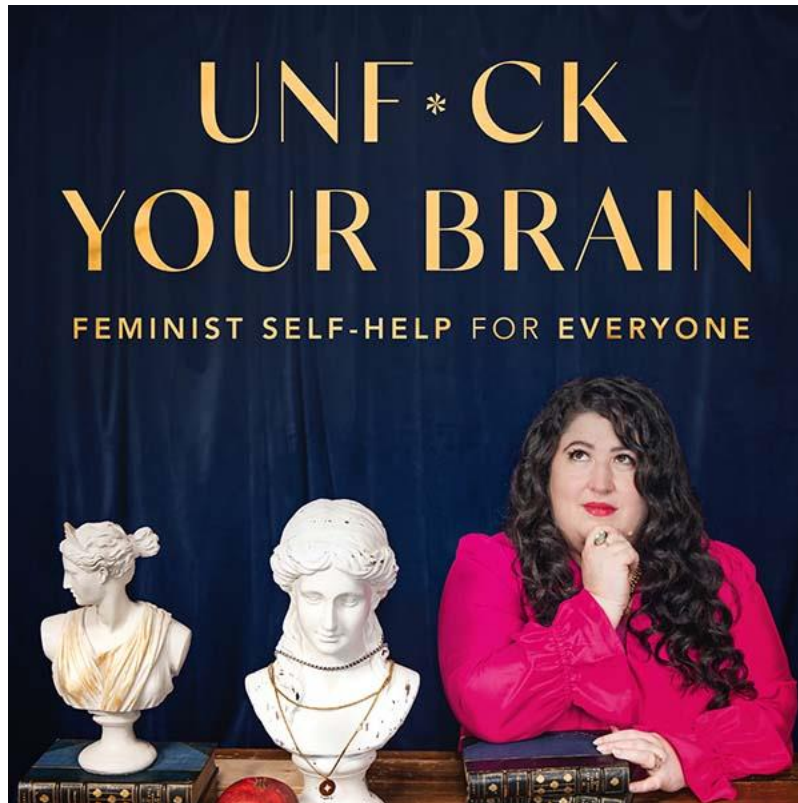


**UFYB 339: How to Feel Better (Or At Least Less Bad)
(Feminist Mindset Principles Series Ep 5)**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Do you know how terrible it feels when you have an overwhelming negative emotion? You feel hopelessly sad or deeply ashamed or unbearably anxious. What if I told you that you actually have no idea what sadness, shame or anxiety truly feel like. Because your brain has been warping those emotions and dialing them up in a wholly unnecessary way that you can actually reverse. In this episode, I'm going to explain why and how that happens and how to turn the dial back down on your negative emotions so they become perfectly tolerable or even sometimes disappear.

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.

Welcome back to Feminist Mindset Principles, episode five. Last episode we talked about where your thoughts come from and why it may not even really matter if they are true. The recap is that for a lot of what we think we can never fully prove it's true beyond any logical doubt, which means that your brain will just spin and spin and spin with it. And whether something is true or not is often less important than whether it's a helpful thought, whether it produces a feeling and an action in your life that you want.

So today we're going to dive deep into feelings, but if you haven't listened to the last episode, it is really, really important. Please go back and do that, because what I'm saying in this episode will sink in much better if you've opened your mind to what I said in the last one. If you remember in the episode on the three baseline assumptions of feminist thought work, that was one of the earlier episodes in this series, one of those assumptions, premises, whatever you call it, was that your thoughts create your feelings.

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So this is an insight from cognitive behavioral psychology. This is the model that CBT works on, cognitive behavioral therapy. There are other theories about how thoughts and feelings interact, but this is the one I have found most true to my life and experience. And even if you believe that some of your feelings arise in some other way. Everyone agrees that how you think about your feelings and how you react to them in your mind makes a big difference in what you then emotionally experience and how it impacts you.

So even if you believe your emotions are caused by the planets or God or a magical worm somewhere, whatever you think. The way you then think about those feelings you're having will have a big impact on your experience of them. The same thing is true for physical sensations, for instance, if you're irritable because you're hungry, how you interpret that irritability, how you think about it, how you react to it, how you talk to yourself about it, will create a whole new set of emotions on top of it.

So for this episode we are assuming that your thoughts create your feelings. But it's actually not crucial, because what I really want to focus on in this episode is not even getting rid of that initial emotion but working on your reaction to your own emotions. So first we need to define what are we even talking about when we talk about an emotion?

