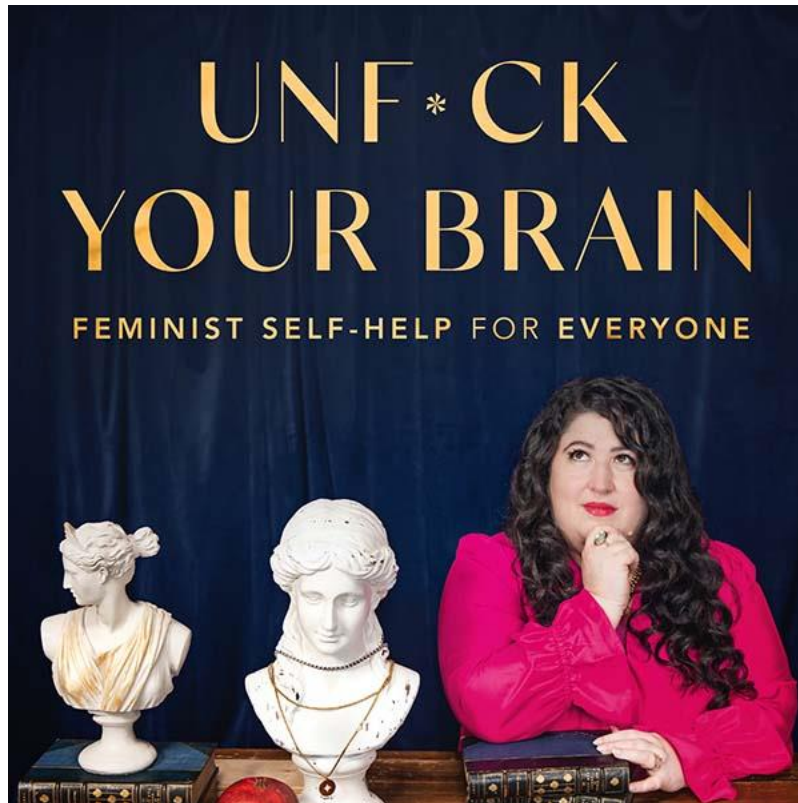


UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

Welcome to *UnF*ck Your Brain*, feminist self-help for everyone brought to you by *The School of New Feminist Thought*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Harvard lawyer turned life coach extraordinaire. And I'm here to help you get society's sexist messages out of your brain so you can be confident, feel powerful and live a life you won't regret when you die.

If you want to jumpstart that process, you need to grab my totally free guide to feeling less anxious and more empowered by rewiring your brain. Just text your email to +1347 997 1784 and use code word, brain or go to unfuckyourbrain.com/brain. Now let's get to today's episode.

Hello, my chickens. So in a weird turn of events recently, well, maybe not weird or a turn of events. Here's the thing I realized recently. I realized that, you know, so many people who come and join The Society or even find and listen to the podcast are doing it because they feel anxious. Right? Anxiety is one of the highest kind of keyword searches that leads people to us.

So I think anxiety is a big motivator of why we go look for help with our mind. So completely natural. It makes sense. And, obviously, I talk quite a lot about anxiety and a lot of different ways in bits and pieces here and there. But I realized I had not, in a long time, if ever, really put together all of my work on anxiety and taught it in a way that everyone can start to use really actionably right away to understand what is going on in their brain when they feel anxiety, why it can be just so distressing and overwhelming, and how we can use feminist coaching tools to really help us reduce or eliminate our anxiety.

And so it's really more than I can fit in a podcast, and I want to be able to share kind of visual aids and take questions and just do this all together in a more interactive format. So I'm teaching a free training called the Feminist

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](http://unfuckyourbrain.com)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

Anxiety Fix this Sunday, March 17th at 1 PM. And this really takes the kind of cutting edge, most advanced work I have on anxiety.

I've been in the process of writing my book this whole year, which has really deepened my work in this area and kind of brought up and integrated and synthesized a lot of what I have been teaching in different pieces in different ways over the last few years into one kind of coherent overall, well, not that I was incoherent before, but one overall framework. Alright. I'm a little punchy because I'm really excited about this training, and I want you to come.

So register for the Feminist Anxiety Fix, please, if you have any anxiety. And if you don't have any anxiety at all, then I would like you to come teach this class to the rest of us. We all have anxiety. It's a normal human emotion, but we can reduce it. And I think depending on who you are and the sources of your anxiety, you can see substantial to an almost all reduction. I mean, I am somebody who used to be anxious, like, every, I don't know, 5 minutes every day, and I really rarely feel anxious anymore. Still happens. I'm still human, but I don't know. It's probably 2% of what it used to be.

