

Needy

How to Advocate for Your Needs
and Claim Your Sovereignty

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Contents

Introduction:	You're Needy, and I Love That About You	1
Chapter 1:	The Needy Framework	19
Practice:	Your Daily Check-In	33
Chapter 2:	Safety	37
Practice:	Befriending Your Inner Child	43
Practice:	Tending to Your Discomfort	51
Chapter 3:	Rest	57
Practice:	Plugging Up Your Energy Leaks	65
Practice:	Your Daily To-Do List Makeover	70
Chapter 4:	Sustenance	77
Practice:	Honoring and Identifying Burnout Warning Signs	84
Practice:	Defining Your Realm of Responsibility	96
Chapter 5:	Trust	101
Practice:	What Is True for You?	107
Practice:	Affirming Self-Talk and Sowing Seeds of Trust	113
Chapter 6:	Integrity	121
Practice:	Defining Your Priorities	126
Practice:	The Hot-Potato Collector	134
Chapter 7:	Sovereignty	141
Practice:	Being the Detective of Your Own Experience	150
Practice:	Saying No. Saying Yes.	154
Chapter 8:	Love	163
Practice:	Saying What You Mean	170
Practice:	Creating a Menu for Self-Love and Self-Care	182

CONTENTS

Chapter 9:	Belonging	187
Practice:	Wheel of the Year	194
Practice:	Embracing Your Muchness	202
Chapter 10:	Celebration	207
Practice:	How to Celebrate	213
Practice:	Trusting and Celebrating New Growth	219
Epilogue:	Reverence for Your Life	227
	Acknowledgments	233
	Additional Reading List	237
	Notes	241
	About the Author	243

INTRODUCTION

You're Needy, and I Love That About You

This book is for humans who have needs, especially those of us who pretend we don't.

This book is for those of us who are longing for something we can't even name.

This book is for those of us who are overwhelmed and those of us who are just one yes away from complete and utter burnout.

This book is for those of us who believe that what we do makes us infinitely more interesting and worthy than who we are.

This book is for those of us who are preoccupied by mentally scanning every room we walk into and anticipating every need around us.

This book is for those of us who learned to mask our needs under an armor of self-reliance because our needs weren't met as children.

This book is for those of us who don't often feel seen, held, or heard.

This book is for those of us trying to tend to our needs in the hidden corners of our lives to protect ourselves from the intimacy of having our messy humanity witnessed and judged.

This book is for those of us who carry the story that no one would stay if they really knew us.

This book is for those of us who abandon ourselves in an attempt to belong.

I FELT MY FRUSTRATION RISING UP from the pit of my stomach as my partner and I made our schedule for the week. My partner outlined their needs—the hours their business required of them, the classes at the gym they wanted to take to feel good in their body, and the lunch adventure to a local restaurant they hoped we'd take as a new family. I wanted to be supportive, but as I listened, I felt consumed by a familiar swell of anger and resentment.

Barely four months after the birth of our first child, my neediness felt like a pot boiling over, and I'd never had less personal time or space to figure things out. I was accustomed to shielding my true self from the humans around me for fear of overwhelming them, a lesson learned from a lifetime of being told I was too much—too ambitious, too big, too loud, too many feelings, too many needs—plus the steady social conditioning of what a good woman should be. I had learned to tend to myself in the shadowy corners of my day, during the infrequent moments when my to-do list was complete and no one else needed me.

Somewhere along the way, I learned to believe that minimizing my needs was what it meant to be a good wife, friend, mother, coach, sister, and daughter because that image was reflected back at me from the heavy onslaught of media messaging, but it was deeper than that too. Many of my adolescent role models diverged from this ideal, but I rejected them as outliers in a pursuit for unconditional belonging.

I wanted to be liked. I wanted to be seen as good, as worthy. I wanted to fit in. I wanted the safety that I assumed homogeneity would give me. And so, I groomed myself in this way, strictly monitoring myself in an attempt to keep the peace and make other people comfortable, even when it meant that I, myself, was uncomfortable. This messaging felt unimpeachably true because the reminders were mirrored back to me from every angle—take care of yourself, don't make a fuss, be chill, downplay your feelings, be good. Be less, so that someone else will find you attractive. Keep yourself safe from rejection or abandonment. Somewhere along the way, I learned to believe that making myself invisible in this way was necessary in order to secure the love and belonging I ached for.

