

Ep #351: How to Recognize and Release the Grip of Overfunctioning



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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. Now listen, I talk to a lot of exhausted people in my job. People, largely women, who tell me effectively the same story over and over and over again. They tell me they have to manage other people's feelings. They have to step in. They have to fix it because if they don't, something terrible will happen.

And when I ask them what terrible thing will happen, it's rarely, I mean actually never really actual safety we're talking about. It's not like, my partner will drive drunk so I need to take the keys away or my child will wander off a pier. It's much more about their own inability to handle other people having big, messy, uncomfortable feelings. They say things like, if I don't remind him about his doctor's appointment, he'll be stressed and grumpy all week and I can't handle that energy in the house. If I don't research her college options, she will get overwhelmed and then I'll feel guilty if going to college feels stressful for her. If I don't manage the family group chat, my mom will call me crying and I just, I cannot deal with her being upset.

My beauty, do you hear what's happening here? They're not protecting anyone from real harm, though their brains are telling them they are. They're protecting themselves from witnessing other people's discomfort. But here's the thing. They've convinced themselves that it's their obligation, they have to, it's expected by others, which it probably is at this point, and that doing this is how they show love. They've told themselves they're being helpful, caring, and responsible. When really, what they're saying is, "I can't handle you having feelings, especially big ones. So I'm going to manage your entire life to prevent you from having any feelings I find difficult to witness."

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And look, I get it. Nobody wants to hear that their exhausting efforts to hold everyone together aren't noble and amazing. But, we got to call this spade what it is. My beauty, you're managing other people's lives because you can't tolerate their discomfort. Now, before we go any further, let me be clear. Today I'm talking about overfunctioning with older teens and adults who are capable of caring for themselves. This isn't about actual caregiving for people who genuinely need support due to age, illness, or disability. Got it? Got it. Okay.

So what exactly is overfunctioning? It's doing for others what they can and should be doing for themselves out of obligation, as a rote thing, as a complex way of showing up in relationship that takes away a person's autonomy. It's a form of emotional outsourcing, outsourcing your sense of safety and okayness and belonging and worth to whether other people make good choices and live their lives by your standards. Your emotional regulation depends on controlling their outcomes.

Here's an uncomfortable truth. Overfunctioning is inherently disrespectful. When you research supplements for your partner who has made it very clear that they just want to eat takeout, they're not interested in your supplements or your health food or whatever, you're saying I don't trust you to take care of your own body and I don't agree with your choices. And my opinion about your choices is way more important than your opinions about your body. Yikes, right?

When you remind your adult sibling to make that call for the third time, when the call is only about their life, what you're saying is, "I don't believe you can manage your own adulthood." My beauty, we don't mean to be condescending. We don't mean to talk down or be patronizing or paternalistic. We don't mean to. But that's exactly what overfunctioning is: treating capable adults like children.

It's also failing to respect your own ability to be with discomfort. And that's the part I think we don't realize, right? What you're saying is, I don't trust

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myself to be okay if the kitchen's messy, if there's dust bunnies under the bed, if he's upset, or if she's sad about something trivial. Instead of tolerating normal human emotions, you rush to fix, to control, to manage, to make it all go away like that's your job. And let's be real. Someone being sad, being upset, having their feelings isn't a problem that needs solving. It's just a feeling that will pass given the space and love, co-regulation, and care that we need to be with our feelings.

But we've been convinced and have convinced ourselves that all discomfort is a crisis requiring immediate intervention, that we must step in, lest someone have their feels. Now, here's what's fascinating. Overfunctioners and underfunctioners tend to find each other like magnets. The overfunctioner thinks, "Finally, someone who needs me." The underfunctioner thinks, "Finally, someone who will handle everything so I don't have to." And when they link up, you get a perfectly dysfunctional dance where both people avoid the scarier, more vulnerable for real-sy, real work of actual intimacy and mutual respect.

Now, of course, this isn't conscious. Both think they're being loving. But at the end of the day, without realizing it, it's really two people using each other to avoid stepping into emotional adulthood, to avoid growing up and being with their own feelings and those of the people they love. My darling, this happens because writ large, we've gotten confused about love. We think love means preventing mistakes, taking responsibility for other people's lives and their feelings and their outcomes and managing everyone. But real love, real love trusts people's capability, their capacity, and respects their autonomy.

So why do we fall into this pattern? Well, many of us learned in childhood that safety equals control. Maybe your caregivers were unreliable. They demanded A pluses or you didn't get love. You had to be quiet at the dinner table or you didn't get dinner. Or maybe they were the kind that ran hot or cold or who gave the silent treatment. Or maybe you got praised for being

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the responsible one. And so your young brain concluded, if I control what happens around me, I stay safe. I belong. I am worthy. This worked when you were small and powerless, but now, if you're anything like the thousands of women I've worked with, it's exhausting you and disrespecting the people you love.

