

Agency And Mirroring



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Natalie Bacon

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Hi there. Welcome to the *Design Your Dream Life* podcast. My name is Natalie Bacon, and I'm an advanced certified mindfulness life coach as well as a wife and mom. If you're here to do the inner work and grow, I can help. Let's get started.

Hey there. Welcome to the podcast. I hope you're doing well. Hey, if you haven't left me a review, would you do me a huge, huge favor and head on over to iTunes and leave a review for this podcast? iTunes uses reviews to determine whether to show the podcast to other people. I would so love to get this podcast out to more women, more moms, and just help as many people as possible with this work.

It's specifically for iTunes. So if you are on the Apple Podcast app, it's pretty easy to do. I know it takes a little bit of time on your part, but I promise you I read all the reviews. They mean so much to me personally, but also kind of on a bigger scale. I would just so appreciate it so that we can get these tools out to more people.

If you are not an Apple user, maybe sending the podcast to one of your friends would be such an amazing way to share this work. I know that a lot of you DM on Instagram, @natalierbacon, over there and tell me how this is your favorite podcast. We get emails. I can't tell you how much I appreciate that feedback. I always share it with my team as well.

So it's going a long way. I just want to say thank you. Thank you for all of the episodes that you're listening to, for the downloads, for the support, for the reviews, for all of it. I appreciate you being here. Because without you being here, there is no show.

So with that, let's talk about agency and mirroring. We're going to talk about relationships. These are two tools that I teach and coach on. In fact, if you're a Grow You member, these are probably not new tools. You've heard me coach and teach on them a lot in there. It's because with every relationship, something to do with agency and mirroring usually comes up.

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So I want to talk with you about what they are, how they are intertwined, and how you can just by knowing about them change how you show up in all of your relationships. So this is most commonly used in our closest relationships. So marriage, with your spouse, with your kids in your primary home. Also with extended family, your sister-in-law. We joke. We do a lot of coaching in Grow You on the sister-in-law relationship. It could be with your mom or with anyone else who's close to you. That's when these tools become the most powerful.

So let's dive into agency. Agency simply means that every human has the capacity to think, to feel, and to do whatever they want. So you could get up right now and go get a glass of water. You have agency to do that. You could just decide hey, I'm thirsty. I'm going to get some water. That's probably not new information to you. That makes sense. So far everything seems obvious, right?

The truth is that not only do you have the agency to get the water, but I have agency to keep doing this podcast or to stop it. I have agency to do whatever I want, just like you have agency to do whatever you want. Just like everyone else in the world has agency to do whatever they want.

So your husband could come into the room right now and yell at you, right. Is that likely? Depending on your relationship. I know in my relationship, that is extremely unlikely to happen. But husband does have agency to do that, right. Steve could quit his job. He could go take the dogs for a walk. He can do anything. He could come up and yell.

So it's not looking at the likelihood, but it's looking at the capacity and seeing that as an adult, that as a normal healthy human being adults have agency. They can think, feel, and do whatever they want. So take it a step further. Let's say that you are struggling right now with a son who is throwing his bookbag at his sister. Son has agency to do that. So he's another human. He can think, feel, and do whatever he wants.

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Now this doesn't mean that there aren't consequences. So there are always consequences. Think about the speed limit being 35 miles per hour. You could get in your car and drive 60 miles per hour. There will be a consequence though to doing that. Maybe a policeman will see you and will stop you and you'll get a speeding ticket. Maybe you will blow and stop sign and hit something. You just never know. So there are consequences to your actions and to everyone else's actions.

So in the case of son throwing a bookbag at sister, there is going to be a consequence. That consequence is, of course, the natural consequence that happens between their relationship but also the consequence that you set for son as the parent. That can be whatever you want.

So seeing that agency doesn't mean that we just allow people to do whatever they want. It just means that they're going to do whatever they want. What we can do is only control how we show up. In the case of kids and in the case of employees, you can do a lot to coach and train and teach and guide behavior. In the case of adults, we want to get to the place where we are accepting other adults exactly as they are knowing that they have the capacity to think, feel, and do whatever they want. And that that doesn't always mean there aren't consequences that you are going to do.

