

Enough Episode 93: When Love is a Hustle: Healing the Fixer Identity, with Dr Natalie Cawley

Mandy: You fix your partner. So that you'll feel needed. You do all the emotional labor in the relationship and call it intimacy. You think that love is earned through being easy going, taking care of everything, pushing down your own needs. You think that if you just love them enough, they'll finally be okay, and maybe you will be too.

You might do the same with your friends at work, with family, and you're exhausted, frustrated with yourself and unsure how to get outta this pattern. And every time you do it, you get a little bit more irritated with yourself. So you try boundaries, you try detaching, you try pulling back the care. But the surprising truth is this.

If you fall into those rescuing and fixing habits, it's not about caring less. It's about no longer performing the version of yourself that you think will finally be loved. We get into that in today's conversation with Dr. Natalie Cawley, psychotherapist and author of *Just About Coping*, which is a raw, super compelling memoir about mental health identity and what happens when you finally, finally stop trying to fix everyone else and start healing yourself.

We dig into where that fixer identity comes from. How it masquerades as love and what it takes to unhook from the fantasy of rescuing others in the attempt to finally feel enough before we dive in. Welcome back or welcome to Enough the podcast. I'm your host. Dr. Mandy Leto. In every episode of this show, I explore a particular facet of enoughtness, whether it's in work, in leadership, in personal relationships, or in your relationship to yourself.

You're likely a high achiever whose life looks shiny and successful on the outside, but inside you feel conflicted, self-critical, and never feel quite good enough in spite of your stellar achievements. You're tired and wondering, will I ever feel enough in these deep and often funny conversations?

You'll hear how others are navigating that question, including me, and the answers might surprise you. Before we get into fixing and rescuing in today's episode, Natalie shares what it means for her to feel enough now.

Natalie: I think for me it's about having a sort of internal self companion, so a relationship with the self that's accepting and challenging. But also compassionate and recognizes having internal praise and all those sorts of things that can. Drive me forward, but not in a, in a pathological way.

Mandy: So having read your brilliant book just about coping, I suspect that you didn't always have this relationship with feeling enough.

I know from reading that you have stayed in relationships that were. Unhealthy for you. You have wanted to be chosen, I feel you. Mm-hmm. And you pushed down your inner knowing on multiple occasions. Mm-hmm. So that was that private life dimension, but you also had it in professional life. So when you were training to be a psychotherapist, you came from a very different background.

And when you were amongst all of these sort of polished, confident public school medical students, you felt. At times that you didn't belong or you felt like an imposter. So I feel you, because I've been there both personally and professionally. So take us back to those years of wanting to be chosen and hustling for your worth. What was happening inside of you? Take us there.

Natalie: I had a very deeply held belief about a romantic partner being an ending for me and an identity around being almost a shadow of my partner's success and wanting to be, have an identity as that partner, rather than having my own worth outside of a relationship.

I thought I'd found that in a match when I was very young. I think we were 19 when I met that partner who was training to be a doctor and all that sort of accolade of, you know, status and doctor's wife was kind of, I mean, it feels really shameful now, admitting this.

I don't think I was consciously aware that that was my drive but that was definitely what I was seeking. I didn't have huge ambitions for myself, my own journey, my own career. I just sort of plodded along and I don't think there was that much expectation of me actually from my family. There was much more expectation on my brother, and so I just, I'd kind of gone along with that. That sense of knowing that that was gonna be my future and I felt very inferior. I think during my journey in psychology and, and in that early training I always had a pattern of putting other people on a pedestal. So partners were always on a pedestal.

My mentor was hugely on a pedestal. Without giving too much of a spoiler away, it turns out you learn in the book that she was actually dealing with some obviously very intense demons of her own, and that really shocked me and, and kind of unsettled my worldview of how other people who I perceived as these, you know, perfect enough people putting myself in the one down position that actually they had their own struggles and their own demons and flaws

Mandy: So let's talk about relationships, because this is something, and I've been there too, so I so deeply resonated with what you were just saying that it's so easy when you don't necessarily feel enough. It's not even a conscious thing, especially as a younger person, but this idea, that status and whatever it was that you were seeing.