Let's look at what's actually happening when you overfunction. Well, first of all, you're living in hypervigilance: muscle tension, ruminating, planning, fixing, obsessing, living from obligation. You're not connecting with people, you're strategizing about them. You're so busy managing their life, wanting them to want what you want them to want, you're not present with them as a person. You're exhausted doing everyone else's emotional labor while neglecting your own life. The more you step in, the less they trust themselves, and the less you trust them, and the less you trust yourself to be with their big feelings or your own.

Your worth becomes tied to their okayness. So of course, you never get to relax. Sit on the couch, enjoy the movie? Are you freaking kidding me? No way. You can't sit down. There's stuff to do. When you're managing someone else, you're treating them like a project. You're not relating to them as a person. Heavy. So how do we stop this pattern without feeling like we're abandoning people we care about? We'll get to the remedies in just a second.

Alright, my beauty. So what do we do here? Well, first, we get honest about the disrespect, while being compassionate, while being caring, while being curious, and really giving yourself the grace, no one's doing this on purpose. And we need to start noticing when we're about to step in. Take a moment, orient yourself, take a breath, come into your body, maybe put a hand on your heart, and ask yourself, am I about to treat this capable adult like they can't handle their own life? Am I about to try to erase their feelings so I can feel better? Feel the uncomfortable truth of that, with love, not self-flagellation. We're not beating ourselves up, but let yourself feel how

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uncomfortable that is, that's become your habit. Give yourself compassion for it, right?

And then second, practice radical trust. So trust looks like believing people are capable of learning from their own mistakes and running their own lives. It looks like saying, "I trust you to handle this," instead of, "let me do it for you."

Third, separate love from labor. Love is not a to-do list. You can love someone deeply while letting them fumble through their own learning process. I would say that in fact, that is love, right? Is loving them in their imperfectness and in their working it outness and in their sorting it-ness and in their stumbling, you can be there to love them regardless.

Fourth, return responsibility to its rightful owner. Their health, theirs; their career, theirs; their relationship with their family, also theirs. Their life is theirs to manage. Your job is to love them, not manage them. To be all, "I'm rubber, you're glue. Your life is yours, and we'll stick to you." That didn't really work, but I'm going to give myself a couple points for trying it.

Fifth, regulate your own nervous system with specific thoughts. When you feel that familiar urge to step in, pause, orient your nervous system again, breathe, feel your feet on the ground, then try these reframes. Instead of, "They're going to mess this up and that's going to be a crisis and ahh," try, "They have the right to handle this their own way, even if it's different from mine." And PS, nobody thinks you're going to believe these things at first, right? You can kitten-step towards them, right?

Instead of, "If I don't help, something bad will happen," try first analyzing the situation. Ask yourself, "Is that true?" And then see what your brain gives you. It's probably going to say like, "Yes." But ask, is it really true? Is it really true? And keep going, annoying toddler style, until you get to like, what is it I really fear here? They'll have a big feeling, or I'll have a big feeling when they have a big feeling, right? So, instead of if I don't help,

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something bad will happen, I trust them to handle whatever comes up and they can ask for help if they need it. You can also add to that, I trust me to handle whatever comes up for them. And I can ask for help if I need it.

Instead of, "They obviously can't manage this," try, "They're a capable adult who gets to learn from their own experience." Instead of, "I'm being loving by stepping in," try, "I'm being loving by respecting their autonomy." Instead of, "But I know better," try, "My way isn't the only right way." And I'll add to that, if you want to offer your knowledge, like let's say you do know how to do, like I know how to make empanadas, right? I make great empanadas. And if someone is making empanadas and they've never done it before, I can say, "Hey, I'm excited to make empanadas with you. If you want my guidance, I'm right here. Let me know, I can help you or not," right?

Instead of, "They'll be upset with me if I don't help," try, "A healthy relationship can handle me not managing their life," right? Ask yourself, what am I afraid will happen if I don't intervene? And is preventing that worth disrespecting this person's capability, capacity, autonomy? Ask yourself that. And then really like pause, let yourself be with it. Give it a moment. And with that, yeah, of course it sucks to think of someone you love not caring for themselves, someone you love suffering, obviously.

But here's the reality. You stepping in isn't actually making them care more or do it better or have a better outcome. In many ways, it's just making them care less about taking care of themselves or doing their homework or doing their laundry or whatever it is, because they know you'll handle it. Your anxiety about their choices, about their feelings, about your reaction to their feelings, doesn't give you the right to take over their life.

Now, you're likely thinking, "But what if they really do need help? What if they're genuinely struggling?" Heard. Here's the key distinction. Most of what we rush to fix are inconveniences and feelings, not emergencies. Someone forgetting their lunch, not a child, but someone who has a tap credit card on their phone, right? Forgetting their lunch isn't an emergency.

