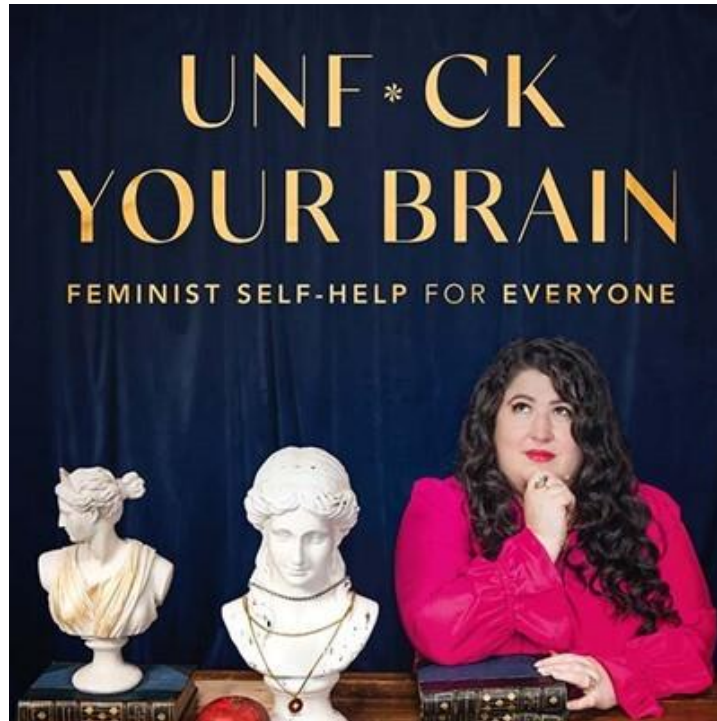


UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome

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 darling. I feel like it's been a while because I prerecorded last week's podcast two weeks ago. So I was all over the place last week. First, I went to Chicago and I got to meet some of you in person, which was super fun. I think we should have meetups all the time. I did a workshop at an Amwah 200 firm in Chicago and some of you were in the audience, which was great. And I got to hug one of my favorite clients who worked in the same building. And then I went to Detroit with a friend for a weekend away. And, oh my God, if you have not been to Detroit, you need to go to Detroit. I'm about ready to just move there and set up a coaching office in the Fisher building. The architecture is amazing. It's like New York in the 1970s, and basically everything costs \$10. It's fantastic. I highly recommend.

But anyway, so now I'm back. And before we dive in today's topic, I also want to remind y'all that this podcast is soon going to be rebranded as the UnF*ck Your Brain podcast. So I'm expanding my practice to work with high-achieving feminist women in general, not just lawyers. I'm just wrapping up the new intro, and artwork and music, and all that jazz. Super excited for you guys to see it. But I don't want anyone to be confused or scared. I know change is frightening sometimes. So I'm going to keep reminding you until the transition day comes about what's happening. I don't want anyone to wake up one day and be afraid that the podcast has disappeared on them. And the back episodes are not disappearing. We're going to keep them for a while. Okay. I think that's all of our preliminary business.

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

UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome

So today we're going to be talking about one of the topics that I know touches so many of you personally. And I have gotten a lot of requests from you guys to talk about this, and I totally understand why because it was a real issue for me before I learned how to coach myself. And that is imposter syndrome, the scariest sounding of the thought patterns. It's a syndrome. I've been thinking a ton about imposter syndrome, because it's really at the heart of the problem and the transformation that UnF*ck Your Brain coaching problem solves. I often say the program is for women who believe in empowerment, but often don't feel empowered. And that's exactly what's going on in imposter syndrome. So some of you know this term and you've read the think pieces about it, and then some of you probably actually experienced this, but don't know the term.

I was just on a consultation call with one of you listeners recently who described this exactly, and was like, "Is there a name for it?" Yes, there is a name. The name is imposter syndrome. So how do you know if you have imposter syndrome? Let me give you a few questions and see if you think yes to any of these. Do you ever feel like all of your accomplishments might have been due to luck, or chance, or appearance, or connections, or anything else that is in your own smarts or drive or talent? And sometimes your brain can get really sneaky about this. Like I had a client whose imposter syndrome took the form of saying, "Oh, I am a really hard worker, but now I'm at this point in my career where I have to also be like a good analytical thinker, and I have to be strategic, and I'm not good at those things."