That other person who you put on a pedestal, that power, maybe that's not the right word, but that thing to be achieved, that thing to be had that status, that it was somehow outside of you. And it was something to be pursued rather than something to be cultivated. So when you were in that relationship with that medical student and you were a young person, what was that relationship giving you?

Natalie: It was giving me that role of supporter, the status as you say, of being that nurturing, supportive role and getting praise from, from that side of things rather than it coming from me, but actually. There was definitely an internal tension in me at that time because I spent a lot of that relationship being very angry and projecting some of that anger out towards him because it wasn't really fulfilling a need in me that I needed quenched. So I felt a constant in a state of tension and turmoil. So it was quite uncomfortable actually that relationship probably for both of us looking back

Mandy: So I'm curious how that inner knowing started to bubble up. was it a voice in your head or was it that anger or that sort of passive aggressiveness? In my situation when I was in those types of romantic dynamics, it came up almost as a passive aggressiveness because that felt like a way of releasing the steam out of the situation without full-blown anger.

So how did that inner knowing start to manifest for you?

Natalie: There was definitely, I definitely visited passive aggression and there, there were two versions of me. There was this sort of sort of Stepford wife idealized figure that I was trying to be, which I imagine was probably quite suffocating, trying to do all these practical things and offer lots of support and praise, but then there would be a buildup of energy and eventually, you know, that gauge would blow and I would be quite impulsive and dysregulated and quite angry, and then I ended up in this cycle where then the other person would come in and try and overcompensate for that and I'd feel a lot of guilt and a lot of shame, and so that I knew that this wasn't working for me on some level, but because my sort of mode was to focus on his needs and what he was doing, I tried to ignore my own emotional process a lot, ironically when I'm training to be a psychologist, but I was really trying to, you know, shift that out of conscious awareness, which took a lot of work, I think emotionally and left me quite drained.

Mandy: I remember being a young woman and. I always used to look in the magazines and when we'd go into the shops and I'd be like, oh, I want that, or I like that, or, when I grow up, I'm gonna have this life.

And it was just very different at the time. I. I don't know if you resonate with growing up and my mom said to me, I still remember to this day I was probably about eight or nine and she said, you've got expensive taste, kid. You better marry a rich man. And I remember being so incensed. By wondering like what is the path forward, to be able to have your, I mean in this case it was just like silly material things, but like to have your needs met or to be able to desire or to have power.

I remember that message being instilled in all those small ways that, again, it was outside of me. And then how those dynamics then play out in romantic relationships when you're sort of trying to pursue this, like this is the way we position ourselves to power, to have access to power and status and all the things.

But then there's this knowing, bubbling up, and I remember seeing Cher, the singer Cher, was on television. Her mother had said something similar to me that, you know, you better marry a rich man. She said, ma, I am a rich man.

Natalie: I've seen that clip. I love that clip. So empowering.

Mandy: So is that a tension that you are feeling as well as you matured?

Natalie: I think I definitely had that same messaging laid down throughout my growing up. But it sounds like for you, you had an aha moment, like a lightning bolt of insight when you saw that interview. I think for me it was a, for me it was slower. A slower recognition of my own competency. I think I remember nobody thought I was particularly bright or, you know, would have expectations of me, and I remember putting my mind to my A levels on my own, took myself off, did my revision, and then exceeded everybody's expectations. That was the first moment of, oh, I I, I, I can be competent, I can. I put my mind to things and then do them, and then that slowly started to build and that probably tied in with the recognition that that relationship model was not going to work for me.

Mandy: Let's talk about the fixer and the rescuer for a moment. So she's the one who senses a partner's mood shift before they've even said a word. She anticipates needs, smooths tensions and performs emotional triage like it's a full-time job with benefits, except the benefits never seem to come.

Natalie described this so perfectly like a Stepford wife, all smiley, agreeable, and emotionally polished on the outside while feeling quietly ragey hollow and utterly lost on the inside. This isn't just over-functioning. It's a survival strategy that's often rooted in childhood where being good or helpful or low drama earned you connection, or at least avoided conflict.

