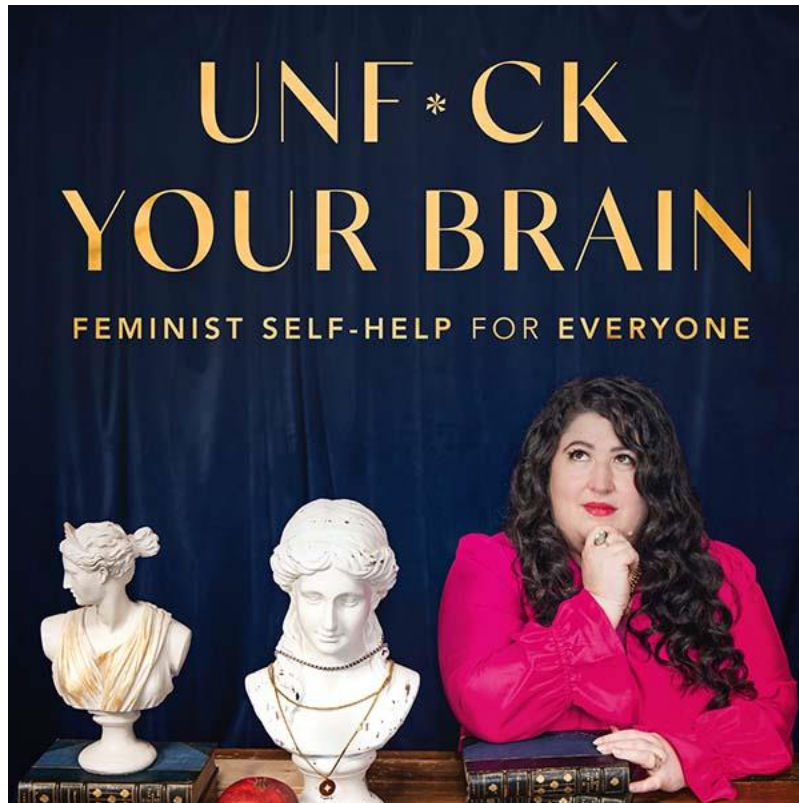# 337: Three Keys to Changing Your Thoughts (Feminist Mindset Principles Series Ep 3)



## Full Episode Transcript

**With Your Host**

## __Kara Loewentheil__

# 337: Three Keys to Changing Your Thoughts (Feminist Mindset Principles Series Ep 3)

Behind the door of self-coaching lies an entirely new version of you and your life. But there are three keys you need to unlock that door. Almost every time I coach someone it's one, two, or all three of these keys that are missing and blocking them from that transformation they want. So I'm going to teach you all three of them today.

Welcome to *UnF*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and Founder of *The School of New Feminist Thought*. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence and create a life on your own terms, one that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Hello my friends, welcome back to the podcast and to the Feminist Mindset Principles series. This is episode three. Today we're going to talk about the three keys to coaching yourself successfully. I'm going to tell you the three beliefs and then we are going to go through them one by one. And if you're a longtime listener, listen to this even if it sounds a little familiar because I swear to you, you cannot hear it too often. When I get coached, it's one of these three that usually I'm saying. So it is just a lifetime process of using these keys and sharpening them.

And if you're new, this is going to give you a really good foundation. It's really important to understand these three premises before we get into the actual cognitive change tools that I'm going to teach later in this series. So the first premise is that thoughts create feelings which motivate behavior. And that is the only way the sequence runs. It cannot run upstream, it cannot run backwards. So I'll explain what that means when I get to this belief.

This second is that thoughts and feelings do not have moral value. Again, your brain may be screaming. I'm going to get into it. And the third is that

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self-criticism does not produce effective change. Some of you, your brains are already screaming. Some of you think you believe these things and that sounds fine to you. But I guarantee if you're listening to the podcast, no matter what you think you believe or what you want to believe, you actually do not believe all three of those yet in the way that you need to in order to produce transformation. So let's get into it.