It was like she was sort of validating that she had gotten to where she'd gotten through hard work, but she was still telling herself she was an imposter because she was telling herself that she didn't have the real goods. Like she just could work hard, that was no big deal, but she didn't have the real brains for it. Or do you ever worry that you're going to be exposed as a fraud? Even when you're well into your career or area of expertise, do you always have the sense that someone's going to figure out

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

UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome

that you don't know what you're doing, or that you made a dumb mistake, or that you're not smart enough or good enough? Do you feel like everyone around you is smarter, or works harder and does a better job than you do? Think your brain will really pretend this one is objective.

All my clients are like, "Everyone else is working harder than I do." I'm like, "That can't be possible because you're all telling me the same thing." So your brain might be telling you that you aren't as smart as everyone else. You don't work as hard as everyone else. One of the things that's so interesting about imposter syndrome is that it'll take any fact and use it. So I have clients saying like, "Well, I only got this job because I went to Harvard Law School," that's my imposter syndrome. And then there's other clients saying, "Well, I'm an imposter because I didn't go to Harvard Law School, I only went to Michigan State," or whatever. So it's like your brain will look for whatever is unique to your story and then still turn that around and use that as a reason that you don't fit in, and aren't the same as everyone else and are an imposter or a fraud, or missing something that you need to have.

Another question you might ask yourself is, do you find yourself terrified of making mistakes and constantly believing you're likely to make one, no matter how expert you get at your career. It's really not uncommon that clients will come to me and be like, "Every time I have to file in a case, I really get stressed out and I worry that I'm going to miss something big, and there's going to be a huge problem." And I'll say like, "Well, how many of these filings have you done in your career?" And there'll be like, "I don't know, 300," like so many they've been doing it for so long. But it doesn't matter because their brain is constantly scanning for this mistake, which we know is super common, particularly for lawyers.

So when you have imposter syndrome, it's not exactly that you don't think you've ever accomplished anything or amounted to anything, it's more subtle than that. Usually you're really high functioning and you see that

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

UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome

there are external indications that you're successful and you're skilled, but you don't believe that you are. So you have this cognitive dissonance between what you know other people think about you, like other people would look at my career and be like, "Well, she went to Harvard Law School and she clerked on a federal court and she got the one reproductive rights fellowship in the country her year. And then she got these academic fellowships," like there's this external evidence that would seem to indicate that I knew what I was doing.

So when you have imposter syndrome, it's not exactly that you don't think you've ever accomplished anything or amounted to anything. It's not that dramatic. Usually you're really high functioning and you see that there are external indications that you're successful and skilled, but you don't believe that you are. So I had this 100%. I could look at my career when I was still practicing, and say, "All right. I went to Yale. I went to Harvard, I clerked on the federal appeals court. I got the only reproductive rights fellowship in the country my year for litigation. I got these academic fellowships." Like anybody looking at my resume would think that I was clearly talented and skilled and good at what I did. But I didn't believe it. My brain had a whole bunch of explanations. "Well, you only got into Yale because you were a legacy because your mother went there. Then you only got into Harvard Law School because they wanted more women," which also doesn't make sense. There's still a lot of women in the country that they could have taken.

None of this makes sense. And it was like, "Well, you only got your clerkship because not that many people want to clerk in New Orleans. And then you only got your fellowship because you knew some of the people in those organizations," which again, it's like, you could tell that story as, "I had decided in law school that I wanted that fellowship and I had gotten all the experience you would need, and pursued it single-mindedly, and developed the relationships I would need, and the experience I would need to get it," which is a totally legitimate way to get a fellowship. Like that's

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

UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome

how you do it. But my brain totally turned that against me and used it as a reason to show that I didn't deserve what I had achieved.

So that's what characterizes imposter syndrome. You have this cognitive dissonance between what you know other people think about you or what someone might rationally deduce from looking at your life, and how you actually feel inside. So if we're going to define it and boil it down to a sentence. I think that imposter syndrome is essentially the feeling that you are an imposter, not surprisingly. The feeling and fear that you'll be found out to be undeserving, or unqualified, or revealed as a fraud. It sounds like such dramatic language, but that really is how we think about it when we're suffering from this. We feel like we're going to be found out. Someone is going to reveal that we don't know what we're doing, or we don't deserve to be where we are.

It's a totally bizarre fear in many ways. I used to literally think that I would be found out as a fraud, even though I had not lied about anything. I was actually a lawyer, that was true. My entire resume was true. Nothing was fraudulent or a lie. But that didn't really matter because the emotional experience I was having was being not good enough. And to me, that is really the underlying truth of imposter syndrome. It's about the not good enough feeling. It's about that fundamental conviction you have that you are unworthy in some kind of unspecified way. And that's what gives rise to the syndrome. And I think the classic sign of imposter syndrome is the phrase, "I know rationally X, but I feel like Y." Like, "I know rationally that I have gotten lots of prestigious jobs, but I feel like I don't deserve them." "I know rationally that's better to be alone than in a bad relationship, but I feel like there must be something wrong with me that I haven't found a partner yet."