So we become brilliant at tuning into others and terrible at tuning into ourselves. That's what's known as the fawn response. It's the nervous system saying, if I keep everyone else happy, I'll be safe. It looks like kindness. It feels like competence, but actually it's self abandonment in pearls in a twinset.

And here's the twist. In romantic relationships, this fixing and rescuing can look a lot like love. You care deeply. You give generously. You feel indispensable. But when love is laced with fear of rejection, of being too much or not enough, it stops being intimacy, and it starts being strategy. The fixer isn't weak, she's wise and she did what she had to do to feel safe and connected. But eventually that strategy can start to chafe because your worth depends on being pleasing or perfect, and that means you lose touch with the messy, brilliant aliveness of who you really are. So let's get back to the conversation where Natalie shares how she started to unhook from the need to rescue others.

How did that shift start to happen for you when you were in those relationships that were not getting your needs met. You were feeling lonely, you were feeling disconnected. You probably also felt a plummet of self-esteem. I'm guessing from your book, how did you actually start to realize that this just isn't working for me and maybe my performing and hustling is actually the problem?

Natalie: I think I grew in my ability to not ignore my gut feeling anymore. And me and my best friend for years had this concept of the little voice, which is you're in this relationship, you're going along, pretend,

pretend, pretend. And then you have this little intrusive moment that says, well, this doesn't feel quite right, or You're pretending, or some form of that.

And I got better instead of when that little voice came in. No, no, no, no. Ignore that. Ignore that. Carry on. Carry on. I got better at just having a moment to listen and even if I didn't act on it, 'cause a lot of times I didn't act on it, but I heard it and then I allowed it to sort of percolate in the background until I was able to really listen to it and think this, this isn't right, this isn't working for me.

Mandy: Make that real for us. Let's go back to your internal movie. To a moment if you can conjure one up when you are in a situation and that little bubbling voice is coming up, the little voice is saying, this isn't quite right. If we freeze frame there, what's going on?

Natalie: So I was dating a man who turned out to be a pathological liar.

And he did a lot of work learning about therapy, um, and therapeutic language and pain and distress, and how that sort of shows up because he told me he was seeing a therapist because he had this role that was very emotionally loaded and there clearly was a lot going on for him psychologically because he had.

The need to develop this false self to the world and pretend to be somebody he wasn't. So I think I tapped in on that emotion and there was a level of knowing that things weren't as they seem, and I was ignoring it, ignoring it, pushing it down. And then I found myself doing behaviors without thinking.

So one day he went out of the room and I just took his driver's license out of his wallet and took a picture of it. I did it totally without thought or planning, and later on I thought why have I done that? There's a there's a level of distrust here that's percolating. And then one night he hadn't been drinking and I think it was New Year's Eve, and I'd said, you know, have a couple of drinks it's New Year's Eve. And so he did. And then he said, um, oh, I'm feeling really tipsy, I'm glad that you've, you know, said to have a couple of drinks. Anyway, I went to pay the bill, to get the drinks and it said Virgin Mojitos and it seemed like such a tiny lie in the context of all the layer upon layer of huge, complex lies.

But that moment just, there was just a penny drop of something's just not right. And I was able to feel empowered enough to back myself. 'cause I knew I would be met with a lot of anger and rage if I tried to challenge him. But I just took that moment as, no, I can do this. I can listen to that voice and I can listen to my gut and I can follow this through.

I've got the strength to follow this through. And I did. And he unraveled in front of me actually.

Mandy: And that was the end of that relationship. If we were going to look at this almost forensically, like what was it that was shifting for you? Was it your self-trust growing? Was it your self-belief growing?

Like how did you all of a sudden get to a place where I can back myself and confront and the effect that that then had on subsequent relationships?

Natalie: Yeah, definitely. I was doing the work in therapy at that point for myself and learning that I had a lot of, a lack of self-trust and a lack of, um, belief in myself.

And my therapist actually said I had pathological doubt. So I was trying to work on that and build on that and realizing actually that I was giving people the scaffolding to create a false self in the first instance. So say I met somebody on a dating app, I would construct a reality for them.