So I'm going to teach you what is causing your anxiety. I'm gonna be really diving into what I really specialize in, which is socially programmed anxiety. I'm gonna teach you what that is and how to solve it in the Feminist Anxiety Fix. So text your email to +1347-997-1784. That's +1347 997-1784, and the code word is anxiety when you're asked for the code word. Or just go unfuckyourbrain.com/anxiety. I cannot wait to teach all of you about the sources of your anxiety, about socially programmed anxiety specifically, and how to change it. I'll see you then.

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](http://unfuckyourbrain.com)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

Alright, hello my friends. I'm so excited for today's guest because I'm here to talk with Laura Gassner Otting who is an expert in what I think is one of the defining mental cluster fucks of myself and everybody who listens to this podcast. Which is that nexus of the emotions we believe accomplishing things and success should bring to us. So I'm super excited to hear her perspective and share it with you. As we all know, I like women to brag about themselves.

So Laura, can you tell us a little bit, you've had an amazing and very varied career different from the background of most executive coaches or authors as have I. So I would love to hear how did you get to where you are today?

Laura: Sure. Well, thank you for having me, first of all. I would say that my career has really four distinct moments. The first was dropping out of law school and joining a presidential campaign that landed me in the Clinton White House and helping build AmeriCorps. The second was going into doing executive search for one of the sort of biggest Marquee firms in the country. And then having a crisis of maybe a moment of rage, I would say where I realized I could do things better, smarter, faster than the old white dudes running the place.

Which led to my third iteration of my career, which was opening my own executive search firm. So yes, executive search for 20 years, but the second the 15 years of it were actually as an entrepreneur, as a founder running my own thing. And so I sort of think of those as two very distinct, the doing and the leading are sort of very different jobs. And then I sold that firm to the women who helped me found it.

And that's when I had a crisis of identity where I was like, who am I when I'm no longer LGO CEO, here's my business card? And I started a blog which was under the very clever name lauragassnerotting.com, because

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

I'm a marketing genius. And I started writing about things that pissed me off in the world. And somebody from TEDxCambridge saw one of those blog posts and asked me if I would do a TEDx talk, and my first response was, "No fucking way. I don't want to speak in public. That's terrifying. I've never spoken in public. I don't want to do it. No, thank you."

My kids were in the backseat, and they're like, "Mom, don't you tell us we have to do things that scare us?" And I was like, "Man, you don't listen to me when I tell you to pick up your dirty socks, but that you grokked." Okay, cool. Six weeks later, I'm on the stage, I give a talk. That talk gets some attention. I get an offer to go fly to Boise, Idaho to speak for \$1500 and little did I know it, a hat with a potato on it because it was Idaho. And I was like, "Well, this is interesting. You're going to pay me to talk. Cool."

I started to notice that all the people who were getting paid real big money had books. So I was like, "I'd better get me one of them." Which brings me to the fourth iteration of my career, which is as now I spend my time as an author and a keynote speaker. So that's who I am.

Kara: Amazing. I feel like the only thing that could be better than that story is if you were wearing the potato hat while you were telling it because that really feels like a piece of local color. That's now, I'm putting that on my bucket list.

Laura: If I were like, "And I was wearing this potato hat", and I pull it out.

Kara: [Crosstalk] potato hat. Now I want a potato hat.

Laura: That would be amazing, a potato hat. Yeah, I mean, I could sit here and be like, "I've now done another TEDx, and that's got almost two million views. And I got a Wall Street Journal bestseller, and blah blah blah blah

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

blah. But I don't know, I think what's more interesting than the achievement is the journey that we take towards the achievement. So yeah, I guess the assignment was for me to brag about myself, but I think I told you more about the journey because I think that we're all on the journey.

Kara: I love that, though. I mean bragging or not, that sort of path you went on, I think is so obviously important to where you are. But I also love it because one of the things that I see so much in my followers and listeners and students and I was like this too. Is sort of how early on we get this thought pattern of well, this is what I'm doing. So I have to be doing it. It's too late to change. I should have majored in something else. I should have gone to a different graduate school.

I should have gone to graduate school. I should have not gone to graduate school. I should have picked a different career. And I think your journey's showing, I mean, I almost dropped out of law school too. My parents convinced me to stay. And so maybe the lesson is, I could have skipped a lot of my process by just dropping out in the beginning and doing something else but that having those different phases of your career, I just feel even that before we get to succeeding in them is just important to talk about.

Because people get so stuck in, I made one wrong choice when I was 18 and now whatever I'm doing, being a horse trainer, an accountant or whatever for the rest of my life.

Laura: Yeah, absolutely. So we should talk about choices, making choices and whether or not there actually are any bad choices. We should talk about that because when I was writing *Wonderhell*, my latest book. I came across a study that said that people who are paralyzed by a decision, and

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

they can't decide, should I do it, should I not do it. If they flip a coin and the coin says heads do it versus tails don't do it.