But in that moment on the couch, I could feel the hot shame of my neediness flooding me and threatening to eat me up whole. I felt angry

when I thought of how unsupported I felt, but I didn't have the vocabulary to describe how I wanted to be supported. I was so exhausted. I needed a shower. I was ashamed that I couldn't smooth myself over and smile and nod graciously the way I had practiced for so long. My new postpartum body felt foreign. I desperately wanted to have the space and energy to return to my work. And my partner was taking everything—all of the available time, space, and shared resources. Intellectually I knew this wasn't true, but it *felt* true. It felt as though we were fighting over one tiny scrap of available time, and they were grabbing it and leaving me with nothing.

Suddenly, I exploded, “Why are the things you want to do nonnegotiable? What about MY things? What about MY needs?” Tears rolled down my face as I got tangled up between needing to ask for something and feeling as though I didn't even have the time or energy to figure out what it was. In spite of myself, I was quickly becoming that thing I tried really hard not to be—needy.

Surprised, my partner calmly replied, “If there are things that you want and need to do, you need to ask for them. It is not my job to read your mind. And when you say you are going to do something, you have to safeguard it. It's not my fault that you keep giving all of your time away.”

Those words stung. I felt so angry, and while I wanted to be angry at them, really, I was angry at myself. When had I stopped mattering? Why was I so quick to make myself small in order to take care of everyone else? Why did I believe that asking for help made me a burden? The truth was, I hadn't prioritized my care. I hadn't respected my limits or set boundaries to protect my energy. I hadn't advocated for my needs. I hadn't even allowed myself to acknowledge that I had needs.

Somewhere along the way, I had abandoned myself.

I was longing to feel understood and valued, and I wanted them to do that for me. I wanted them to acknowledge my hard work and self-sacrifice with gifts, ample words of affirmation, and permission to tend to myself in whatever frivolous way occurred to me, but really, underneath all of that, I wanted to matter.

The profound ache of this desire ran much deeper than what was happening in my relationship. When I started to trace it back, I found

the need woven throughout the entire fabric of my life, braided into every relational pattern I had learned was necessary to belong. I had shielded others from the fullest and truest expression of myself for as long as I could remember, spending my life squeezing into the small boxes I created for myself and believing this uncomfortable restriction was a necessary apology for my too-muchness.

As a fat, loud, smart, and opinionated human with a lot of feelings, I was and am kind of a handful—something that I have learned to adore about myself after an adolescence littered with bullying and experiences of being told I should be ashamed of who I was because of the size of my body, the bright tenacity of my ambition, and my natural appetite for growth in every direction. *I am too much*, I told myself over and over—too many words, too many feelings, too many interests, too many desires. I carried these lessons through to adulthood, reliving them each time I tried to bend myself into shapes to earn external approval, feel loved, or belong to the humans that surrounded me. Often I did this by making sure the needs of those around me were met and I was earning my worthiness one carefully perfected step at a time.

Like many of us, my automatic association with having my own needs was negative.

“Don’t be needy!”

But, what is neediness apart from a bid for connection? Neediness is the presence of a desire to matter, a deep yearning to be prioritized and handled with care. Your needs—and mine—were never the problem, even as our social understanding of them is littered with examples of disposable, unlovable, unworthy, clingy, too-much humans. Hungry ghosts who are never satisfied. People who are a profound drag to be in a relationship with or who you often hear are dumped or rejected. Our needs are not the problem, but they become more challenging to hold—both for us and the people around us—when they are not addressed, verbalized, or well tended. They become more challenging to hold when we endeavor to outsource them to the people around us because we were

never given the tools to tend to them ourselves and because we were taught that minimizing our needs was an act of love and service to those around us. The less our needs are met, the more frantic we become to get them met, by whatever means necessary, because we are humans and humans have needs. We require care. This is an unshakeable fact.

I was, and am, needy. We all are. And yet, at that point in my life, I had never taken the time to get to know what my needs were, an ignorance fueled by the belief that being needy was bad and not burdening other people with my needs was good. I knew it was better to rise above and overcome them. I had learned I felt safest when I tucked myself in, hiding my messiest truths from view. And because I had never really risked sharing my needs with anyone, they often went unmet.

The presence of those unmet needs fueled a belief that no one cared what I needed, that my needs didn't matter, and that I should meet them myself when possible and ignore them when that was not possible. I knew no matter how small and cramped I felt inside the little box I had created around myself, it felt infinitely more dangerous to let myself out.

Lost in the abyss of a life that didn't reflect me, I became accustomed to doing what was expected of me as quickly as possible, and never stopped to ask myself what I wanted or needed. One day I found myself surrounded by people who did not truly know me, as I busily moved around a life I didn't recognize.