Premise one is that thoughts create feelings which motivate our behavior, our action or inaction. I do a deep dive into explaining how and why this is true in my book, *Take Back Your Brain*. I'm going to do a briefer overview here, but it's important to understand the relationship between thoughts and actions in order for the other two premises to really lock in the way they should. This premise is derived from cognitive behavioral theory, cognitive behavioral psychology. And the idea is that our thoughts create our emotions, which drive our behavior, our actions, or our inactions.

Just to give an easy example, if we think we do not know how to do a task and we feel hopeless, we will not try to do the task. If we think that someone doesn't like us, we will feel sad or rejected and we will not reach out to them. If we think that we would love playing pickleball, we feel excited and we go play pickleball. If we think on the other hand, that working out is hard and boring, we will feel dread and we won't do it. Our thought creates an emotion and that emotion drives our behavior.

What's important about this premise for this specific episode is that the chain only runs in one direction. You can't swim upstream. So many of us try to change our actions to change our feelings and our thoughts. We want to swim upstream. We want to behave different so we can feel better about ourselves and think more positively about ourselves. That's natural because we're taught that's how the world works. We don't know that our thoughts are what create our emotions and that those emotions drive our behavior.

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And we're not even taught, and we don't know that thoughts can even be changed directly. So what we are taught either explicitly or implicitly, is this really roundabout way of trying to change the way we think and feel by trying to control other people or control circumstances outside of us or change our behavior through sheer willpower or something. Assuming that if we act differently, we will then think and feel differently about ourselves, but that is not how it works.

The proof is in how much it does not work to just tell yourself to do something differently. Really think about how many things have you vowed to do differently, or to start doing, or to stop doing and just not been able to? If it was easy and possible to just change the way you act without changing your thoughts and feelings, there would be zero problem with habit change in the world. We wouldn't need therapists and coaches and programs and tools and so many products and people trying to help us change our habits.

We would all just easily change our behavior whenever we wanted to, and we'd all be our perfect selves and feel great about it all the time. That's not reality. And the explanation we get socially for this is that it does work that way. It's just that we personally don't have enough willpower or discipline or there's just something wrong with us specifically that we can't get life to work that way. That other people can just force behavior change to magically happen out of thin air and if we can't, there's something wrong with us. But that is just simply false. It's just not true. It is inaccurate.

The problem is that we're going about it the wrong way. We're trying to floor the gas on a car that's still in park. It's going to burn out the engine, you're not going anywhere. We have to change the thoughts in order to change the feelings and the actions. So premise one is your thoughts create your emotions, create your behavior. And behavior means both things you do and things you don't do.

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Premise two is that our thoughts and feelings do not have moral value. So we have been taught largely by the influence of a particular brand of Christianity on our culture since its founding, especially in America, that thoughts themselves, the sentences in your mind and your feelings can be good or bad. They can be virtuous or sinful. They can mean you're a good person or a bad person. As with most of the premises we use to beat ourselves up, we don't generally actually give ourselves positive feedback based on our thoughts.

So often when we are kind of imposing moral value on something, we're only imposing the negative moral value. If we have a loving thought about someone or a generous thought about someone, we don't stop and give ourselves a high five. But if we have a thought that we judge as uncharitable or angry or mean, then we judge ourselves. We judge ourselves for what we think and feel about other people or the world.

Sometimes we even judge ourselves for feeling good, telling ourselves that we don't deserve to feel good. We don't deserve to be proud of ourselves or think well of ourselves, or that we shouldn't be happy when there are bad things happening in the world or when we aren't perfect. All of this is based on the idea that our thoughts and our feelings tell us something about the world. That they are reflections of our soul or our character but that's simply factually wrong, and I can prove it to you.

Your thoughts and the feelings they cause are not a reflection of your soul's value or truth or a characteristic. Thoughts are essentially a combination of electrical signals and chemical processes that happen in your brain. And what causes thoughts is a combination of nature and nurture. And there are many levels to this. So there are evolutionary biology predispositions to think certain ways that almost all humans share. The negativity bias, for example, where your brain is more likely to hold onto negative experiences

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because that has a survival benefit, keeps you from repeating things your brain thinks might make you die.