It turns out that if they're asked six months later if that was the right choice or the wrong choice, they'll say actually after a couple of months, they're probably no worse off. And after six months or longer, most of them will say they're actually better off for going for it, even if they say that it was the wrong choice. And I think that's so fascinating because it means that there are really, I mean obviously there's some very bad choices, like drinking a bottle of gin and getting behind the wheel of a car, very bad choice.

But there are, for the most part, when we decide, should I take the job, should I buy the house, should I go on the trip? If we move forward with the thing, even if in the end we're like, "Yeah, that was the wrong choice." We always talk about the lessons we learned along the way, the adventures that we had, the opportunities that we were introduced to.

There are so many moments in our lives, these sliding door moments where we wouldn't have the things that we have if we just stayed home. So this sort of action beating stagnation, I think is just sort of a fascinating question. Should you have dropped out? Should I have stayed in law school? I don't know. There's no way to know because you don't get a control group in your life. But I love this idea that failure's never finale, it's just fulcrum. It just teaches us that there are other options that are out there.

Kara: Yeah. And you had a chance to then make another decision. That's one of the things I often talk about. If you don't make any decision, then at the end of six months, you have made zero decisions. I mean, that is sort of a decision, but you're still where you are. Whereas make a decision, even if you're like, "Turns out I don't like living on a cruise ship", or

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

whatever you've decided. Now you have an opportunity to make another decision. You're going to by the end of six months, you can have made so many more decisions that moved things forward in your life, in your business, whatever it is.

Laura: Yeah. And here's the thing. That decision may be I'm going to do nothing for three months and just gather more information, but it can't be I'm going to do nothing. It has to be sort of time limited. There has to be a reason to do it. But I think, to go back to something that you also said when you were responding to my journey. We always do things so that we can. I'm going to study for this test so that I get a good grade. I'm going to get good grades so I can get into college.

I'm going to get into the right college so I can get the right internship. I want to get the right internship so I can get the right job. There's always a so that we can, what's next. And then you get into sort of your late 20s, your early 30s, maybe you get married, maybe you have kids. But you're at this point in your life where you're like, "Okay, I've now done all the things that I want to do so that I can do the next thing." And then you look around and you're like, "Okay, so I've now filled all the boxes on the checklist. Why do I still feel so empty?"

And it's because we spend so much time in this so that I can, so that I can do the next thing. And this to me, it came in sort of this crashing moment for me in the middle of the pandemic. So like a lot of people during the pandemic, I just kind of stopped sleeping. The stress of, I make my living as a keynote speaker, so there's no planes, there's no events, there's no stages. There is no keynote speaking. I have to rebuild my entire business as a virtual person. How do I do it?

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

At the same time, my husband is losing his mind because he's trying to deal with his own business. I've got two kids that are applying to college and that are dealing with the early days of high school. So I'm trying to keep them sane. And who takes it all? Mom, I have got to deal with all of it. And so the stress that I just stopped sleeping. And I've never been to therapy in my life. Not that I'm against it. I just had never felt the need for it. And all of a sudden I felt the need for it.

And so I walked into the psychiatrist's office and I sit down. And within two minutes he diagnoses me as being absolutely, completely, totally boring. He was like, "There is nothing wrong with you. You are just an overachiever who can no longer overachieve. You're a perfectionist who can no longer be perfect." And I was like, "Okay, great." He goes, "Well, we can work on that if you want." And I was like, "What do you mean, perfectionism overachievement?"

Kara: You're like, "This sounds great. Why would I want to change any of this?"

Laura: That's a feature, not a bug. I was like, "What are you talking about?" And he's like, "Yes, but it's untenable." And I was like, "Yeah. No, doc, I think it's fine." And then he countered with the biggest checkmate of all which was this, "But you're here."

Kara: I love to say that. When someone says no to everything I say in coaching, I'm like, "Great, you came to coaching, so what were you hoping would happen?"

Laura: Yes, exactly. And then so then this doctor looks at me after he just gave me the biggest checkmate of all. And he just basically blows the entire board up and he goes, "You know, Laura, you don't have to give the

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

trophies back.” And I was like, “Whoa. What?” “You don’t have to give the trophies back. Everything you’ve ever achieved up until this point still belongs to you. You still have this award and that access in this network and this, you still have all the things, even if you’re not constantly going for them all every single moment of every single day.”

And I was just like, “Wait a minute. What?” It made me start thinking about what if we aren’t doing all the things so that we can? What if we just enjoyed the journey part of it and got sort of really comfortable being in this uncomfortable space in the middle as opposed to always racing to get to the finish line?