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Someone being sad about a breakup isn't an emergency. Someone struggling with a work deadline isn't an emergency. Real emergencies are rare.

Supporting looks like waiting to be asked, offering specific help. "Hey, would it be helpful if...?" Respecting no as an answer, helping without taking over, supporting their process, not imposing your solution, not trying to get them to not have their feelings, not bright-lining and silver-lining and, "Well, you know, I know that you're unhappy about this, but if you think about it, positive stuff. Don't have big feelings." That's not loving. I know you don't want them to suffer, but it's truly not loving.

And listen, if someone asks your opinion, you can absolutely give it, but don't be upset if they don't follow your suggestion. You can help someone if they ask, but there is a world of difference between helping them with their homework and doing it for them, teaching them to run the washer and doing their laundry weekly. Overfunctioning looks like stepping in without being asked, taking over completely, getting frustrated when they don't want your help, doing it for them instead of with them, fixing the problems they don't have to deal with it, and making their feelings go away. So the key question, are you helping them build capacity or are you doing it so they don't have to?

If you've been overfunctioning for a while, the people around you might actually expect it now. They might even get upset when you stop stepping in. This doesn't mean you should go back to managing their lives. No, not at all. When you first start pulling back, don't be surprised if people get upset or confused. They might accuse you of not caring anymore or suddenly become helpless in ways they never were before. This is normal. You've been doing their emotional and other labor for so long that in one way, they've forgotten how to do it for themselves.

Hold steady, be loving, remember why you're taking a step back and trust that they'll figure it out or they'll ask Dr. Google for some help. On the other

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hand, some people will be relieved and will actually step up with joy. Others might initially struggle or get frustrated. Relationships might feel awkward or tense at first. You might feel anxious or guilty. All of this is normal. You're changing a dance you've been doing together for years. Give it time. You can say things like, "I've realized I've been stepping in too much. I trust you to handle this." Or, "I'm working on respecting your ability to manage your own life." Or, "I care about you, which is why I want to support you, not manage you."

And let's be honest about something else. So many of us get something out of being the person someone needs. Being indispensable feels safer than just being loved for who you are when you don't believe that you're inherently lovable. Come on, let's give that some compassion, some care. That's a real thing. And there's a certain power in being the one who holds everything together, the one people turn to, the one without whom everything would fall apart.

But my beauty, that's not sustainable, and it's not fair to anyone involved, because my darling, you're not actually indispensable. You're just scared of finding out what would happen if you weren't. Here's the deeper issue. When you're constantly giving from obligation and expectation rather than true desire, you're staying stuck in those old emotional outsourcing roles. You're not living from your own agency and genuinely wanting to help. You're performing a script that you think keeps you safe and needed.

So my beauty, my darling, my tender ravioli, who even are you when you strip all of that away? When you're not the fixer, the manager, the one who handles everything? Oof, that's the scary question, isn't it? That's the scary one. And it's also where your real life on your real terms begins. Here's what might be the hardest part. You might need to let people you love make choices you disagree with. I know, I know. It's so challenging. You might need to watch them struggle instead of swooping in to save them. You

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might need to sit with your own discomfort instead of managing it by managing them.

This isn't about becoming cold or uncaring. Come on, who's talking? No, no. This is about respecting people enough to let them be adults in their own lives and respecting yourself enough to trust that you can be with all the feelings that come up. So what if love looked like trusting someone's capacity to handle their own life, offering support when asked, not when you think they need it, believing in their ability to learn and grow from their own experiences, respecting their right to make choices you wouldn't make, showing up for connection, not management.

This kind of love is scarier because it requires you to give up the illusion of control, but it's the only kind of love that creates space for real intimacy, genuine trust, and mutual respect. If you are a person who's been overfunctioning, this probably feels threatening. Your nervous system might be screaming, "But what if they mess up? What if they have big feelings? What if something bad happens? What if they're mad at me? What if they can't handle it? What if I can't handle it?"

Here's the truth. They might mess up. Something challenging might happen. They might have really big feelings. You might have really big feelings. They might handle things differently than you would. And that's their right as an autonomous human being. Your job isn't to prevent other people from having their own human experience. Your job is to love them enough to trust them with their own life.

The exhaustion you feel from overfunctioning, it's not the price of love. It's the cost of trying to control what was never yours to control in the first place. If they don't want a birthday party, don't insist they have a birthday party. If they are sad, let them be sad. Offer them a cup of tea, but not to make the sad go away. My beauty, what if you could love people without managing them and could trust them to live their lives on their own terms? What if you could care without controlling? What if you could support

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without overfunctioning? That's where real intimacy lives, where genuine love grows, and that's where your nervous system finally gets to rest.

This is a vital step in overcoming our emotional outsourcing, our codependent perfectionist and people-pleasing habits. And I trust you to take these steps to reclaim your life for you and for the people 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.