There are genetic predispositions based on the specific genetics of your family and ancestors and those are created over time by mutations, how the genes combine and recombine. Even epigenetic changes created by experiences your ancestors may have had. There are individual nurture experiences in your family of origin or in your early life that teach you to think a certain way, and those can actually be epigenetic as well. They can turn certain genes on or off.

And then there are all the cultural and social narratives and lessons and beliefs that shaped your brain from the very beginning. That's something we talk about in the podcast all the time. When you come out of the womb, you have instincts to nurse and to cry. You have some genetic predispositions like we just discussed. But everything else that you believe, especially all the specific beliefs you have, you learn from what people say or do or what you see in your community and the media you consume, among friends and family, etc.

So you might have a predisposition, for example, to the negativity bias, to remember negative things more clearly. That's not the same as having some sort of inherent predisposition to have a specific mean thought about your mother-in-law. That's not genetic, that's not from you. Everything else that you believe, you learn from the culture and society around you, the media you consume, friends and family. You've all heard me say this before. So those are all the influences on your brain. It's a lot of different influences. It's a lot of different kinds of forces programming thoughts in there.

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Today I came up with a metaphor. I did a radio interview earlier and I talked about the idea that your brain has like a million Lego blocks in there. It's like society and everything around you has thrown a million Lego blocks in your brain, and then your brain has to put them together into new little structures. That's your brain, creating thoughts from everything it has absorbed. All those things program the way you think. What's not on that list is your essential morality as a human being.

The bottom line is that you learn how and what to think from the society and people around you. That's why if a one year old says something bigoted, we don't blame the one year old. We assume they are just parroting back something they heard. We don't generally ascribe moral consciousness to that thought or even to the action of saying it. But we ascribe moral weight to our own thoughts, even though the processes that cause them to simply arise from our subconscious mind into our awareness is no more mediated than that of a one year old.

If you've been taught your whole life that fat people are lazy and disgusting and you look in the mirror and see a fat person, your brain saying you're lazy and disgusting is the same as a one year old saying that. It is just programming in your brain that your brain is repeating. If you have not taught your brain to think differently, it's on autopilot. It is going along subconsciously, thinking exactly what it was taught to think.

This premise is crucial because it is what makes the third premise possible, which is the idea that beating yourself up, thinking negative thoughts about yourself and judging yourself is counterproductive to growth and change. A lot of the women who come to work with me say that they want to be less self-critical or that they recognize that they are mean to themselves. Some people don't, to be sure, some people think they're just self-aware and just really in touch with their own flaws and limitations, which is really just disguised as self-criticism and self-rejection.

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But even those who say they know they're self-critical and they want to change it, end up being very subconsciously resistant to actually thinking anything nice about themselves. They agree with that in theory, but then when it comes to any specific thought that we're trying to work on, they are resistant. And that's because we are taught that beating ourselves up produces change. And more broadly, we're taught that the only reason we would or do change things is when we hate them. We believe that negative emotion motivates change.

And this is maybe true at a deep survival level when we're talking about something like running away from a predator or remembering not to eat certain plants because they made you vomit for 48 hours last time. But when it comes to modern times, hating something often does not make us change it. At least not when we are people who have been socialized to doubt our own thoughts and feelings, second guess ourselves and feel like we need permission to ever make our own decisions or change our circumstances.

Hating your body does not produce positive action and taking care of it well. For most of us, it just paralyzes us with shame. If you tell yourself that your body is disgusting and everyone is judging you, you're actually far more likely to eat or drink or smoke or numb out for comfort or to not go to the gym, even if you'd like to take a Zumba class because of the judgment you fear from the people around you.

And even if you are someone whose self-loathing motivates certain behaviors that you think are healthy. They are not that healthy. For instance, if you're self-loathing and your anxiety get you to, let's say, restrict your food or over-exercise, you're really just ignoring your body's signals and communications. You're going to end up potentially harming yourself or restricting and then binging or over-exercising and straining your body. That's not a win.

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Hating your job does not lead to you making it a better place or making yourself a better employee or even to leaving it. You would think if you hate your job, you'll leave it. But when you hate your job and you tell yourself that your job is what is making you miserable, you are then subconsciously afraid to get another job. Because what if that job also makes you miserable or you discover that it was you that was the problem, and you subconsciously are afraid to find that out so you don't want to leave.