Kara: Yeah, I think that’s so crucial because when you’re achieving things for a fleeting sense of confidence or self-esteem or safety or whatever it is. That’s why there’s no end to it and everything you’ve done before doesn’t count anymore. I mean, it’s really as a former achievement junkie myself. You could look at my life now and be like, “Is it former really?” As somebody who is very goal motivated and goes after those things, but still I mean it’s like a high. It’s like an addiction. It’s sort of like it feels good when you get it for a minute.

Really it feels good when you see, you’re going to get it before you actually got it. It oftentimes feels anticlimactic.

Laura: Sometimes it doesn’t even feel good, sometimes it just feels like relief. When my book launched and I hit the Wall Street Journal list, people were like, “Are you happy? Was it great?” And I’m like, “I’m just kind of relieved that the work worked.”

Kara: That I’m not going to have to beat myself up. And I’m relieved of all the shame I anticipated having if it didn’t work. So I feel like what you’re

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

saying is so important. And I think everybody listening to this who is a little bit of an achievement junkie should. I'm not trying to be stigmatizing to drug users. Whatever word we want to use, an achievement pursuer. It is fascinating to ask yourself, especially once you're in your 30s, 40s, 50s. I achieved all these things, every single one of them. I told myself I was going to finally feel good about myself when I achieved it.

Now I have the whole list. What's the point of the next one? It just shows you how much you are not actually achieving things for their own sake or because they're going to give you any lasting sense of confidence. It's just you need another hit. You need the next source. You need the next. You've got to tie it to the next thing.

Laura: Yes. And you know some of that comes from evolution. I mean, we've evolved over thousands of millennia to be constantly pursuing better and more and different. And innovation, that's baked into our DNA. It's why we exist. It's why we're still alive. So some of it, you got it, sorry. I love to travel. I'm never as happy as I am when I've got a boarding pass in one hand and a passport in the other. And the weirder the departure board looks, the better. The stranger the language is, the city names, the better. I just love it.

And my younger son has this wanderlust also. And I'm like, "Sorry kid, it's fatal. It's in your DNA. You're going to have it till you die, it is what it is." I think if you are an achievement pursuer a junkie, an addict, whatever we want to call it. I think it's who you are. And I think we can try to fight against it but it's just who you are. I mean, to actually take people who have addiction issues for a moment. The Venn diagram of people who are recovering addicts and people who are long distance runners, endurance, 50 mile races, 100 miles.

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

There is a huge overlap between former addicts, and recovering addicts and people who just run for days at a time because you are constantly pursuing that next high. And it's never going to be as good as the first one, but you're constantly pursuing the next one. You're always chasing that first high again is what they say. And so I think it's the same way. When my first book came out, it hit the Washington Post list and I was like, "That's cool. If I'm ever going to write another one, I'm only going to do it if I think I can hit the Wall Street Journal."

And now I'm like, "If I'm ever going to write a third, I'm only going to do if I can hit the New York Times." Because why do it if you're just going to do the same thing again? But there has to be a reason. So for me, hitting the Wall Street Journal list gives me a bump in my speaking fee, which gets me on bigger stages and it gets me bigger media. So there's a reason, but it's still the so that I can. It's always the so that I can.

And a couple of days ago I had somebody ask me what success meant to me personally, since I spend all my time talking about success and happiness? And I said, "I think we all have two numbers. We have the need to make number and the want to make number." The need to make number is what you need to put food on the table and pay your mortgage and pay for your kid's school and healthcare. All the stuff you need to pay for.

And then some are floating above that as the want to make number. How many vacations do you want to go on this year? Where do you want to stay on those vacations? What kind of car do you want to drive? Do you want to give back to charity? What's all the extra, what does that cost? And what I said was, "Somewhere between the need to make number and the want to make number is a whole lot of work."

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

And I consider myself successful if the work that I'm doing in between the need to make and the want to make number is based on curiosity and interest and joy and delight, and not just my own ego.

Kara: There's a lot to unpack there. I want to back up to the sort of the it's baked in part because I think there's so many factors. There's evolutionary biology. There might be genetics. There's how you were raised and what your family expectations were. And then there's also social drama.

Laura: There's generalization.

Kara: Sure. What kind of mentors or teachers did you have? And so many things impact this. What's your birth order? And then there's the socialization that women get. And I think part of what you're talking about that's so important is that it's not that there's anything wrong with being achievement oriented, wanting to achieve, setting big goals. I mean, this is something I teach and coach about how to do all the time. The problem is when you've got your sort of ability to exist with yourself all wrapped up in it.