On the outside it looked great—prestigious graduate degree, attractive fiancé, busy in preparation for a perfect vineyard wedding. I was a high-functioning individual who received a lot of praise for her efforts. I was excellent at not needing anything from anyone and was relentlessly reliable.

And I was *miserable*.

I felt wholly disconnected from my body and was teeming with resentment over the many, many trespasses upon boundaries I had never expressed—the moments when my body was offered up for public opinion, the feelings I squashed in an effort to make my friends happy, and the way I dimmed my own shine in an attempt to keep myself safe by keeping others comfortable. My entire life was set up for other people

to think I was doing a good job, and I had zero understanding about replenishing the energy that doing a good job was costing me.

This worked for me for a long, long time—right up until it explicitly and definitively didn't.

And so began the long process of acknowledging the depth of my own self-abandonment. With time, I realized nothing in my life was free from needing to be examined in this new light. From the shift I made away from the career in social work I almost pursued, right up to the conversation about caring for my needs that I had with my partner, this work quickly became about whether or not I was actually willing to allow myself to be who and how I was—regardless of how I was received by others. It was humbling to realize how much of my power I had been giving away while waiting for someone else to tell me I had earned the tending I ached for. This is a lesson I anticipate learning again a hundred times in my lifetime.

The work in this book is work I myself have done and continue to do. It's tender and challenging, maybe in a different way from anything you've ever done before. And it is so very worth it.

From Safety to Celebration

How did you find your way to the margins of your own life? So many of us find our way there, one way or another. And it always, always comes back to needs. How did your needs get pushed to the periphery—tucked away for a better, more convenient or ideal moment that never seems to arrive? Do you, in fact, know what you need to begin with?

Let's take a moment to define what needs actually are. A need is something you *require* in order to exist and thrive. Human bodies, minds, and hearts have needs. There is no escaping this, even in a world where we are so often forced to abandon our needs if we want to succeed or belong to the status quo. You also have wants. A want is something you *desire* in order to exist and thrive. A want takes your particular hunger for engagement and personal predilections into account, allowing you to meet your needs in a way that is both unique to you and particularly satisfying for

you to receive. When it comes to considering your needs and wants, it can be tempting to try to put them into a hierarchy. I lovingly urge you not to do this. It might feel as though you barely have the energy or ability to focus on your needs while a want feels much too big or scary, but both are essential for occupying the full breadth of your life with pleasure, satisfaction, and deep enjoyment. This is a stretch for many of us—a good one. I encourage you to lean into that expansion as much as you can while reading this book, inviting yourself to fully occupy your body and your life to the best of your abilities. Yes, this is a book about identifying, honoring, and advocating for your needs, but at its core, this is a book about you welcoming more of yourself into your life and giving both your needs *and* your wants space to take form and flourish.

Everything you do, from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to bed, is a choice made to meet a need, whether you realize it or not. The more you can understand the vocabulary of your needs and develop a relationship with yourself that allows you to be present with what is—no matter what—the more consciously you will meet those needs. This will enable you to better ally with yourself, freeing yourself from judgment as you approach yourself with great compassion.

When you think about your needs now, you might feel familiar with your body's physical needs for air, food, water, rest, nourishment, and shelter. This book aims to grow that understanding, building your vocabulary to encompass your mental, emotional, spiritual, and energetic needs as well. There are universal needs we all experience—the need for safety, rest, sustenance, trust, integrity, sovereignty, love, belonging, and celebration, for example—but each of us experiences them in our own way, which is why reconnecting with yourself is an essential skill for this work.

What are the consequences of not addressing your needs? They are myriad—and I am certain that if you are reading this book you are already familiar with some of them. You might be experiencing a diminished excitement for your life, a heightened presence of anger or resentment, or a felt sense that you aren't receiving the same care you routinely offer others. You might feel unhappy or unappreciated in your relationships or feel secretly hungry for changes that seem impossible to

ask for. You might carry the weight of not wanting to be a burden, even as you feel increasingly fraught or overwhelmed. You might be living a life in which you don't see your truest self reflected. Your needs might be shifting because of life circumstances or hormonal changes that cause your current body to feel foreign to you. You might be tense, chronically ill, fatigued, or facing a major health crisis—but still attempting to push yourself forward in an effort to keep up. You might be bending yourself into shapes to keep the people in your life comfortable—but all the while be navigating profound bouts of discomfort.