This is particularly confusing in English because we tend to say, "I feel", before we then give a thought. A thought is a sentence in your mind or a phrase in your mind, or even an image, but in English we'll say things like, "I just feel like if my boss really appreciated me, they would have praised me at the staff meeting."

That is not a feeling. That is a thought. It's an idea. It's an opinion. It's an evaluation. It's a string of concepts described in words. That's a thought. An emotion or a feeling, I'm using those words interchangeably is a set of

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physical sensations in your body. It can be described in one word, generally, maybe two. And those words correspond to a set of physical sensations in your body, like fear or joy or love or anger or sadness or shame. These are all emotions.

And I recommend keeping it pretty basic when thinking about your emotions. For instance, we have a word, nostalgia, which means wistful affection about a past experience or time period. That's kind of a complex idea to give that word to. In the actual body, I think nostalgia feels pretty simple, because physical sensations and emotions are pretty basic in physical terms. But we use this more complex word because we're kind of bundling together some thoughts and feelings.

When you are thinking about identifying your emotions, just try to keep it basic, especially for negative emotion. Just like sadness, fear or anxiety, shame, guilt, disgust, some anthropologists think is one of the basic emotions, happiness, love, excitement. We're really going to keep it kind of basic.

So our model here is that if we have a thought and it creates an emotion in our body. So for instance, if I think my partner is so great with his kids, I feel warm and expansive in my body. And in my human language I call that sensation in my body, affection or love. If instead, my thought was, my partner doesn't really care about how I feel. I would maybe feel hot and I would call that anger or I might feel heavy and call that sadness. There is no one correct thought feeling pair. People's emotions really depend on how specific thoughts resonate in their specific brains.

So the same few words might produce a totally different feeling for you and for someone else. Also important to notice is that whether our thought is true or not is really irrelevant to the production of the emotion in our body. If

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you are erroneously told that someone you love has died, you will feel grief even though the person is absolutely alive and well, and it was just a mistake. You believing they are dead will go through the same intensity of grief you would if they were actually dead.

If you think someone isn't texting you back because they don't want to date you and actually it's that a dolphin ate their phone while they were swimming with the dolphins. You will feel rejected or sad regardless of the truth that they actually like you and wanted to text you back but the dolphin ate their phone. So your brain is not only producing emotion when a thought is true, which is really important because generally when we feel something, we assume it's because something is making us feel that way and that something is true. That is not the case. Your brain does not know the difference.

Even if you're correct about a certain circumstance, let's say that someone doesn't want to date you. Their phone wasn't eaten by dolphins. They have their phone. They don't want to text you back. Your emotion is caused by your thought about it, because imagine that you have a friend who you like platonically, and you're worried that they like you romantically because you don't feel that way. And then you find out you were wrong, they don't want to date you. Well, you feel relieved because your thought is, thank goodness. Now I don't have to have a super awkward conversation and maybe mess up our friendship.

So in that case, this person not wanting to date you, feels fine. But if you like someone and they don't want to date you, then your thought may be more like there must be something wrong with me. I'm not good enough. I would feel better if I got to date this person. And then you may feel shame or anxiety or sadness. Now, all of that is totally fine. There's nothing wrong with negative emotion. We're going to talk about that a lot in this episode.

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But for this piece of it I just want you to be understanding that whether a thought is true or not, whether it's helpful or not, does not impact whether it creates a feeling. If a sentence or an image or an idea goes through your mind and you believe it, it will create an emotional reaction in your body. So this means that if we want to change our feelings, we have to change our thoughts.

And many people who follow me follow me because they love the idea of changing their thoughts and feelings and actions cognitively. And they would like to avoid that whole pesky negative emotion being in the body, having their feelings thing. Thank you very much. And listen, I get it. That was me once upon a time. And honestly, at least once a month, once a week, every other Tuesday, it's still me sometimes. Humans are inherently somewhat predisposed to not like negative emotions.

We are wired to seek pleasure and avoid pain, or at least that's our current story about humans and that lines up nicely with what our culture tells us all the time. We're constantly being taught to think positive, be a beat, don't be a downer, good vibrations only. And this intersects neatly with capitalism, which tells us that constant growth is possible. Constant happiness is something you can buy. Any emotional issues you have can be solved by purchasing something to make you feel better.

This is really culturally specific, and this is so important to understand. Our allergy to negative emotions in our culture is not because humans just can't cope with negative emotions on a biological basis. It's not because that's a universal premise, it really isn't.