So I've coached women in marriages where the husband is speaking to them in a way that they don't like and they don't want to be spoken to. So there's no physical abuse, but there is yelling and being spoken to in a way, in a tone, and with words that they don't want to be spoken to.

So husband has agency to do this. Husband can think, husband can feel, and husband can do, which includes speaking, whatever he wants. That doesn't mean that you don't also get to use your agency. So you should protect yourself and have the standards that you want to have and set some boundaries.

So it might look like, "Hey husband, please don't talk to me like that." So you're making a request that he changes up how he uses his agency. If he

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says, “Yep, you're right. I won't do that anymore.” He does that, and then he actually doesn't talk to you like that anymore, then it's done. There's really no need to set a boundary.

Let's say you ask him to use his agency differently. “Could you please not talk to me like that?” He says, “Yes, I'll try my best.” Then he does talk to you like that again. You can set up a boundary. A boundary isn't intended to control someone else's behavior. So a boundary isn't meant to control husband's agency, right. You're not trying to punish him or control him. It's not because this is the more noble way or something. It just doesn't work.

So if you've ever tried to control someone else's agency, you know what this feels like. It feels like you're out of control. I mean I've done this gosh I feel like in my 20s when I dated guys who would party a lot. I would try to control the amount that they partied. It never worked, right. Because they were just using their agency how they wanted to use it.

So what you want to do here going back to the example if husband's speaking to you in a way that you don't want to be spoken to. You request that he stops and he doesn't stop, you can set a boundary. The boundary is for you. It's not for husband. It's for you so that you can love yourself. So that you can take care of yourself and give yourself what you need.

It can be set from love. It can sound like, “Hey, I don't want to be talked to in that way. I don't let anyone talk to me in that way. So in the future if you decide to speak to me like that, I'm going to leave the room. I'm going to go for a drive. I'm going to do X, Y, Z.” A boundary is always something that you do for you. It's for your benefit so that you can take care of yourself. So if you take a step back and you see how that's related to agency, it can be really empowering.

Now this doesn't mean that you feel happy about all of this, right. You probably are going to have a lot of different emotions. This is one of the bigger examples that I have, but this goes to all sorts of things that we have in our marriages, right. So if you want husband to clean up, right. If you

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think about if he's leaving dishes everywhere and you've asked him to clean up, and he says he will try but he just doesn't. We want to let him be him.

I think this is so powerful because this is where it's the hardest to do this work. It's the hardest to separate ourselves from our closet loved ones. From our kids and from our spouses.

So in this case, okay so we've asked husband to clean up. He doesn't clean up. So we're asking him to use his agency differently when we ask him to clean up. He doesn't want to because remember he can think, feel, and do whatever he wants.

So the same is true for you. You can do whatever you want. So you get to decide okay what kind of woman, what kind of wife do I want to show up as knowing that husband's going to be him. We don't want to expect him to change. We don't want to try to control him. Certainly, we can make requests of him, but he gets to decide for himself what he's going to do. So then what do you want to do? How do you want to show up?

You might decide you know what? I really like when dishes are in the dishwasher. So I'm just going to be the one. I'm going to be the one to put dishes in the dishwasher. Kind of let go of that need for him to do something to satisfy you. That's just one option available. You might decide to let go of the need for them all to be in the dishwasher. Either way, it's you feeling so much more empowered to use your agency given that someone else is using their agency in a way that you wouldn't choose.

I always joke in Grow You. I'm like if I could tell you how to control all of the humans, trust me I would. Because that's really what we all want, right. We all want to control the world, but it's not possible. So instead what we can control is ourselves.

So we're in all of these different relationships in society, in our homes, in the world. People are using their agency how they want to. We get to

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remember that that's separate from us. When we focus back on ourselves, we feel so much better because it's within our control. So I always say assume that even though you've made the request that that person is not going to change their agency. Then decide how do you want to show up given that they're going to just be them? That's where all of your power is focusing on how you can think, feel, and act.

Now mirroring is something similar, but we talk about mirroring typically with respect to emotions. I think there's some overlap here. I want to dive into what mirroring is and how it relates to agency as well. So mirroring is taking on other people's feelings and actions. It's kind of like empathy. So it's feeling other people's feelings. We have mirror neurons, it's a tongue twister for me. Mirror neurons in our brains. It's a very natural human behavior to adopt the feeling of someone else and even the body language of someone else who you're in front of.