Stacey and I began working together after a difficult conversation she'd had with her daughter about how her daughter felt pressure to suppress her needs for Stacey to be okay. Her daughter admitted that during her childhood she felt like she had to express gratitude and love for her mother during her mother's lowest moments, and at times she had secretly resented that. During this conversation, Stacey felt bitterly angry when confronted with what she heard as her daughter's judgment of her doing the best she could during a challenging time—anger that provided a more comfortable cover for the shame and confusion she felt about her behavior. Wasn't it her daughter's job to appreciate her, Stacey wondered? At the same time, she recognized that she wanted her daughter to feel unconditionally loved and free to ask for what she needed—even when it hurt Stacey to face her perceived inadequacies directly.

Stacey's plight urges us to think about what we do with our “ugly” needs. The ones that are painful to hold and grow through. The ones that keep us from the very relationships we deeply desire. The ones that we never learned to express, even to ourselves. Through our work together, I reminded Stacey that all needs are neutral. No need is shameful. But the way that we learn to outsource our needs to people we are in relationship with can be hurtful, smothering, overwhelming, or burdensome. When Stacey felt overextended and burned-out, she needed everyone around her to love and approve of her, to make her feel okay by expressing gratitude for her efforts; otherwise, she would begin feeling resentful. This pattern wasn't fair to her daughter, and it wasn't fair to Stacey not to appreciate herself by setting boundaries

around her available time and energy. By giving more than she truly had to offer, Stacey had secretly set up a transactional interaction with her daughter. Stacey routinely trespassed her own boundaries around what she had to offer, giving more than she had to give and feeling her child owed her for her efforts.

The questions remain. How do we lovingly confront long-standing patterns while remaining on our own side? How do we tenderly hold the shame that gets excavated when we realize we've been trying to get our needs met in ways that are hurtful, harmful, or oppressive to the people around us? This wasn't Stacey's intention—although that was the impact. When Stacey was able to hold her own hand through her discomfort, she was also able to figure out how to address her needs and advocate for them instead of expecting the people around her to read her mind.

Journal prompts to dive deeper:

What are the costs of neglecting my needs?

Who benefits from me suppressing my needs?

How do I benefit from suppressing my needs?

What are the risks I imagine will crop up as I delve into welcoming more of my needs into my life?

It can be challenging to imagine what might be on the other side of this work if you are in the thick of navigating the consequences of not having your needs met. This book aims to cast a vision of what might be possible for you as you begin weaving a greater sense of your needs into your life. What might it feel like to have these tender and true parts of you not only acknowledged but also prioritized? How might you relax into your relationships if you felt rooted in a deep sense of self-partnership? What would you strive for if you trusted yourself to be kind and compassionate no matter the outcome? What would you ask for if you no longer saw your needs as a flaw or a burden?

The best way I can describe the other side of this work is the enormous exhalation it brings and the unshakeable confidence of knowing there is no one else and nowhere else you should be. You are able to exist as the human you are because the presence of your humanity no longer negates your self-worth. Will it be perfect? No. There will be many moments when things are uncomfortable and challenging—but you will feel certain that those experiences don't mean you're doing anything wrong.

It's important for you to know that no matter how far in the margins you find yourself, you always have permission to abandon that course of action and to restructure your life by bringing yourself to the center of it. At the crux of this rebuilding and learning to identify, honor, and advocate for your needs are both the truth that you *are* needy and that you have full, unbridled, and inexplicable permission to be that way. I will not tell you that you deserve to have your needs met (you do) or that you are worthy of them (you are), because their existence is a fact, not a flaw.

You live in a world that doesn't provide for or honor your needs, but that doesn't mean there is something wrong with you for having them. These pages have been written with the express purpose of inviting this thick, life-affirming permission back into your body to take up residence there. You are your own responsibility and belonging to yourself is your birthright. You have permission to grow your relationship with yourself from self-abandonment to self-partnership, no matter how many times you've broken your own promises before or how untrustworthy you fear you are.

Being in relationship with yourself isn't something you do once and then set on a shelf in your closet to forget about. Much like building a strong and enduring relationship with another person, being in relationship with yourself requires your attention, commitment, care, and devotion.

This work is an intentionally slow process. The path home to yourself isn't about racing toward an ultimate destination of perfection, where all of your problems are magically solved or you never experience any amount of struggle again. Instead, it is about journeying with yourself at your own side. A relationship brimming with self-love isn't created through flash-in-the-pan, one-size-fits-all self-care plans. It is created with