For instance, Buddhist teaching is very heavy on the premise that pain and suffering are a normal part of life, and they are to be expected. So if you were raised in a culture that has been strongly influenced by Buddhist

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religion, negative emotion is not something you would necessarily expect that you could escape or assume you shouldn't be experiencing or assume means something's gone wrong.

And even in western cultures, if you go back a few hundred or 1,000 years, when the Catholic Church was the major culture shaping institution. The message was that suffering on Earth was a normal and necessary part of life. That suffering was virtuous and that it would be rewarded in heaven. Now, I'm not suggesting we adopt that belief system again. But what it did have that was beneficial was setting the norm of believing that negative emotions and experiences are actually a part of regular human life.

Different cultures have had different attitudes to them, but one thing you can trace all the way throughout has been that humans have always experienced negative things, they have had negative feelings. And they have had to come up with some sort of cultural belief system around those experiences. And unfortunately a lot of us alive today in western cultures especially are in a culture where the belief system about that is no, no, that isn't normal. It's not necessary. We can just try to avoid ever feeling that way.

I am not trying to be a downer or suggest that unrestrained misery is the norm and you should just resign yourself to that. Obviously I would not have a huge following as a self-help teacher if that was my message, probably, I don't know, maybe, I could try that, but that's not what I believe. But what I am saying is that it's normal to have a mix of positive and negative emotion. And that negative emotion is not something to try to optimize out of your life.

And I have to hit that point really hard because everything in our society and culture is telling you the opposite. And the belief that negative emotion

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is a problem, that it means something is going wrong, it shouldn't be happening, it is a sign of a bad thing or there's something wrong with you. All of the kind of stigmatization and attempt to avoid negative emotion and the unwillingness to feel negative emotion is actually what makes negative emotions feel so unbearable.

Our attitude about negative emotion actually turns up the volume of negative emotion in our bodies and makes it feel worse, literally. So let me explain to you how and why that happens, but a quick break first.

So let me demonstrate to you why and how our brain turns up the volume on negative emotions and makes them feel worse when we don't think we should have them. Let's go back to the example of somebody who doesn't want to date you. If that's not relevant or resonant for you, you can sub in someone who doesn't want to be your friend, someone who doesn't want to hire you for a job, whatever is your kind of pain area.

So in this scenario there's a first level thought that causes some emotional pain. Somebody says, "Thanks for the date, but I just don't think we're a match." Or they ghost you or they don't hire you or they fire you, again any kind of example. The first level thought is often something like, I'm not good enough. I did something wrong. There's something wrong with me. I'm missing out on this good feeling I would have if the circumstance were different.

Those thoughts naturally create some level of negative emotion. Let's call that anywhere from level two through four. If a negative motion could be ranked on levels one through ten, let's say anywhere from a two to a four, even a two to a six. But then we react to the negative emotion. And this can take a couple of different forms and kind of comes from a couple of different misunderstandings.

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First, we think that a bad feeling in our body means that something objectively bad has happened, but an unpleasant sensation in your body actually does not mean anything about reality. Our brain assumes if we feel bad, something bad happened, but that's not true. Your brain just had a thought that feels bad. And when our brain thinks something is bad and something bad is happening, is evolutionarily primed to want to get away from it. So then we start to feel like we need to make this feeling go away. We need to get away from the feeling.

And this is especially true, I find, for anxiety because our body thinks anxiety means that something physically dangerous is nearby that we need to run away from, but it's not just anxiety. Resistance to any negative emotion will create this urgency to try to get rid of it. This is why we spend hundreds of hours and billions of dollars a year on shopping and eating and drinking and Netflix and scrolling and drugs and whatever we need to do to distract ourselves from experiencing our feelings.

We also start to come up with thoughts about the feelings and thoughts about why the feelings should go away. We tell ourselves that we shouldn't feel a certain way. We shouldn't be feeling anxious or sad or angry or whatever. We're too mature, we're too old to feel that way. We're too young to feel that way. We're too smart or too privileged or too lucky or we know too much thought work or we're too emotionally mature to feel that way, or whatever it is. That for some reason we should not be having the feeling we are having and that we are doing something wrong just by having it.

A lot of us were raised this way. We were told not to have our feelings or that our feelings were a problem. Some of us have been practicing what I teach for a minute, or have been to a lot of therapy, or we meditate or whatever. And so then we tell ourselves we should be beyond this somehow. We should be beyond having normal human reactions to things. And then women are socialized to believe that they are irrational and overly

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emotional as well. So we doubt and second guess our own feelings too and we tend to minimize and underplay them.