Now I read this amazing book. It's called *Against Empathy* by Paul Bloom. Highly recommend it. There is some overlap between what he teaches and what I'm going to talk about here. Because I think the biggest problem with mirroring is that we don't realize we're doing it. It's really your default primitive brain will mirror.

So let's say that your sister-in-law is being really judgmental. So you talk to her on the phone, and she is being negative and judgmental about your brother, her husband. Then maybe even about your mom or something like that. So then you hang up the phone, and you talk about how judgmental she is behind her back. That is you mirroring her behavior. That's not to say that that's wrong. Really I just want you to see that this happens over and over. It happens so often we don't even realize it.

Something else I coach on a lot that has helped so many moms have such really big breakthroughs with yelling and snapping at their kids is when your toddler has a tantrum. They are frustrated. So then you get frustrated. That's your mirroring their emotions. Now are you going to mirror it in the same way? No, you're going to mirror it in the 35 year old way whereas

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toddler is going to feel frustrated in the three year old way. You end up yelling and feeling frustrated and having that adult version of the tantrum because you're mirroring how toddler is feeling.

Now mirroring isn't necessarily bad. Because let's say that you go to meet a friend for lunch. She is just so happy, has the best energy. She is connected to you. She's there for you. You are picking up on how she is feeling. So you adopt that feeling as well. You leave lunch feeling like you are in the best mood and on cloud nine. This is an example of mirroring to your benefit.

So it's not necessarily that mirroring is bad. We do it for positive and negative emotions. What I want to kind of bring to your awareness is that it's happening on default, but it's not always serving you. So if you can bring some consciousness to it and awareness to it, you get so much more authority over your emotions. So you can end up staying in your prefrontal cortex and deciding on purpose how you want to think, feel, and act. How you want to use your agency in any situation.

So if you're out to lunch with a girlfriend who is in the best mood ever, let that default brain take over and mirror her. But when your kids are fighting and they are feeling really upset, do you then also want to feel really upset? Most of the moms I coach the answer is no. The objection to this is, "I don't want to feel really happy that my kids are frustrated or sad or throwing the tantrum."

I say of course not, but the options aren't feel frustrated or feel happy. That's what our brain goes to. It goes to like the either or. I think that well, if I'm not going to mirror them then I'm just totally fine that my child is really upset. I say no, of course you don't want to be happy when your child is really frustrated. Maybe an older child is going through something really challenging with school. What you want to do though is decide what kind of mom you want to be.

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So there are so many options in between feeling happy and feeling frustrated. Maybe you want to show up with compassion and connection and support instead of what we tend to do is let me fix this. I want to fix all of it. I'm going to go to the school and find out what happened. We go into fixit mode. There is a time and place for that.

Ahead of that when you're connecting with your child, you're kind of showing them things happen in the world that we want to be sad about. It's okay to feel sad. So instead of you sitting down with them and also feeling sad, you're saying, "Hey, I'm here for you. I support you. I know what sad feels like. I see you."

So a lot of times when people talk about wanting empathy, and Paul Bloom goes into this in *Against Empathy*. What we're really talking about is wanting to feel seen and feel heard and feel understood. I think you can do that from a place of connection and self-compassion without actually feeling the other person's feelings.

So if your child is feeling sad, it's not useful for you to feel sad with them. It is useful for you to have compassion, for you to feel connection and love and support and show up deliberately, right? There is that subtle difference, but the difference is everything. The same is true in all of our relationships.

So if you've ever talked to someone when you were going through a hard time, and that person says, "Oh it will be fine. It'll get better. Don't worry." Usually this is coming from a really great place, but since they haven't met you where you are, they're not mirroring you at all, it can be very disconnecting.

So instead what you want to do is you want to show up and have that compassion and that connection. It's I see you. I get you. I see that this is really hard. I know that feeling frustrated and upset and so sad is challenging, and it's painful. I've been there before.

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Do you see how that is very different than also taking on the person's emotions, but also very different than sort of ignoring them, right? There's that space in the middle where we don't have to mirror when we don't want to mirror. We can still show up and support the person and feel connected to them.