So if you miss the bestseller list, for instance, what is your reaction? When your reaction is, you're so fucking stupid. You did it wrong. I can't believe you failed. This is so embarrassing. That's the problem. Thinking about it as baked in from whatever amount of factors. I think one I'd usually shy away from sort of deterministic ways of thinking about things. But I think that one benefit of it might be that a lot of the objection that I get from kind of high-powered people or people who have achieved a lot is like, "Well, if I start being nice to myself, then I will lie on the couch and not do anything ever again."

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

The idea of criticizing myself has driven me. And I hear this all the time. And I'm always trying to share my example of, that's not what happened to me like. But you think about it as, if you are somebody who's very achievement oriented, you probably are still going to have that. Changing your self-talk or not beating yourself up or not trying to drive yourself with shame is not going to excise that out of your personality.

Laura: And you're not going to have a personality transplant because you decided to not say you're a stupid bitch in the mirror every morning. It just doesn't happen.

Kara: Right. You're still going to be, if you are someone who likes to set goals and achieve them, you're still going to have that, but it's going to be more pleasant. And in my experience, you can actually, it's what you're describing between have to make one or make. Whether you're talking about it in financial terms or just in terms of thinking about what kind of goals would you come up with and how would you achieve them if you had freed your brain from the down drag of you're doing it wrong, you're stupid. You have to do what everybody else does. Define success.

So I know you talk a lot about how are we going to define and determine success. And I'm curious what your advice is, as somebody who has gone through the process of kind of disconnecting your vision of success from maybe dropping out of law school even. You obviously went on to have a mainstream prestigious career in some ways, but you still took the step of being like, "I'm going to let go of that safe path that I'm supposed to be on." What do you think was the mindset that kind of allowed you to do that?

Laura: I think it was organ rejection failure really was what it was. You know when you're in those moments when you're like, "I don't know where I should go or what I should do but I know I can't stay here." The only way I

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

can describe it is it's like when you've eaten a piece of bad shellfish and it just needs to come out no matter what. I could very easily tell the story differently and say, "Well, I was in law school and I heard this man give this speech and I had a vision that he would become president. And so I decided to start volunteering. I met the most important people and I ended up...".

No, I dropped out. I got coffee with the guy who got coffee for the guy who got coffee because I was in law school and I was basically failing out. And I was dating the world's worst boyfriend. And that guy had exceptional taste in precisely two things. Obviously, the first being girlfriends clearly. And the second being unknown presidential hopefuls from tiny southern states. And I was governor who from Arkansas, not a chance in hell. George H. W. Bush had just 'won Desert Storm'. He had a 91% approval rating and the democrats were running a sacrificial lamb.

And then I heard Bill Clinton talk about this idea of community service in exchange for college tuition and I was like, "Whoa. That's an interesting idea." And all four principals, Bill and Hill and Alan Tipper were coming to Gainesville, nowhere, Florida about three weeks later. So I started volunteering on the campaign just because I was not studying at all. And we got 36,000 people to show up at a rally and the National Office was like, "Who were those volunteers? We should hire them now."

Now, hire them means we'll pay them all the cold pizza they want to eat and they can sleep on a campaign bus. And I was like, "Well, I can't stay here so I might as well go there." So I'd love to say that I had this epiphany. I had this drive. I had this way to see the world. But I think the truth is a lot of times people who do things that are outside of the norm do it because they're just failing in the norm or either they're failing the norm or the norm is failing them, but they're just, it's not working.

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

And so they figure out a way to survive outside of it and so that's what I did. And I think because of that moment, it's funny I've never been asked this question this way, but I think because of that moment. I was just introduced to this, I don't know, what if it works kind of mentality. And I think a lot of times we worry about what's the worst thing that can happen? And so I give a lot of talks now to groups of entrepreneurs or entrepreneur wannabes. And they'll ask me at some point, "How long did it take you to write the business plan for your search firm?" And I'm like, "Have you got a napkin? I'll write it now."

Kara: I get that too. And I'm like, "The business plan was coaching costs x. I want to make x. I need this many clients." There you go, it's on a napkin.

Laura: Exactly. I was like, "I had this total moment of rage, and I literally had this idea, as I mentioned, that I could do this work faster, better, smarter, with more authenticity, more integrity, better for my clients, better for me than these dudes." And I walked into their office, and I was like, "There is a better way." And they were like, "There is the door." So I mean, I'd love to say that I could write the story and tell you that it was all this fancy polished thing, but I think that does a disservice to other women.

I want to tell the story as real and as messy as it was, which was in this moment I was faced with this. You've now determined that the way that our search firm works is that it is not solving our clients' problems. We're not the solution, which left me in only one place, which is that I realized that if I wasn't their solution, I was their problem. And that to me was untenable. I couldn't stay. I had to go and so I left.

