

UFYB 316: The Danger of a Dramatic Brain



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With Your Host

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Welcome to *Unf*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard Law School grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello my chickens, how are you? I am recording this about three hours before I take a week off for vacation, which will be my first time off in four months. So, very excited about that. Gentleman concert and I are going to Quebec, but we're just going right over the border. I just wanted to be as close as I could with French cheese. I plan to read books and go to a mineral bath and take regular baths and try not to open my computer at all.

But before I do that, it's time for a little tough love episode. And remember, the operative word is love, all of this is out of love. I really want us all to be able to create the returns in our lives that we want to create, create the outcomes we want to create. So in order to do that, sometimes we've got to tone down the drama in our brains. Now, society literally socializes women to believe that we're dramatic. That's a very old misogynistic trope about women.

And what society means is we have feelings at all. We object to mistreatment or being second class citizens. We want people to pay attention to how we think and feel. That's what society considers dramatic. I obviously don't believe that's being dramatic. That's not what this episode is about. But I do think sometimes in a weird way, because we are taught that any feeling we have is being dramatic, we don't have a good sense of discernment. And so we can lose perspective on whether or not we're being dramatic.

And we can assume that any feeling we're having is important and true and real. I mean, they're all real, they're happening in your body. But it is important and indicative of a truth about the world. And that expressing it and kind of fanning its flames is serious and good emotional work. We just

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don't have much perspective on whether we are being dramatic or not. Now, obviously whether something's dramatic or not is a thought. It's optional. It's made-up. There is no such thing as objectively dramatic.

And even the belief that being dramatic isn't helpful is just a thought. That's my thought. You might decide you enjoy being dramatic or you don't think you're dramatic or you love being dramatic so much that it's worth sacrificing other outcomes to enjoy it. You always get to decide and we have the caveat that all of these words and terms are optional and subjective.

But nevertheless, I'm going to talk a little bit today about what I mean when I say being dramatic and why I think it's not helpful and why I think it's actually harmful and self-harmful in a way that people don't see. So here's what I've been thinking about this. I mean, this comes up a lot, but I overheard this conversation the other day that really made me want to do a podcast about this.

So I was at a coffee shop recently and there were two women sitting next to me. This is New York, tables are right next to each other. You could hear everything. And one of them was telling the other one about how they'd gotten some advice from a family member that they hadn't been sure about. They weren't sure if they want to follow it. So they wanted to buy an apartment, obviously buying an apartment in New York is a completely bananas process and a predicament.

They want to buy an apartment. Their family member, I didn't catch who it was, but someone in the family worked in real estate. That person had advised them not to buy an apartment right now because, whatever reason, the economy, interest rates, they'd be house rich and cash poor. I don't remember all the details. But they felt like the family member knew more than they did about real estate, which sounds like they did in the sense that they're a real estate broker.

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So the person in the coffee shop who had the family member in the real estate, kind of overruled their own desire, basically decided to follow that advice. This woman wanted to buy an apartment and make an offer on an apartment really. And her family member told her that wasn't a good idea. And so she followed that advice and she didn't put in the offer. But she kind of regretted it. She kept thinking about it. And eventually she decided that she really did want to put in an offer anyway, and then when she went back, that apartment had sold.

And so she had to look at getting a different apartment. So, nothing wrong with the story so far. These things happen. Except then I'm waiting to hear about the apartment they got. And then this woman started talking about how this had been this really sort of traumatic experience for her. That she felt that she had betrayed herself by taking this family member's advice, that she had abandoned herself, that she had substituted this other person's expertise and made them the be all and know all, of things.

And that she could no longer trust herself. That she had let herself down. She had violated her own intuition. She had been spending weeks talking about this with her therapist. And she went kind of on and on like this, sort of making this decision, this arbiter or sort of pivot point of her whole relationship with herself. Now, I am not saying this to criticize this person. I completely get that this is their experience and it feels really significant and painful to them. And I'm glad that they're getting support for that.

And I also know as a coach that what made this so painful is all of these thoughts and that it's so unnecessary. Because everything that I just reported that they said about their self-betrayal and abandoning themselves and not trusting themselves and violating their own rapport with themselves or whatever you would call it. Those are all optional thoughts and they're pretty dramatic.