It's so hard to wrap your brain around because it truly does not make sense on the surface. Imposter syndrome feels like there's just no connection between what you can rationally see other people would see about you and

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

UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome

how you actually feel. So I am going to talk to you guys about how to change imposter syndrome actually, really specifically. But before we talk about how to cure it, we need to understand where it comes from. This is really one of the main tenets of my coaching and the way that I try to teach you guys on the podcast, which is, you want to understand where these things came from, not in the therapy model where understanding will lead to change. I don't think that usually works... it didn't work, let me say this more concretely, that didn't really work for me. And for a lot of my clients, having insight did not lead to changed behavior.

I think a lot of therapeutic models, that's the assumption, like insight will lead to change. And for some of us, insight just leads to doing the same God damn thing while knowing why we're doing it, so I don't think that insight is enough. But because a lot of what women suffer from is various forms of internalized social conditioning and self critical thinking that they take to be just true thoughts about themselves. Because that's a really big problem for women, I actually think it's super important to talk about where these thought patterns come from, and then we talk about how to change them. But it gives you that perspective and that distance. One of the core points of meditation is that it teaches you to disidentify with your thoughts to see that you are not your thoughts.

And what I do is really the same thing in this more analytic way. And one of the ways of doing that is being able to identify, "Oh, my brain tells me all these things that are wrong with me and I just believe them. But actually, if I think about it, those came into my brain because society tells all women to criticize themselves in those ways," or sometimes it's the family, whatever it is. So that's why I always take the time to talk about how social conditioning impacts these things. And that's really part of actually why I'm expanding this work beyond just lawyer stress and into the UnF*ck Your Brain platform, because I do think it's a bigger mission. And part of that is seeing how social conditioning gets inside our heads and presents itself to us like it's our own thoughts. It's like it goes undercover, it's in disguise.

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

UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome

So if you're raised as a woman in our society, you're constantly encouraged to second guess yourself, to criticize yourself and to doubt your own worth. You're told that your appearance is what matters most about you, but that if you care about your appearance too much, you're vain. No way to win. You're told that you should want to be smart and ambitious, but that men won't want to be with you if you are. Or you're told to be bold and confident, that's cool now. But if you talk too much, you're still shrill and aggressive. You're told you should be able to stand up for yourself, but that if you're too assertive, you're a bitch. There's no way to win. And it means that even if you didn't absorb the messages that you're inferior, you probably did observe the messages that you should be constantly doubting your own instincts and inclinations and worrying about whether or not they're justified and how they are perceived.

All of that goes into creating imposter syndrome. So you've got the cultural conditioning, and then there's the family patterning that a lot of people experience that adds to the problem. So the social conditioning can come through your family, that's one version of it. There's also a version where if you're taught that your values, your intelligence and accomplishments, which a lot of us high achieving women are, we think our brain is like the thing to be proud of. Then you'll be terrified of finding out that you're not as smart as you thought, or more importantly, as other people thought. You know, it sounds like encouraging women to, for instance, really focus on their intelligence and their accomplishments, as opposed to like how they look or who they marry, should lead to high self-esteem. It's like a more feminist perspective and your parents might even have thought that's what they were encouraging for sure, like we're going to teach our daughter to focus on her accomplishments and not her looks.

But by telling you to base your self-worth on your intelligence, they may have inadvertently set you up to be super concerned about whether you're smart enough for the rest of your life. It's like if you raise someone to be very concerned about their looks, they're going to be obsessed with their

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

UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome

looks and what other people think of them. So this is not about blaming your family, I don't think that's helpful. But just showing you that if you were raised to really value yourself based on your accomplishments and your intelligence, as opposed to just like you have value for existing. If you were raised to really value yourself based on your accomplishments, and you have also absorbed any kind of critical talk, any critical patterns in your family or the social conditioning of encouraging women to doubt themselves and worry about what other people think. Those things can combine to make you really fixated on whether you're smart enough, whether you're good enough, whether you deserve to be where you are and how you might be fooling everyone in your career.

So social conditioning, plus family baggage, plus self-critical thoughts all day long. I mean, talk about the self-talk soundtrack, which we talked about in a previous podcast. The imposter syndrome is a form of your own self-talk, that's what really creates it. All of the social conditioning and the family conditioning, everything else gets internalized, and then repeated back to you in your own voice, in your own self critical thoughts. That's your self-talk and that's what really creates it.