I had 24 hours of Labor and an unplanned C-section, and six weeks later I got a phone call from somebody that I'd worked with in the White House who was like, "I heard you had a baby, ugh. I mean cool, I guess, ooh,

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

wow. Are you still doing search? Our executive director just resigned.” And I was like, “Yes.” And she was like, “Great, what do you charge?” And I was like “\$100 an hour.” And she was like, “Terrific. Send me a contract.” I had literally a baby in one hand, I’m six weeks past an emergency C-section. I can barely walk to the bathroom by myself.

One handed I’m clicking on my laptop, how to write a professional services contract, Google search.

Kara: But everything you’re describing, even if you’re failing out of law school or the system, whether you’re a failure of the system’s failing, there’s this resourcefulness and this, I’m just going to try something. So for anybody listening who’s like, I am, whatever, I’m failing out of school. Or I feel my boss hates me and I’m not going to get ahead or I’m getting poor performance reviews at work”, or whatever. What you’re describing is, it wasn’t a moment of revelation, but it was a moment of resourcefulness/

A moment of, I’m going to do something. The story wasn’t, I dropped out of law school and then I moved home with my parents and beat myself up for two years and then started delivering papers or whatever.

Laura: Yeah, I mean, I refused to lay down and die. That’s huge.

Kara: That’s huge, though. I think that is an underrated [crosstalk].

Laura: Yeah. I mean, okay, to make this very literal. In 2021 I got so sick with a super rare autoimmune disease that I didn’t know if I was going to see 2022, super rare, 800 people in a country of what? What are we, 300 million people, have ever been diagnosed with this disease. I’m fine now. I’m in remission. People shouldn’t worry about me. But in this moment, I walked into my doctor’s office and I was like, “I’ve got what, 800 people?

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

I'm sorry, I'm special, but I'm not that special." And he was like, "Well, according to the 32 blood tests, the four biopsies and the one chest x-ray you've had, it would appear that you are."

And, he said, "Look, we've got two ways to do this and both of them are off label. We can either give you this one medication, which will sort of keep you where you are, which is stable, but you're not happy." And trigger warning, suicidal thoughts here. I spent hours for months while they didn't know what was going on with me, in the middle of the night, Googling, trying to figure out what the all these symptoms were, and making a mental list of the videos I should make for my kids because I didn't think I was going to be there for their most important moments in their lives.

So it was bad, so number one, we could just keep you where you are. Well, that's not a good option. Or number two, we'll give you this other biologic, this chemotherapy and fusion biologic. And there's a 40% chance of stroke and a 20% chance of death. And I was like, "Can I have the IV in my arm right now?" So I think there are moments in your life where you are backed against a wall and you just say, "Anything is better than where I am now."

And then there are moments in your life where you're like, "Okay, I have some choices. Some of them are more dramatic than others. Some of them are easier than others, some of them, the failure might be worse to recover from than what's going on." But I think every one of us, at every point in our lives except for the one big thing at the end, we have choices. There's always options. And a lot of times it starts with refusing to roll over and die literally, physically, metaphorically.

Kara: And refusing to see yourself as helpless and having no agency. I think this is something I coach on all the time because people think that mindset work and coaching is fluffy and for privilege, that it's sort of this is

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

just for people whose hardest choice is should I go to Pilates or yoga? And in fact, mindset and so I talk a lot about Victor Frankl, the holocaust survivor who wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*.

Because that's the power of it is, when you don't like any of your options, when your options are my boss is sexually harassing me and I need this job and I have to figure out what to do. And all these options are scary and have some risk. Am I going to have an internal soundtrack, that is I'm helpless, I can't figure this out, I don't have any options, I have to suffer through this? Or am I going to have a mental soundtrack, that is I can figure this out. I'm never completely helpless. I'm constantly coaching on this, I don't like any of my options, it's very different than I don't have any options.

Laura: So I can also imagine that the people who are listening are like, "Yeah, I don't have any options." And what I'll say is, I don't know if you play video games. I don't play video games. If you're a listener and you play video games, you'll know what I'm talking about. But I have two sons, they're 19 and 21 now. So I had teenage boys in the house for a long time so there were a lot of video games. And I remember waking up one day and I had a terrible night of sleep. And I was driving my kid to school. I drove him to the dentist and we were driving alone in the middle of the morning.

And I was just still grouching about having a bad night of sleep and I had a chapter due to my publisher that day. And my brain was oozing out of my left ear. I wasn't going to get anything written. And he looked at me. He's like, "I don't understand what the problem is. Just go on a side quest today." And I was like, "What's a side quest?"

