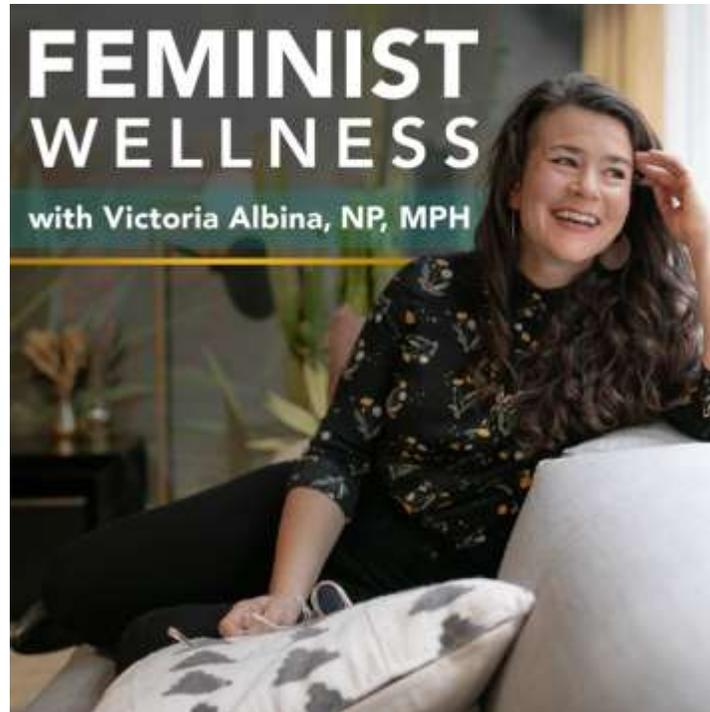


Ep #35: Thinking



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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Self-care can look like so many things; exercise, drinking water, eating a specific way, taking a bath. And I believe that the most life-changing sustainable self-care comes from getting to know your own mind, getting deeply in touch with and learning to be the observer of your own thoughts. Only through this practice can you align your motivation and intention for self-care with self-loving, and thus create outcomes and results in your life that truly feel self-loving.

Have I piqued your interest yet, my darling? I sure hope so. Keep listening; it's going to be a good one.

You're listening to Feminist Wellness, the only podcast that combines functional medicine, life coaching, and feminism to teach smart women how to reclaim their power and restore their health! Here's your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, Herbalist and Life Coach, Victoria Albina.

Hello, hello, my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. I've been loving hearing from you all via email and DM, seeing your reposts of the podcast on social media. It's so much fun to be in touch with you, my love. And I'm also loving that it's finally Sweata Weatha – it always cracks me up to say that, Sweata Weatha – here on the East Coast of North America, although I could do without the rain that's coming our way. I'm a beach baby and I love those hot sunny summer days.

I also know that I get to accept and love life on its own terms, and since I can't change the weather, I'm deciding to love upon this crisp autumn air while we've got it. I'm also so excited to share with you that I have two new offerings. One is a weekly in-person 90-minute breathwork meditation group, taking place every Wednesday evening this fall at the Assemblage in the financial district in Manhattan. And I'll potentially continue this into 2020. Let's see how 2019 goes. And I'll put a link in the show notes so you can sign up for that if you live here in New York City. I'm keeping these

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groups really small so they stay intimate. So if you want to come, make sure to register on my website sooner than later.

And the second offering is my online breathwork meditation class which is a four-week at-time virtual group that you can do at your own place anywhere on the planet with internet access. So make sure to check that out if you're interested in learning about and practicing the transformational magic that is breathwork meditation.

I'm going to be hosting another breathwork webinar soon where I'll be teaching you the practice and walking you through a short session for free right over Zoom, so make darn sure you're on my email list, my love. You're not going to want to miss it.

Okay, so last week, we talked, you and I, about self-care and how vital the intention, the energy that motivates you to care for yourself is. That is, if you're exercising because you hate your thighs, skipping the gluten because you feel in control when you restrict your food, or are trying to change the way you show up in the world or heal your body because you think you need to be fixed, thus implying that you're broken, that is not, in my humble opinion, self-love-based self-care.