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The plain fact is that they asked someone's opinion, the person gave an opinion. They chose to follow that opinion based on their thoughts at the time. Then they changed their thoughts about how much weight to give that opinion and they decided to do the thing anyway. And then there were some consequences of not having done the thing in the first place. Do you see how that's not nearly as dramatic of a story? That doesn't require spending weeks in therapy talking about it.

That doesn't require you to somehow mysteriously heal a wound you've inflicted on yourself that you don't really know how to heal because that's a metaphor. I really, I feel for this person. I definitely used to be much more dramatic in my own brain, so I get it, I really do. When I decided to give coaching a try, not as a career, just whether to try practicing self-coaching and kind of believing that I could change my thoughts. I literally had to have a conversation with myself about how if I became happy I might become stupid. But that was obviously hilariously wrong.

But at the time I really believed and had been taught to believe that smart people were very sensitive. And that people who were kind of naturally optimistic and happy were probably a little dumb. My positive and negative thoughts were all extremely dramatic at the time. I remember the emails I wrote to this boy I was in love with in my early 20s and to read them you would have thought we were having an eternal love affair that would become the story of the next Romeo or Juliet. And when I was upset, I was equally dramatic.

But when I learned the difference between circumstances and thoughts, I very quickly got a lot less dramatic. Because I was practicing just narrating things to myself, I simply and factually as I could. And I noticed how much less emotional anguish that created for me. And thank goodness, because I will tell you one thing, when you are building a business, you really cannot afford to be mentally dramatic. I mean, it's not helpful in a range of areas, but it's fatal in business. People are always rejecting you. Things you try are always failing. There are so many mistakes.

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If you tell a dramatic story about every one of those, you will never be able to keep going. I have had various business coaches and colleagues and mentors over the years. And they have quite frequently suggested things that didn't end up working or that I wasn't sure about trying. And sometimes I've tried them and sometimes I haven't. And sometimes they did work and sometimes they didn't. But I've never told myself that by trying advice I wasn't sure about, I was abdicating my own self-leadership or wounding my relationship with myself.

And that's why it's just never been that big of a deal if I tried something and it didn't work. Not all of my ideas work either. I try my ideas, I try other people's ideas or I don't try them. There's opportunity costs either way and I always choose what to make it mean. I could use the same lens talking about my dating experiences before self-coaching and meeting my partner. I was constantly kind of 'abandoning' myself in favor of random men's opinions of me.

But the beauty of learning about thoughts causing feelings and actions and results was that it gave me a completely non-dramatic way of explaining what was happening. I had spent years in talk therapy, crafting very dramatic narratives about my childhood and formative experiences, and why I was the way I was. And those had not changed anything in my current thoughts or feelings or behaviors.

It was only when I learned that I could isolate specific thoughts and trace them through specific feelings and actions and then change them that I started to be able to change my relationship with myself. Because that relationship with myself was simply my thoughts about myself, my story about myself. Now, everyone's mileage may vary. When I say I was abandoning myself for these men's opinions, I don't feel bad about that. It felt and feels clarity that spurs me to change my thinking. So you always have to check in with yourself.

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But if that story about myself felt really upsetting and triggering to me, it wouldn't be helpful. And I see this going on in my conversations with colleagues who are coaches or entrepreneurs right now for instance. As the economy has been shifting, people are seeing shifts in their businesses and some of us feel fine and some of us are very rattled. And what I see in the people who are super rattled is the dramatic way that they're narrating what happens in their business. And I see this in interpersonal relationships too.

The more dramatic the narrative, the more misunderstanding and the bigger conflict or difficulty in the relationship. So just notice for instance, the difference between these two ways of telling a story. I've told my partner that I don't want him to kiss me while I'm working but sometimes he still does. That is a circumstance. There's no attribution of intent or blame. We don't know why he's doing it or why the person talking thinks he's doing it.

Compared to, I've told my partner that I don't want him to kiss me while I'm working but he still does it all the time. He doesn't care about me or what I want. He just thinks of my body like something he can touch whenever he wants. I don't even have any agency. And I just exist as an object for him to play with. He doesn't care that I'm trying to focus and I already do so much for the house and the family, and I just want to be left alone. But he doesn't respect me, or what I want.