And he said, "Well, at night, if I get the dishes done and I want to go play video games and my friend, Kyle hasn't gotten his dishes done yet. So I'm

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

waiting around to play whatever, Worlds of Warcraft”, or whatever video game they’re playing. He’s like, “I’m sitting around waiting.” He’s like, “If the plan of the game, goal of the game is to go to the castle, slay the dragon and save the princess. If I’m waiting for him to sign on, well, I’m a farmer, so I’m tilling my wheat and then I take my wheat to the market and I sell my wheat at the market for money. And with the money I can buy swords and potions and a horse.”

And I’m like, “Okay.” And he goes, “So then when Kyle finally finishes the dishes and logs on, I’m ready to get on my horse with my potions and my sword to go to the castle, slay the dragon, and save the princess.” And I was like, “Okay, first of all, I hate that you’re learning that you get to save the princess, because the Princess is going to save her own damn self. Second of all, that’s really interesting.” So I started thinking about this concept of side quest.

So even in these moments when you’re like, “My boss is sexually harassing me but I have to make rent and I can’t get another job right now.” There are things that we can all be doing. You can do informational interviews. You can listen to podcasts like this. You can read books like mine and your book that’s coming out. You can watch Ted Talks. You can go to networking events. There’s so many things that we can do. We have so much agency, even if it’s not the big thing.

Even if it’s not the big thing that you want to change, there’s all these little side quests so that when you finally finish the dishes, you can get on the horse and pick up your sword, you can save your own self. And there’s science actually behind this about making your own luck. People aren’t just born lucky or unlucky. There’s actually science that says that if you put yourself out there, if you act like a lucky person, I am a raging introvert. I could talk to you all day, but you put me in a room with 10 people and I’ll

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

curl up in a fetal position, talk to 1,000 easy because I'm making love to the lights.

Kara: Me too, yes. It's performing versus having to [crosstalk].

Laura: It's performing exactly. But if you act like an extroverted person acts, if you make connections, if you have conversations, if you put yourself in the way of luck, you become a luckier person. And so it's the same thing. We can do all these side quests even if we feel like we have no agency right now to do the big thing. We have tons of agency to prepare ourselves by doing the little things so that when the big opportunity comes along, boom, there we are, we're ready.

Kara: Yeah. It's such a different question to say, in the first instance, you don't even ask yourself a question. You're just saying, "I don't have any options." When you ask yourself a question, like, what options might I have or what are the small things I could do? What are the small side quests I can see? I see this constantly in coaching that someone will tell you they have no options and when you get them to try to think something little.

In this instance, it might be, well, I could see about switching to that other project for now till whatever, get away from this guy or woman, whoever's harassing you, while I do the informational interviews or while I network. Or maybe I could start this side hustle or I could think about my best friend called me three weeks ago and said she really wanted me to come work for her. And I thought I should. There's so much around you.

And the science of, what is the name? Not cognitive bias. But you see what you're looking for. So when you tell yourself you have no options, all your brain searches for, your brain is just control F, control F, all it's looking for is

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

all the ways you don't have options. So when you tell yourself, I have agency, I have options. Your brain will be looking for it.

Laura: It's actually how manifestation works. I thought manifestation was total bullshit. It's total bullshit that some hippie dippy, chic and boho chic flower crown, looking out over Coachella, talks about whatever. And then I started reading about it because I was like, "Alright, I want to learn more." And it turns out that you do see what you're looking for. That's exactly what it is. And so our brain takes in 11 million bits of data every single second of every single day, 11 million bits.

And we know the five senses, touch, smell, hearing, etc. But also there's proprioception, how is your body moving through space and thermoception, is it warm, is it hot? And so there's so many, there's 53 different senses and it can only pick up 50. It takes in 11 million and you only pick up 50. So you have all these people who are like, "I wanted to go to Japan. So I put a picture of a pagoda and I wrote Japan in a swirly font on my vision board and then a bus went by with a sale, half off, flights to Japan. I manifested it."

And I'm like. "You didn't manifest that." It's not, I thought about it one day so it happened. You intentionally, you thought about it. You put it on your vision board. You see it every single day. So you train your brain that when the bus goes by it picks that one piece up. You didn't manifest the bus, but you told your brain to, instead of seeing the billboard about the sign for the Celtics playing next week. You see the billboard for the sale to Japan. And I think that's so interesting.

And it makes me realize that when you are in this space and you're feeling negative, and you're looking at yourself saying you're stupid in the mirror. I think one of the best things you can do is surround yourself with people

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

who not just see who you are right now, but who can see your future. I think we surround ourselves with a lot of people who see either our present or our past. They remember who we are, they remember the mistakes we made. But there's studies that show that if you say, "I smoke", you are more likely to quit smoking than if you say, "I am a smoker."