While I'm a huge fan of dedicated daily self-care, I think the energy with which you do these things, these tasks, is so vital to whether they leave you feeling truly cared for or just looking for the next dopamine hit of having checked something off the list, just reifying a tired old story that you are completely worthy and perfect just as you are. That is, I recommend that you start with managing your mind for self-care to truly be an integral part of your healing, by learning to sit with and feel your feels, to process them all the way through, to love those feels no matter how less than lovable they may feel because they are part of you, and to do all of this before you can change your thoughts and feelings.

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And this work of getting to know your own mind, to recognize your own thoughts and feelings, is the most vital first step for all change. And it only works, in my opinion and experience, when it's based in loving yourself first and foremost.

And so, this week, with a mind to self-care as a vital part of showing ourselves love, I'll be talking about the think-feel-act cycle and its various constituents, so we can get really clear on what this means and how to implement it into your life. And because nerds love definitions and clarity, and you know I wear my nerd crown proudly, let's define terms here.

So when I talk about the thought work protocol, I'm talking about the think-feel-act cycle and how we put it into action to change our lives. So the think-feel-act cycle is based in neuroscience, cognitive behavioral and somatic theories, because science matters, my darling. This protocol is applicable to literally everything in this beautiful life and has been a vital part of my healing my mind, body, and spirit.

Once you learn it and understand it and start to apply it to your life, it becomes a skill set that runs in the background of your life, a meta skill that you can apply to any and every situation in life. With the concept of true deep self-care in mind, I'm going to spend the next few episodes talking about this framework in detail before swinging back around to talk about how I apply these teachings in my own life, what self-care looks like for me, and how you can attend to your perfect self in ever deeper ways.

We'll start with talking out the differences between thoughts, feelings, and actions, and the results that you can create in your own life by using this protocol. And in this episode, we'll start by digging into what thoughts are.

I know, I know, you may be, like, rolling your eyes and being like, "Vic, I know what thoughts are." But stay with me, my love. In this life coaching I do, we define thoughts as sentences in your mind, often written by your

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subconscious mind, the part of you that thinks constantly without you even knowing it.

These thoughts are referred to, in the Buddhist tradition, as your monkey mind, and I like to picture a little row of monkeys in my brain, slamming away at typewriters and throwing random thought sentences into your brain without your conscious control.

The thought that these monkeys write and rewrite are often based in our histories, our traumas, our childhoods, and our brains and bodies are in constant communication via the vagus nerve, a topic I shall dive into in its own episode because the vagus nerve and polyvagal theory are so important in understanding trauma responses, which are often in the background while those monkeys are hard at work in your brain.

And this takes us back to the concept of the watcher, which we discussed together, you and I, in episode two, which feels like about 100,000 years ago that we recorded that. So in short, there is the part of you that's thinking, the room full of monkeys, and the part of you, the watcher, who is able to observe the thoughts racing through your head at the speed of simian.

And when you come to realize that you can watch the monkeys and the old stories they tell you, you can begin to get some cognitive distance, to create some space between you and your thought stories about you, the sentences the monkeys write. That cognitive space becomes available through awareness, through meditation in any form, although you know my favorite is breathwork meditation, which I'm completely obsessed with.

So in meditation, whatever form, we learn to quiet our minds, and most importantly to begin to watch our thoughts zooming around our brains. You can't change what you can't see, so this step is vital. You need to be able to see your own thoughts in order to begin to accept and then shift them.

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This is meta work – meta with one T, for those of you who may be thinking about meta meditation from Buddhism, meta meaning self-referring, if you're a dictionary – learning to think about your thinking. And it's a skill for sure, one that I think should be part of education starting in pre-K.

You have the power to observe your thoughts and decide if you want to keep them, if they serve you. Because your brain thinks literally tens of thousands of thoughts a day, for very smart evolutionary reasons, namely survival, which is usually the main reason of your evolution.

We spend our human days evaluating literally everything around us; ourselves, our futures, our pasts, strangers, family, friends, the train and its perennial lateness. And I live on the R, so I feel like I've earned my right to kvetch about the subway, thank you very much.

We are wired as humans to notice things, to assess for safety and danger, to suss things up and come to a quick conclusion, lest we get eaten by a rogue lion. This is part of the monkey mind's job and most of us don't have daily awareness of these processes until we pause and make our subconscious thoughts conscious, by bringing awareness to our thoughts, by learning to see the sentences these monkeys are typing out for you.

