me more?" Right? Like, "Hi, I messed up. Let's make it better." An emotionally immature response is immediate defensiveness. "I wasn't dismissing you. You're being too sensitive."

A sign they may be available to grow is that they show genuine remorse without flipping it back on you. They can sit with the discomfort of knowing that they hurt you, knowing that they did an oopsie without immediately making it all about them, about their own pain, about defending themselves. They might say, "Wow, I'm really sorry I hurt your feelings. I can imagine that was really painful." Not, "I'm sorry you felt hurt. I was having a bad day too." You see how like not an apology that is?

Someone who can change is willing to seek outside help. So therapy, coaching, books, something that shows they recognize they have work to do on themselves. Not just couples therapy to fix the relationship, but individual work on their own emotional patterns. They follow through on changes they commit to. So it's one thing to say, "I'll work on not interrupting you." It's another thing to actually catch themselves mid-interruption and say, "Oh, I'm doing the thing again. Sorry, go ahead."

And here's a really big one. They can tolerate your emotions without trying to fix them, to minimize them, or make them all about themselves. If you're sad about something, they can sit with you in that sadness without immediately jumping to, "Don't be sad," or, "This reminds me of when I was sad about..." And then they stare off into the distance.

Here's the hard truth. If none of that is happening consistently over months, not days, then staying means continuing to absorb the impact of their immaturity. And sweet one, I know how much it hurts to accept that someone you love might not be capable of the growth you need them to have to be able to stay with them. That grief is really real. So is the anger and the sadness. You're not just losing who they are, you're losing who you

Ep #349: Healing from Emotionally Immature Partners Part 2

hoped they could become. You might find yourself thinking, "But they have so much potential." I remember thinking that. And listen, you might be right. But potential isn't the same as willingness, as desire, as wanting to change. You can see someone's highest self clearly, but if they're not willing to do the work to embody that self, your vision of them becomes a source of suffering rather than actual hope based in reality. It's like falling in love with someone's potential and dating their representative, while the real person stays safely hidden behind the curtain.

This realization leads to a crucial question. What is the cost to me? Are you getting sick more often? Chronic stress from walking on eggshells can absolutely mess with your immune system. Are you more anxious or depressed? Are you sleeping poorly, having trouble concentrating at work? Do you think really terrible thoughts about yourself? Are you isolating from friends and family? Sometimes it's because your partner doesn't like them, which can be a tactic, or because you're embarrassed about how they act around others. Sometimes it's because you don't have the energy for other relationships when you're spending so much energy managing this one.

Or maybe you think you're boring to be around in terms of your family and friends because all you can talk about is their related shenanigans. Are you shrinking yourself to survive? This might look like not sharing good news because they will find a way to make it about them, or not expressing needs because you know it'll lead to conflict, not asking for help, not talking about what's real, walking on eggshells, monitoring your tone, pre-editing everything you say. Beauty, that's not partnership. That's survival mode and it's so painful.

Here's something I see often. People in these relationships start to lose their own emotional vocabulary. They become so focused on managing their partner's emotions that they stop knowing what they feel. That emotional numbness is a protective mechanism, but it also disconnects you from your own inner guidance, your intuition, your knowing. Beyond the

Ep #349: Healing from Emotionally Immature Partners Part 2

personal cost, there's something even more significant. The other cost that's harder to see is opportunity cost. Every day you spend trying to get water from a dry well is a day you're not available for relationships, friendships, life that could actually nourish you.

Beauty, I know these questions and this topic are heavy, and maybe you're feeling the weight of them right now. Listen, leaving is no small thing. It can be terrifying, logistically complicated, heartbreaking. When I left my emotionally immature ex-spouse, I remember sitting in my empty house wondering if I'd made a huge mistake. The silence felt deafening after years of chaos. I questioned everything. Was I being too harsh? Could I have tried harder? I laugh at that now, right? Because all I did was try and try and try. But with time, something shifted. I slept through the night without that knot in my stomach. My shoulders loosened. I stopped bracing myself, thinking I heard their key in the door.

I could share good news without strategizing how to manage their reaction. I could have a bad day without it becoming about how my bad mood was affecting them. Slowly, over time, I reclaimed my life. The moment you stop taking responsibility for someone else's emotional immaturity, the moment you reclaim your right to your own reality, it's like your lungs fill with air for the first time in years. You remember what it feels like to trust your own perception. You remember what it's like to have needs without having to justify them.

I also want to acknowledge that not everyone is ready for that step yet. But if you're not ready to leave yet, that's okay. My beauty, that's okay too. Sometimes we need to build up resources before we can make such a huge leap. Sometimes we need to try everything we can think of so we can walk away knowing we gave it our all. I know I did. Sometimes we need to see the pattern clearly for months before we can accept that it's not going to change. If you're staying for now, please be gentle with yourself. Use these tools not to fix the relationship, but to preserve your sense of self.

Ep #349: Healing from Emotionally Immature Partners Part 2

Build your internal validation system. Practice grounding techniques, practice orienting. Don't chase clarity from them. Maintain your boundaries even when they call you names for having them. My beauty, here's something crucial whether you stay or go. Please reach out for support. This is not something you have to figure out alone. Whether it's therapy, coaching, support groups, trusted friends, having witnesses to your struggles and reality is crucial when you're living with someone who constantly questions it. You are not responsible for their emotional regulation. You are not required to absorb their projections. You are not obligated to stay small so they can stay comfortable. My beauty, your needs matter. Your perceptions are valid. Your peace is worth protecting.

So wherever you are, whether you're staying for now, gathering the strength to leave, or already on the other side rebuilding and hopefully feeling really seen and heard, know that you are not alone and you're not broken, and this is not your fault. Your nervous system has been trying to survive confusion and gaslighting, and with time and support, you can build new patterns of clarity and self-trust. You deserve relationships that don't require you to gaslight yourself to survive them, to get through the day. My beauty, you deserve a life you love.

Thank you for joining me. 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. I'll talk to you soon. Ciao, ciao.