One is a habit and one is identity. So if somebody sees you smoke, they don't know if you're a smoker or maybe you're just having a cigarette. So somebody who can see your future will help you become that person, even if sometimes you can't see it yourself. I'm sure you do this with your coaching clients, you probably see their greatness even more than they see it sometimes. And sometimes just you're reflecting their greatness back on them gives them the courage to actually believe it and maybe act upon it.

Kara: Yeah, I think that's a huge part of any one-to-one therapy or coaching. So having that community is one of the reasons that I think it's so important for those who listen this who are not in the Feminist Self-Help Society, most of the people in your life, you may be surrounded by self-development books and people trying to improve their situation and their thoughts. But if you're not, having those conversations, having those people around you does provide that, people who can help you hold that vision of yourself is so important.

And actually, I mean anybody who's listened to this podcast for a while have heard me talk ad nauseum about the idea that 'manifesting' is just the coaching model that we teach, which is, if you think a certain way, you feel a certain way, you act a certain way, you create that outcome. If you believe you're going to meet a partner then you go out and speak to a bunch of people and you go on a bunch of dates. Yeah, you 'manifested' it, but manifestation isn't you sit in your apartment alone and you just think about a partner and then it turns out to be the UPS guy.

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

Laura: I manifested my perfect spouse out of thin air. No, that's Frankenstein or Frankenstein's monster rather, yeah.

Kara: Well, he's misunderstood.

Laura: He's misunderstood. Everyone likes a gentle giant.

Kara: We have to love him for Mary Shelley writing the first science fiction book as a 19 year old girl. So good. Speaking of books, tell us where people can find your book and what they will get from reading it, *Wonderhell*, I love as a title.

Laura: Yeah. My latest book is called *Wonderhell* and it's all about this moment where you've achieved something that you didn't think you could achieve. You weren't quite so sure, and then you did. And you're like, "That's amazing. It's exciting. It's wonderful." And also in this moment of achieving it, I saw a vision of myself that I didn't know was possible and now I'm excited to see what I can do next.

But I'm also filled with anxiety and uncertainty and doubt and envy and exhaustion and burnout. It's wonderful, but it's also kind of hell, it's kind of wonder hell.

Kara: [Crosstalk] look forward to, can't wait till the book comes out.

Laura: So *Wonderhell* is the space where the burden of your potential walks in and is like, "Hey there, what you got for me? What are you going to do with this newfound you that you didn't know existed last week, last month, last year?" And so when I found myself and *Wonderhell* I went about interviewing 100 different glass ceiling shatterers, Olympic medalists,

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

startup unicorns to figure out how on Earth to survive in this moment. And what I learned is that we don't survive these moments.

We just learn how to thrive in them because the underside of this wonder hell is just the next one and the next one and the next one after that. So *Wonderhell: Why Success Doesn't Feel Like It Should And What To Do About It*, Talks about why success doesn't feel like it should and what we can all do about it.

Kara: I love that. So everybody should go order this book. Should people order wherever they order?

Laura: Anywhere they order books is great.

Kara: Anywhere you order from, because I think that paradoxically realizing that the next achievement is not going to be what makes me feel good about myself forever has freed me up to achieve so much more. Creating this business and having a podcast with 40 million downloads, having the book deal. All of these things only came from me being like, "I'll still probably feel like shit 50% of the time, but it's worth doing anyway." When you have all of your future hopes for your happiness pinned on the achievement, then that's what holds you back. So I love that message.

Laura: Absolutely, the achievement is fleeting. I should say, for all of your listeners, yes, you can buy this book anywhere you buy your books because I am out of the book launch window. But anybody who is buying your upcoming book needs to be very specific about where you want them to buy it because of the way that you hit a best seller list, which is so important for us women. We need to have the, oh, and she's a, because that is what makes the men go, "We should actually pay her real money."

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

UFYB 332: Why Sometimes Success Doesn't Feel Good: A Conversation with Laura Gassner Otting

So you can buy my book anywhere that you buy your books. But, Kara, I'm sure that you have a very specific time and window and place that you want people to buy your book. So I don't want to confuse that for people that are excited to support you.

Kara: No. That's a good point. If it's before May 21st, 2024, you should get my book at takebackyourbrainbook.com. Alright, thank you for sharing your wisdom with us and your story.

Laura: Well, thank you so much for having me.

If you're loving what you're learning on the podcast, you have got to come check out *The Feminist Self-Help Society*. It's our newly revamped community and classroom where you get individual help to better apply these concepts to your life along with a library of next level blow your mind coaching tools and concepts that I just can't fit in a podcast episode. It's also where you can hang out, get coached and nerd out about all things thought work and feminist mindset with other podcast listeners 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/society. I can't wait to see you there.