So this is what they do for a job, which means this is, you know, their goals, potentially this is where they could get to. And I would sort of project that out onto them. They would, some people would pick that up and run with it. So I made it very easy for that, those false selves to be created and sustained.

So I started trying to practice what I do in therapy as in work, which is to meet people where they are and just be curious about them rather than giving them an identity almost before they've revealed one to me.

Mandy: Let's talk now to the person who is in this situation where they may be looking at their own relationship history of, oh, maybe I am creating a scaffolding for someone in my life, or maybe I am projecting in some way.

It's really hard to know when you're doing it. It's not like it's a calculated thing. So how does somebody know that they're either creating a persona of themselves or that they're kind of creating a scaffolding for someone that they've met on a dating app to literally step into. Let's take that apart.

That's really interesting.

Natalie: I think there's a deep sense of things not being authentic or um, incongruent in some way. And if you just allow that moment to come forward, it will. That sense of not everything is what it seems. If you take away the smoke and mirrors for a moment and how am I really feeling?

Where I am feeling in my body, it will come up and there might be a reaction of wanting to push it away, but just giving it permission to say what it needs to say, it will be in there as part of your psyche.

Mandy: So in creating a persona of yourself, and it might be like you're in the midst of, I have to have this outfit and I'm gonna do this, and, you know, I'm thinking of somebody in the motions of, because we all do wanna be our best when we're first in a relationship, right?

So how does, how do you distinguish that between somebody who's almost over torturing that I must present myself in this way, so I'll, I'll be enough. How do you differentiate those two things?

Natalie: Yeah, it's hard, I think. I think it's about how you're experiencing it. Is it that you are, you are putting your best foot forward and it's giving you pleasure? Or is it a kind of frantic anxiety cycle of I must and listen to the self-talk? Is it a must and I should? Is it a pressurized, you know, forceful thing or is it more of a you know, like a friend would talk to you getting ready for a date. Oh, why don't you wear that? 'cause you look really good in that rather than, you know, the kind of, you must do this to be loved or to be valued.

Mandy: How did you start to build trust? Like through the discussions with your therapist, if you're open to sharing, like how, how did you do that?

Natalie: We had to work with a lot of resistance. Um, and that's something I've definitely seen in high flyers that I've worked with, which is if I let go of this belief system or the way I treat myself, it means that I won't accomplish as much because that's the held rigid belief.

So it's starting to just try and be questioning, be curious about that a little bit more. Will that really end everything? If you stop sort of self-flagellating every day and actually make room for yourself and what you're actually thinking and feeling beyond that, will that be an absolute disaster? So she taught me, actually, I remember her vividly saying that these defence mechanisms and belief systems that you hold - we shouldn't just be looking at them with a critical eye and saying, let's get rid of them. We need to show them some respect. 'Cause they're there for a reason and they were built to help you survive through something. So let's look at that and let's work out why they were developed.

Show them a bit of gratitude and insight and then think, are they really working for you? Now, can we modify and change them a little

Mandy: So what immediately came to mind as you were talking was this could look like a series of experiments. So if you are going to learn how to trust yourself, what's something that if someone feels that they have to be "perfect all the time" to have connection or to get ahead at work?

What's something that you would say as, as Dr. Natalie, for somebody to start experimenting with? Unpicking that belief.

Natalie: I would say a starting point is to go to your most trusted person, so the person you feel safest with, and that might be a family member or friend or a therapist. And think about what your greatest fear would be to reveal in terms of these sorts of people.

I often use the word messy. They really don't like the word messy. So what feels messy for you? I'm not surprised. Yeah, no. And try something in that region. And some people, I've even done things like do a bit of messy play. Starting that small just to break that constant repetition of perfectionism, leads to connection, leads to value.

See if other things, because what most people find is that person who's upheld, as you know, so competent and nothing, nothing can flaw them. If people get an opportunity to see vulnerability, they relish the opportunity to help them and support them and give something back to them and also bond and say, oh God, I, you know, I feel that way as well. It's just making that first step,

Mandy: I guess the same would apply to somebody who uses the fixer thing and this coming in to save, swooping and saving, and this is my way of being seen, being loved, and adding value. If you know that that's draining you and it's not serving you, there's a way to experiment with that too.