So all of that combines to us creating emotional resistance to the feeling, which just means that we want the feeling to go away. We are telling ourselves, consciously or subconsciously, that we don't want to feel that, the feeling is bad, the feeling is a problem. When you want a feeling to go away, when you are resistant to having the feeling you make the experience for yourself 10 times worse because you're telling your brain that the feeling happening in your body is bad and dangerous.

And when your brain thinks there is a danger, it creates stress on purpose. It's supposed to. What we call stress is the hormonal reaction to danger that's supposed to give us the energy and muscle contraction and heart pumping and blood oxygenation to literally run away from the danger. And that works if the danger is physical and outside of us. But when you tell your brain that a feeling that is already happening inside your body is dangerous and bad and shouldn't be there and is a problem. Now, your brain's really freaking out because you can't get away from your own body.

And that's what we're trying to do when we try to shove it down or numb it out or disassociate or disconnect. We're trying to get away from this feeling that is inside our body and we can't really get away from it and that makes it feel so much worse. So if your initial feeling would have been a three or a bad feeling, when you are resistant to it and your brain is freaking out because there's a danger inside the house, it can't get away from, now we're at an eight.

Now we are completely activated just because we're having a feeling because we have signaled to our brain that the feeling is bad and a problem and we need to get rid of it. So before we can even work with or

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do anything about the underlying thought and feeling, that thought of I must have done something wrong if I didn't get hired for this job, or this person does want to go out with me and the sadness or shame we feel about that thought from that thought.

Before we can even work on those things, we have to deal with the cacophony of, oh my God, I shouldn't feel shame. I don't want to feel this. I have to get rid of this feeling. I can't stand to feel sad. If I feel sad that means that I truly am bad and wrong. I don't want to feel that. I have to get rid of that feeling, all of that. We have to deal with the resistance first. Do not try to get clever, you cannot change the feeling, the underlying feeling to solve both the feeling and resistance at once. That's what happens.

People come to coaching and they're like, "Well, any time that somebody doesn't want to go on a second date with me, I feel really bad about myself. And then I freak out about feeling bad about myself. I don't want to feel that. I want to get rid of that." So then they want to change their thought that they have when someone doesn't want to go out with them, to get rid of all the feeling and the resistance all at once. But that doesn't work because the resistance keeps your brain in a state of panic.

And when you're in that state, you actually can't think clearly so you cannot examine your underlying thoughts. You can't get curious. You can't be self-compassionate. You can't come up with a good new thought. You can't learn and practice and integrate a new thought. None of that works when you're in emotional resistance. You literally have a harder time accessing the part of your brain that can learn and consolidate new thoughts and actually change your thinking when you are resisting an emotion.

So what this means is that the number one thing you can do to make a bad emotion feel better is not change the thought causing that feeling or get rid

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of that feeling. It's actually paradoxically to just be willing to feel it. It's to release the resistance to feeling the emotion. This is why people are always telling you to feel your feelings, but hopefully this is a much clearer explanation of why that's important.

The best way to do this, to release that resistance, to be willing to feel the feeling is to use some simple cognitive and somatic tools that help tell your brain that it's safe and okay to have the negative emotion. So that you can dissolve the panic reaction on top of the original negative emotion. And then eventually you can deal with the negative emotion itself. So I go into these in depth in the Feminist Self-Help Society. In your first month we do a deep dive on all of this, but here's the very concise version.

First, you can describe the emotion to yourself as physical sensations in your body. Describe exactly what your body feels like. Your face is hot, your heart is racing, your stomach feels dropped, whatever it is. This will signal to your brain that you are safe and it will also give your brain something to do rather than just keep thinking the thoughts that are creating the emotion and the resistance.

Second, you can practice a simple thought like, I am willing to feel this feeling, this feeling is welcome here. Or if that's too far, something like, even though I do not want to have this feeling, I know that it is physically safe for it to be here or I know I can survive this feeling or I know eventually this will pass. Any version of that or whatever you can brainstorm, that will help your brain calm down a bit and not see the emotion as so dangerous.

Often once we've removed the resistance, we've removed the panic about having the emotion, the emotion itself, the underlying emotion turns out to be not such a big deal. Sometimes it just goes away on its own. Sometimes we do still need to do some work on our thinking to shift the feeling, that

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underlying original feeling. And to do that we need to be able to change what we're thinking. And that's what we'll be talking about next week in the Feminist Mindset Principles series. So stay tuned.

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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.