This is step one, to believe that you have monkeys writing sentences in your mind, or whatever other analogy makes sense for you, and to understand that these thoughts are generally subconscious, to know that you can bring conscious awareness to them. The second step is to do it, to bring your awareness to the fact that you are not your thoughts and that you can observe, analyze, contemplate, and change your own programmed habitual historical thinking. You can do this and it's vital if you want to change the text that those monkeys are putting into your consciousness.

Finally, you get to decide if the thoughts you are thinking on autopilot are ones that serve you. If you want to keep thinking the same old thoughts

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that you've always thought, understanding that our thoughts create our feelings and we then take actions based on those feelings and have an inevitable result or outcome in our lives based on the action we take.

Same old thoughts, same old feelings, same old life. Notice the thoughts. Begin to separate yourself from them. Ask if they serve you. Keep the ones that do and get ready to shift the ones that don't. And oh, my goodness, this can be challenging. I get that.

I've been doing this work for ages now and I still struggle often to really see the thought that underlies my feeling. I've said it before and you know I'm going to keep saying it; this is hard work, this changing of our lives, and you can do hard things, my love. You really can. And understanding how vital this work of recognizing your own thoughts is helps drive my own desire to sit with my thinking, even when, or especially when, every little cell in my body is screaming, "No, look away, don't acknowledge that you're thinking that old self-sabotaging thought, just buffer a little more, that will do it."

And what I find most vital here is to pause and to give yourself a ton of love and care when this feels challenging. Really taking stock of your own habitual thoughts and recognizing their origin can be really overwhelming at first. Go slowly, be gentle, encourage yourself lovingly to stay with it. But no need to push or shove here. This work can be dysregulating for folks with a trauma history, which frankly is most of us in late-stage capitalism living under the patriarchy.

You may not like what you hear when you look at your thoughts, and that's okay, truly. I don't like half of my thoughts half the time. It's not shameful or regretful. There is nothing to be upset or sad or angry about with yourself. Your old thoughts are just survival tools that you developed to get through this bananas world. And the more love you can give yourself, the more you can be your own loving witness and the more space you can hold for change, the more easily this work is done.

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As I said in episode 19, on adaptive and maladaptive thinking and behavior, you can't heal hurt with more hurt. So being mean to you for having a harmful, painful, or self-defeating thought is just choosing another painful, harmful, self-defeating thought. Instead, consider writing down and repeating to yourself, "I am new to this. It's okay to have had thoughts that don't serve me, thoughts that kept me stuck. I'm learning to release these thoughts little by little, day by day."

This is what we call a bridge thought and I'll be talking in detail about this process soon, so make sure you're subscribed to this show so you get each and every little episode right to your phone, my beauty.

I'll also remind you, your negative thoughts about you do not define you. You are made of stardust, my darling. You are perfect and whole and magnificent just as you are. And thoughts about how you're a failure, how you should be married with kids or how you hate being married with kids, thoughts that you always eff up, that you're not think enough or you're too think, not smart enough or your smart mouth always gets you in trouble, these thoughts, they don't define all the magic that is you.

They're just old thoughts, old judgment. Calling those thoughts fact and believing them keeps you stuck in the cycles you're in now. Harmful thoughts, harmful feeling, harmful action, harmful outcome, because neuroscience. And because neuroscience, we understand that once you attune yourself to seeing your thoughts and create a little space from them when you can begin to disassociate yourself from most thoughts, which is different from the psychological phenomenon of dissociation, to be clear.

But when you can disassociate yourself, when you can – my brain's only thinking of this in Spanish... When you can like break the bonds, the links between you and believing that these thoughts are fact and can recognize that they're just a brain habit, then you can begin to decide if these

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thoughts serve you and you can begin to learn to shift them to a new thought that can help you to move your life forward.

And this is a brand-new skill for most of us. It sure was for me. I thought my thoughts like, “I’ll never be skinny enough and that means I’m a failure,” which didn’t actually look like that as a thought. It looked more like me staring in the mirror grabbing a chunk of thick inner thigh and just sighing. It took a little work to get to the fact that that was the thought under that experience.