It's like maybe not doing that and seeing if the connection and the love and the belonging remains is still there. Mm-hmm. Yeah, exactly. And what about somebody? It's probably the same. I suspect it's gonna be the same, but let's go there. Like what about somebody who feels like they constantly have to be achieving to be relevant, worthy, and have any self-esteem?

What's, how would you start unpicking that?

Natalie: Again, I would say trying as you put it, to experiment with that initially in very safe places where you feel secure, uh, where you can mess up and it won't affect, you know, the fundamental attachment relationship. And maybe just acknowledging how it feels to be that personal time, because it must be exhausting. Is there a part of you in there that wants a break?

Mandy: Often there's a moment where someone just says, enough, whether it's a diagnosis or a relationship falling to pieces. Or whatever might happen in that moment where you actually say, I really need to do things differently now, or I really want to do things differently now. Can you take us to a moment like that for you?

Natalie: I was in an accident and it resulted in me breaking my neck in two places. And actually for me, the relational fallout was more painful than the operation and the, you know, the pain of going through the physical elements of it because for whatever reason, the people that were involved, who were very close friends of mine, felt threat or felt shame, or felt guilt or something that made them turn on me.

And everything was minimized, everything was denied, and I then became the villain in the story, and I was blamed for subsequent misfortunes that they faced because of stress that I had caused, and my default was to go into the one down position. I was so desperate to explain myself and to try and repair these relationships by saying, no, I'm not a threat to you and this is how I feel and I've been through this and I I don't want this. The more I tried to explain and pursue, and repair, the more I was faced with this turning away and there became a moment where I said, right, enough is enough. I'm cutting all ties. I'm totally removing myself from anything to do with those relationships and not trying anymore, not trying to explain myself and it was very painful for me. It was a lot like heartbreak, but eventually I got to a point where I didn't feel the injustice and the anger and the betrayal. I just sort of felt indifferent to the loss. I'm glad I had that moment because it was exhausting me just, you know, trying to over explain to make my case.

Mandy: In some ways it is a worst case scenario coming true, where you're losing connection. Oh yeah. Mm-hmm. And that was really important to you, and you are losing connection, but in spite of your horrible injury, there was also something rising from the inside, which is, if I'm hearing you right, you're trusting yourself and you're advocating for yourself.

So there's a sovereignty that is rising in you. That came out of that. I'm trying to think of what a moment like that would've been like for me. This highly dysfunctional romantic relationship that I was telling you about. This person was unavailable and emotionally unavailable. So, you know, I like to be extra thorough in and I remember we were in a moment of intimacy. And he actually spit on my face at that moment. And I remember being so, uh, what's the word? What kind of person would I have to be to be spit on by somebody who is in an intimate act with me? How low have I let my standards go for myself?

It was simultaneously the lowest possible moment of my existence as a human being, and also the birthplace of some deep knowing that knuckled its way up out of my body. I was like, I am done with this. And I think of all the ways I contorted myself to be accepted by this person who was, you know, kind of a

big deal in his own world and his own niche and it just made me confront that I'm never going to get what I want from this.

Like hitting a brick wall that takes you to such a low place to actually allow you to rise. And I think there's something about those rock bottom moments. Not that I'm trying to romanticize them 'cause they suck, but something powerful can also emerge from those places.

Natalie: I was just going to ask you how you experienced yourself in that moment, because there was the meeting of two worlds there. This sense of, you know, being, I don't wanna put words in your mouth, but humiliated or, but then at the same time, I, that's a good word, uprising. The uprising of the empowered self saying this is enough for me.

Mandy: As I replay that moment right now, it's hard to, you know, that was such a long time ago. I was, you know, so young and vulnerable and I suppose, and over my head and my current self has so much compassion for her, how hard she was trying just to be loved and to be seen, and how it turned out to be the exact opposite.