So what you can do is know about mirroring and start to pay attention to when you are mirroring and just notice it. Sometimes, again, you're going to want to continue to mirror. Other times you want to just start to bring that awareness into it and think, "Okay, maybe I don't want to mirror my kid's tantrum and have my own tantrum every time that they're upset."

It's not that we're not going to have consequences. It's not that we're not going to use our agency to create the home that we want to create, but we are going to loosen the emotional response that we have to their tantrums. So it's seeing that the three year old is going to continue to be a three year old. Supporting him and being by him and normalizing big feelings. Normalizing feeling frustrated and sad in a way that shows you understand is going to go so much further than trying to control that and remove it completely.

This is hard to do because you have a million things going on. It's happening in the moment. What I don't want you to do is beat yourself up. I never want you to beat yourself up. Instead it's just starting to bring some awareness to it. Then what you can do, come inside Grow You and bring those specific instances of where this is coming up to the calls that we have. I can help you work through those specific situations so that you can practice this and get a lot better at it.

One thing that I want to wrap up with here and remind you of is that there is no changing another person. So you have the agency that you have, that God given agency. Everyone else does to. So there's no fixing other people.

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This was something that I learned firsthand with my upbringing and my dad. I just let my dad be an alcoholic, and he was so much easier to love. I let go of the societal norms of what dads should do and how they should be. I went into this radical acceptance of just who he was and just decided to love him exactly as he was.

Now I had boundaries in place. I decided for myself I was not going to be around him if he was drinking. That was something I did for me. I didn't do it as a way to try to control him. I didn't do it as a way to punish him. I truly did it as a way to love myself and protect myself and take care of myself.

This is hard work to do, particularly with something that is I would say more extreme like alcoholism. It's even hard to do for the little things, right. So what we can do here is be a student of this work and see how profound it can be in our lives. My relationship with my dad was one of the best that I had because I did this work on it.

So it's seeing that every other human has agency, and sometimes that means that there is sadness that comes with that, right. Because a lot of times we go from anger and trying to control and trying to manipulate other people's agency to that acceptance of oh, they can choose to do whatever they want. They can choose to make choices that I don't want them to make. So we can go into sadness, but that is going to feel a lot better than frustration and trying to control the other person.

With that, you can also remind yourself that you don't have to ever mirror someone else's behavior if you don't want to. If they want to fight, you don't have to bring the fight as well. We get into these emotional habits that don't really serve us. A lot of that has to do with just mirroring. Once you see it, once you see that you're mirroring, you can stop it. You can decide how you want to connect, how you want to love them, how you want to support them, how you want to show up for them or spend time with them or not.

There are relationships that you will want to leave and get out of. For most of your relationships that are fairly healthy and just two people using their

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brains and their agency in different ways, it's really up to you to decide how you want to show up since you can't control that other person. This is the work. This is the inner work. It's hard to do, but it's so worth it.

I know that when you are in your head all day and you are ruminating about what's going on outside of you, your marriage, your kids, your life. You are stuck in a negative mindset. It feels pretty doom and gloom when you ruminate like this all day.

So the first piece of this work is becoming aware of what you are thinking and feeling. It's like getting out of their agency. It's getting out of what they're doing, what they're thinking, what they're feeling. It's shifting that focus on what are you thinking about this? What are you feeling about this? What are you doing about this? Just noticing it.

Then you can start to redirect your thoughts and change how you feel. You get better at it. You choose better feeling thoughts. When you manage your mind and do the inner work, specifically controlling the direction of your brain and where your thoughts go, you've really discovered the key to peace and happiness.

Because when you protect your peace, when you can have emotional maturity, when you can create your own happiness, you're free. You've figured it out. You have this resilience that you take with you. You can go from there into the world, into your marriage, into anything that you want to do for yourself and take it all on.

Because you always have you, and you always get to decide who you want to be in any set of circumstances. That my friend is the best gift that you can give yourself. That's what I have for you today. I will talk with you next week. Take care.

If you loved this podcast, I invite you to check out Grow You, my mindfulness community for moms where we do the inner work together. Head on over to nataliebacon.com/coaching to learn more.

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