Or this little gem that I’ve held on and off since high school, which is, “Everyone else knows exactly what they want to do with their lives.” Man, that one, that one kept me trapped for a while. Or – I’m just laughing just even thinking about this one, “Other people have normal families.” That one cracks me up so much. I totally believed that that was real back in the day.

I also used to have thoughts that kept me comparing myself to others day in and day out, and I still find myself doing that one. All of these thoughts, all of these examples of habits that my brain had, and maybe you’re thinking of some habits that your brain has on auto-repeat, none of it’s me. None of those thoughts define me.

They’re literally just electrochemical impulses in my brain, and old habitual ones at that, not facts. And whatever self-defeating or mean thoughts, whatever judgments you may have about yourself and your life, those are not facts either. They’re just a mental evaluation, an assessment based on an old measuring stick of what success or thin or pretty or having enough money, having a good career, I mean, whatever the story is that you’re using to beat yourself up, it’s just not real.

It’s just as subjective as anything else in this world. And the sooner you start to believe that, to truly take it in and to recognize that all of these

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judgments of ourselves and others are just based in stories, the sooner you can take back your mind.

And when we believe that our thoughts, our stories, our old narratives are truth, that can be really painful, like super-duper insanely painful because of course you'll feel stuck in your current life experience if you believe your thoughts about it. And of course, you'd want to change who you are if you have painful thoughts about yourself.

And so, wise being that you are, you strive to change the circumstances, the outside factors of your life as though that could change the way you think and feel about yourself.

You go to the gym, you read the self-help books, you restrict your diet, you try the yoga, you do and you do and you do and you do and you become a self-care machine. You knew I'd bring it back to self-care, right?

Despite all this doing, if your thoughts continue to be, "I'm terrible, I'm not enough, I need to change this, why can't I just be..." the energy of all that work, all the push to be different is for naught because despite all the self-care actions you're taking, you'll feel just as lousy about yourself when you get to some invisible destination as you did when you set out on the journey.

I can't tell you how many of my patients have come into my office saying, "I just want to lose 10 pounds," and they lose the 10 and want to lose five more and five more because it wasn't about the weight, it was about their thoughts about themselves, their human bodies, the story that they're not completely and utterly perfect as is and the way, just a ruse, just a brain full of monkeys doing what monkeys do, telling you someone else's story.

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See, doing the things won't make you happy if you don't believe that you're worthy of being happy or feeling joy, if you don't believe in your heart you deserve a lovely life or can have peace in your heart until – until what? Until you've enacted 473 acts of self-care a day while still feeling you're not amazing enough as is? Trust and believe, my love. That is a cover up job, and it's a super popular one. Just ask social media.

So I recommend that you pause, that you take a deep breath and start to truly look at your thoughts and to understand that seeing them is the first step to shifting your entire life and to truly engaging in self-loving self-care. Know going in that this will be scary at first. Potentially it may lead your brain to tell an overwhelm story. And that's okay.

Get in touch with the grounding supportive resources in your life; your communities, your pets, your loved ones, your capacity to breathe before you embark. You are well resourced, make sure you're in touch with those resources and remind yourself that you are perfect, loved, and lovable, and that you're safe.

If you get overwhelmed, you can pause, breathe, give yourself a break to regulate, and come on back to the work, potentially starting with the story that you are overwhelmed because is that not but a thought, my love? And this is the work I recommend, the invitation I offer you in this process of diving deeper to see your own thoughts and to become your own watcher in this profound way.

I recommend you start to write it all down, get your thoughts out of your head where they roll around like little grenades doing you small and big harm and put them on paper. Once you can see them, you can learn to manage them, to sort them out into stories that serve you and those that don't.

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But first, you need to understand that thoughts are not facts. They are habits written by monkeys, driven by electrical impulses and you don't have to believe them. You can look at them and you can choose purposefully, for your own actual good, which you want to believe and which you don't. And that is a massive act of self-care and self-love in action.

So we begin with a thought download. You start by setting a timer for five minutes. If that feels like too much, if your brain is like, "Whoa, I can't do five minutes," start with two. It doesn't really matter in the end.

Start to write physically with a pen on paper, which the neuroscience research shows is much more effective than using a machine, but whatever, I totally do this work on my phone if I'm on the subway and want to see something in black and white in front of me. Don't make perfect the enemy of good.