If I bring myself back to the moment, I think there was relief in that moment, though I could be distorting that through my current lens. I hope there's relief in that moment of putting that conflicted internal negotiation that I had been doing for such a long time to the side. All of a sudden, everything is very simple and very clear.

I think when there's this hustling for worthiness in a romantic relationship in particular, there's so much internal ping pong back and forth. The trying not to know the justifying the constant justification for bad behavior or for, you know, something that, something that happened or a comment or, and I think suddenly all of that went away for me. I don't talk about that very much, obviously, because the humiliation was huge and it just felt like I was engulfed in it for a moment. Until I wasn't, until there was that, that rising that was coming through. I see if your Instagram is right, that you are in a new relationship now, and I saw a sparkler on your ring.

Is that, is that something to celebrate? Are you engaged?

It is. Thank you. Yes. Congratulations in December. Congratulations. Thank you. Yay. Thanks so much. Yay. Yay.

Mandy: How are you showing up differently? How are you showing up in terms of the connection with this relationship? Bearing in mind everything that you have learned from this, from this journey that you've been on with romantic relationships?

Natalie: Yeah, I think I got to a point before I entered this relationship where I was okay by myself, and that's not everybody's journey, but that was really important for me because as we said at the, the top of the episode that I. I never felt enough by myself without a union. I had my own, my own goals, my own successes and things I was celebrating for myself.

So I felt in a strong position with lots of self-trust and I felt confident that I was able to discern whether this person. I was able to look at my own patterns of relating and check if I was falling into them or not. So I'm not a rescuer. I don't try to be his therapist. I'm very unapologetically myself and all those messy bits. I mean, he couldn't really avoid them anyway because I've written them all down in the book. But they're all there to be seen and to be, to be celebrated and you know, just accepted if they're, if they're not wonderful. And yeah, you know, every relationship is an evolving dynamic. But I'd say it's the first healthy relationship I've been in so far. So, very pleased.

Mandy: I'm thrilled for you. I'm thrilled for you.

Thank you. And there's also something, as you said about owning all those bits of ourselves. 'cause I, I had some. Some people say to me like, oh, you share so much on the podcast, I could never do that. Especially all those cringey bits that you share. And I thought there's something about bringing those things outta the shadows.

Right? And it's, you know, I'm not gonna lead with those in a dinner party conversation, but in the appropriate context, there's something about being an owner of all of ourselves and all of our experiences and not relegating those to the shame cupboard under the stairs. And just understanding that life is messy and complicated and we can be enough being messy and complicated.

Natalie: Absolutely. I think they're sometimes the most fun elements of people. That's why I'm probably in the job that I'm in 'cause I like to dig them out. I've put mine out there to the world to sort of try and model that for people. So, yeah.

Mandy: I end every episode with one question. What is something you've recently said enough to and been better for it

Natalie: Overworking. I have recently said enough to, and trying not to feel guilty when I'm off work and just try and focus on the here and now rather than thinking, oh, really, I should be doing that. No, I'm here now. Stay with this.

Mandy: If you've been listening and thinking, uh, yep, that's me. I'm tap dancing to keep everybody happy, and I'm so over it. I hope you've got some juice and inspiration from this conversation. You're not broken, unlovable, you're not pathetic. Those are some of the words I've heard people use to describe themselves when they recognize that they're fixers.

Savers, contortion artists, and smoother overs, often to their own detriment. So as Natalie and I have just unpacked, those urges are just leftover survival hacks from childhood, and you've probably figured out by now that they don't work. They just leave you depleted, quietly, ragey, and deeply unfulfilled.

So consider this your permission slip to stop performing. And to start listening to that little voice, the one that says this isn't quite right, and then start some tiny experiments and safe spaces. One more thing before we go. If this episode hit you right in the fields or maybe made you nervous, laugh during moments of recognition, please share it, text it to that friend who's always fine, but never is, or post it on your Instagram.

This one's for my fellow recovering fixers. And while you're there, why not connect with Dr. Natalie Cawley? Her details and book are in the show notes, and heck connect with me too if you haven't already. Thanks for tuning into Enough, the podcast. Until next time, let everyone clean up their own messes for once. Ha, that's a great experiment for you.