I often use the metaphor of the fainting couch. If your story makes it seem like your brain would be throwing themselves or itself on a fainting couch dramatically when telling it, it's probably more dramatic than it needs to be. You can think of dramatic thoughts as being thoughts that push the circumstance and the thought farther and farther away from each other. When you are stating circumstances as neutrally as possible, your thought and the circumstance are pretty close together.

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When you're giving yourself a dramatic rendition of what's happening, your thoughts are getting farther and farther away from the circumstances. And one of the biggest problems with dramatic thoughts is that they actually obscure an opportunity to get curious and learn more about what is really going on. If I'm super dramatic about a business outcome, I never really figure out why it happened or what I could change.

If I'm super dramatic about not having bought an apartment, I don't get to kind of get curious about why I took that person's advice or why I'm making which apartment I buy the key to my happiness forever. If I'm super dramatic about something my partner does, I never really figure out why they're actually doing it, or why I'm reacting so strongly.

Dramatic thoughts also just distract you and create unnecessary suffering. And then there's unnecessary work required to remedy that suffering. If you just decide you want to buy an apartment, then you can get down to looking for an apartment. If you tell yourself a super painful, dramatic story about it, now you have to spend a bunch of time going to therapy to work through that whole thing when you could just be looking for an apartment. And I think the kicker to this is that dramatic thoughts are actually kind of subtly self-shaming and self-critical and I don't think people realize this.

I think that this woman in the coffee shop probably thought that she was healing her relationship with herself by taking this 'self-betrayal' so seriously and doing the work to recover from it. But I'm not really sure that's true, because how do you feel about yourself when your story is, I took some advice to play it safe and then I decided I didn't want to play it safe, so I changed my plan. Versus I abandoned and betrayed myself and ruptured my self-trust.

It's actually a really self-critical and harsh way to describe what happened, because remember that it's all optional thoughts. It's not objectively true that you betrayed yourself. It's also not objectively not true because it's not

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an objective thing. We can't analyze it to get an answer. It's just a totally optional description you're using of a series of thoughts, feelings, and actions that you had in the past. Even if the reason you did something was because of self-critical thoughts, you don't have to compound that.

Imagine that you're dating someone and you think maybe you want to break up with them. But then you have thoughts that you should give them another chance. They're nice, you probably can't find anyone better, etc. So you date them a bit longer and then you finally work up to ending it. In this scenario, the reason that you overrode your initial desire was because of self-deprecating thoughts and scarcity thoughts that kept you dating them for longer. But you still get to decide how to talk to yourself about that decision afterwards.

And what's healthier for you long term, psychologically, is it to accuse yourself of abandoning yourself and betraying yourself and wounding yourself and committing some kind of wrong anytime you change your mind about something or make a decision or do something because of unhelpful thoughts? Or is it actually more helpful to be curious, to notice what thoughts led to what feelings, actions and results and give yourself the grace of not taking it all so seriously and so dramatically.

You can choose to think that by continuing to date someone out of scarcity or insecurity, you abandoned yourself and betrayed yourself and let yourself down. And then you have to deal with all the emotions that story creates for you. Or you can just learn from those thoughts and decide to do it differently the next time and spend your energy working on changing the thoughts you'll need to change now. In other words, you can have one thought pattern to work through, the one that led you to keep dating them, or to not get the apartment.

Or you can have two patterns to work through, that first pattern and then the thought pattern you layer on top about how bad and wrong and self-

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betraying it was of you to do that. Just because you talk about it in terms of self-harm rather than objective morality, doesn't mean it's any more helpful. So my advice to you, my chickens, is to leave the drama to the stage and when you notice yourself being dramatic, try a little understatement for your brain instead.

If you're loving what you're learning in the podcast, you have got to come check out *The Clutch*. *The Clutch* is the podcast community for all things *Unf*ck Your Brain*. It's where you can get individual help applying the concepts to your own life.

It's where you can learn new coaching tools not shared on the podcast that will blow your mind even more. And it's where you can hang out and connect over all things thought work with other podcast chickens just like you and me. It's my favorite place on earth and it will change your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. That's unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch. I can't wait to see you there.