When you can, choose paper and pen, and if that feels like a real barrier to getting this done, grab your phone, seriously. Start writing, my love. I like to do it in bed before I've even gotten out of bed, so there's no real barrier story. Like, life doesn't get rolling, my phone's still on airplane, and my brain is fresh.

Start writing, not judging or minding your grammars or spelling or anything. Just get it all out of your head onto paper. Let it flow. And once it's written down, you can get that cognitive distance from your thoughts and you can start to question whether you believe them, whether you want to believe them, if they serve you, remembering that all of your thoughts are totally subjective.

They come from your past, your culture, your community, your home of origin, your family, et cetera. They are no more real than any other thought. They are not objective truth. They are just stories, just evolution-driven assessments of the world you've lived in. And the more you look at your

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thoughts, the more you'll see that what you've been calling objective reality, fact, is not likely so facty after all. They're judgments, and so often in the folks I life coach, those thoughts can be pretty darn mean to you and are keeping you from recognizing your complete amazingness, those old thoughts are keeping your cortisol spiked and are keeping you from healing.

And it bears repeating once more, this whole frame work may be completely wildly new to you. It was for me when I first learned it. I so used to believe that my thoughts were fact, that statements like, "Well, that's just how I feel," was a reasonable thing to say and believe because I didn't know that my thoughts caused my feelings. And I was taught, like most of us, to that situations or circumstances of this life led to my feelings, that I was upset because they ghosted me after that date or I was mad because the train is late, or I'm sad because my walrus died, whatever.

And capitalism has taught us that we're not happy when we haven't bought anything in a minute, and that if we just buy that new bag, we'll have a great summer or fall or vacation or whatever. We've been taught to buffer and numb, which I talked about in episode 14. We're taught to believe that the circumstances of life keep us from joy, from peace, from contentment. And nothing could be further from the truth. Your thoughts are the key to unlocking it all and to engaging in true self-care.

So I have some homework for you. And if you're a regular listener, it's going to be quite the shocker. Wow, I'm really amusing myself today. How delightful. Okay, so my love, your homework is awareness. Awareness, acceptance, action, that is how we move through this thing called life. So try your darnedest to not jump to action. This week, I want to invite you to bring your awareness to your thoughts. And if you've been listening regularly and have gotten really cozy doing that, start to write them down. Do a daily thought download every single day.

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And here's the challenge; I want to invite you to take a picture of your daily download. You can take a picture of you doing it. You can do a selfie. You can take a picture of the actual writing, whatever works for you, and post it on Instagram or Facebook and tag me in it, @victoriaalbinawellness, and we're going to use #thisishowweheal.

And when you do that, it helps spread the message that this work is so vital, so life-changing. And when you tag me, it alerts me that you've been doing your homework, and then I can cheer for you. I can re-share what you posted. I can give you a cheer in a DM. We can connect. And we know that community and connection is so vital for healing, so don't go it alone. Tag me. It takes like two seconds. And it's really fun.

This daily thought download, this, I promise, is your most important daily self-care. Every morning before you do your future self planning, which I talked about in episode nine, I want you to do this free writing for five minutes – okay, fine, two to five minutes, whatever works for you.

Simply observe yourself thinking. Take a breath to center yourself and to keep you from judging your thoughts. They are not you. You are not them. They're just thoughts. They're just sentences. They're just words. Picture some monkeys at a typewriter, if that's helpful. And you know that being silly is always helpful for me. And write it down.

Next week, we'll dive into the feelings part of the think-feel-act cycle, so we can get really solid on this and how to implement it in your life as the framework and basis for true deep lasting self-care.

Thank you for listening, my darling. It's such a delight to be connected with you and to share these teachings. I love seeing you repost about the show on social media. I'm just sitting here pre-excited about you sharing pictures of you doing your thought work in the morning, your thought download and

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tagging it on me so I can share in your celebration, your joy, your success with you. So beautiful.

Alright, my loves, that is it from me. So beautiful. I love recording this for you. I wish you could see the massive smile on my face. Just picture it. Here I am, full of joy, thinking of you getting cognitive distance. Oh, I'm such a nerd for your healing.

Well, thanks again and remember, you are safe, you are safe, you are held, you are loved, and when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my love, talk to you soon.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you like what you've heard, head to VictoriaAlbina.com to learn more.