So in other words, hating anything does not generally motivate you to change it. And you can find a lot of evidence of this around you. Just think about yourself or the friend or family member who has been complaining for years about a circumstance they're in, a job, a relationship, a house, whatever, and has not changed it, and it does not work for yourself either. Self-criticism and hating yourself leads to the same paralysis and inaction. It's not effective for behavioral change because self-criticism and hating yourself cause anxiety and shame.

And fear and anxiety and shame can induce short term change and compliance sometimes. But they do not produce long term intrinsic motivation or transformation. If you want to train a dog or raise a child, you don't scream insults at them and then hope that creates positive change. And many of us have yelled at a dog or a child, not usually with insults, but sometimes it's totally human, these kinds of things happen to all of us. But when that does happen, you usually realize afterwards that you were dysregulated and it wasn't productive. And then you need to apologize and make it right.

Same for yourself, it doesn't make you a bad person to have lost your shit and yelled at yourself or someone else. But it isn't useful, and you certainly wouldn't adopt it as a sort of constant methodology if you were trying to raise a kid or train an animal. But you do adopt it as a constant

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methodology for yourself. What is useful is a lack of self-judgment, so self-compassion, or if that's too hard, just self-neutrality.

We hear self-compassion a lot, but it can be hard to know what that means or how to operationalize it. How do you implement it? How do you actually demonstrate compassion towards yourself? So I actually like to back it up and just start with non-judgment. You don't have to be your own biggest fan at first, but can you work on not being your own biggest critic and worst enemy? Can you adopt a position of neutrality towards yourself? Simply not judging, simply noticing, being curious.

It's the difference between, I can't believe I yelled at my partner, I'm such a bad spouse and they must hate me and want to leave me. And I noticed that I just yelled. I wonder why I got so upset. I'm curious what caused that emotion for me. That would be curiosity, or even I just yelled. Sometimes humans yell. That would be non-judgment and you're getting close to self-compassion there.

If you want to really try self-compassion, imagine thinking about yourself the way you'd think about a small child you love, oh, I just yelled. I must have been having a really big feeling I didn't know what to do with. It's hard to feel that upset and overwhelmed. I'm going to unpack what happened when I calm down, but right now I'm just going to give myself a mental hug. That's self-compassion, as opposed to yelling at yourself when you're already upset.

Self-compassion or non-judgment is crucial if you actually want to change anything about your behavior or your life. Because if you judge something you will produce shame and anxiety and then your brain wants to avoid the whole thing. If you really want to compose a symphony but every time you try to sit down to write it, you're criticizing yourself or you're beating yourself

up for not working on it enough, you're creating shame. And all you're doing is teaching your brain to associate the feeling of shame with working on that project. Your brain's no dope, it's going to avoid the project and not do it.

Even feeling vaguely guilty for not working on it is preferable to the acute shame of trying to work on it and then having all of these self-critical thoughts about how untalented and lacking in discipline you are. So we have to stop judging ourselves and criticizing ourselves if we want to be able to change. That is premise number three. And you can see why premise number two is important. It's a lot easier to stop judging yourself when you remind yourself that thoughts don't have moral value. They are simply electrical impulses in your brain that create certain feelings and actions.

And with premise one, we established that if you want to change the actions, you're going to have to change the thoughts. So you can see how these three things work together. Thoughts create emotions which create behavior. To change feelings or actions or inactions, you have to change thoughts. But if you shame yourself for your thoughts or your feelings or your actions, your brain will avoid working on it. It will avoid getting curious and getting to know what's going on.

So you have to practice not shaming yourself, which means recognizing that there's no moral value to your thoughts, that they don't mean something about you. When you internalize that your brain just produces thoughts like your stomach produces digestive enzymes, that's when it becomes easier to practice being curious and non-judgmental, or maybe even compassionate rather than critical. Because you are not assuming that your thoughts are a flashing light indicator of your moral worthiness.

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And that will set the stage for the thought change tools I'll be teaching in the rest of this series to actually work. Because they require at least neutrality, if not, self-compassion in order to be able to actually approach the thoughts, get to know them and be able to change them.

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.