So what are the impacts of imposter syndrome? First of all, it just feels terrible. We're encouraged to spend tons of money on how we look to others, like our clothes, and our shoes, and our makeup, and workout trends, and diet books, and cleanses, and everything else. But society doesn't teach us to invest in our own mental health. And in fact, as women, we're socialized to think that we are over-sensitive or silly when we have strong feelings. So I always like to say just, "First things first." You feeling shitty is a problem worth solving in and of itself. Just the fact that you feel like an imposter is a problem worth solving, because it's really unpleasant. And how you feel, your mental health, it does impact everything else in your life. And we can talk about that, but also, it just feels terrible. And you not feeling terrible is something that is worth investing your time and money in, that actually does matter despite what society tells you.

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

UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome

So that's the baseline, but it's also worth solving imposter syndrome because of the way it interferes with you getting what you want in life. The imposter syndrome voice will drive you to really focus and prioritize external validation, what other people think of you, getting those brass rings and to really shy away from risks and change and doing something unconventional that you really want to do. You feel insecure, so you don't go for the promotion. You don't negotiate for the raise. You don't ask that cute guy or girl out. You don't set boundaries with your mom about what she can say to you about your body. You don't wear that bikini, even though you want to. You'll hold yourself back in life and you'll undermine your own success and happiness, because you're convinced that you don't deserve it and that it can be snatched away at any moment if the truth is revealed.

And because you don't believe you can even get it. If you're an imposter, why would you be able to get a promotion? Why would you invite that level of scrutiny, what if someone finds out during the process? So imposter syndrome does not go away on its own. This is so important because it often combines with perfectionism and our brain lies to us and tells us that if we just get that next goal, then we'll be able to believe that we're worthy. I used to do this all the time. It's like, "Oh, okay. Well, my litigation fellowship didn't count because I had planned for it and worked for it and gotten to know the people I need to get to know and gotten the expertise I needed." So for some reason that didn't count. But if I got an academic fellowship, like academics are super smart. So if I got an academic fellowship, then I could feel okay. I got an academic fellowship. I got several offers. Shockingly, I did not feel any better.

There's no level of accomplishment that will mute those voices in your head. The thoughts they're offering you, that you don't deserve your success, that you accidentally got where you are, that you're not smart enough or good enough, that someone's going to figure it out. Those thoughts can apply at any level of your career, at any year of your

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

UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome

marriage. I mean, I'm always astounded at how many of my clients have been in relationships for 10 or 15 years and still worry that at any moment, their partner's going to decide they don't love them or find out they're unworthy. Can apply at any weight or body size, in any friendship or relationship, there's nothing you can change externally that will resolve those internal voices.

So how do we solve it? This is going to shock you guys, but we have to change our thoughts. I know you did not see that coming. The tool that you can use to get from your current imposter syndrome to actually believe in yourself is called the thought ladder. So the thought ladder is a three-step process that actually helps you change your brain. So that over time you naturally will think more helpful and empowering thoughts.

Step one, always, we always start, in any tool I teach you, we always start with figuring out what you are thinking about yourself now. So this might be something like, "I don't belong here," or, "I'm not as good as my colleagues," or, "Someone is going to figure out that I'm not smart enough." Whatever you're currently thinking about yourself goes at the bottom of the ladder. And it's really important you just pick one. You can do the ladder as many times as you want, but each ladder needs to start with one single thought. If you put too many thoughts down there, you will get overwhelmed and you'll just feel like, "How can I change all of these?" You don't need to, you just start with one, one thought. So you figured out what you think now.

And the next step is to brainstorm what you wish you could believe about yourself. So this will be something you don't believe right now. That's okay. That's a really important thing to understand. This step two, this goal thought, the thing you wish you could believe about yourself, you don't believe it right now. And that's totally fine. So you can dream big. It can be a thought like, "I'm incredible at this job," or, "I can achieve anything I want," or, "I'm smart enough to succeed in any position I choose." This

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

UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome

thought goes to the top of your thought ladder. It's your goal thought, the thought you don't believe now, but you'd like to. It's important because it shows us where we're going. It's like knowing the end of the path.

Then step three, this is where the real magic happens. It brainstorms three thoughts that you could try to think now. So these thoughts should be more neutral or positive than your current thought. So your current thought is, "I don't belong here." And your goal thought is, "I'm the best here." You go for something in between like, "I've gotten good reviews at this job," or, "They hired me because they thought I would do a good job," or, "I've accomplished many things in my life even though I felt insecure at the time," or, "I have equivalent experience and skills as my colleagues." These are not like, "I'm amazing, on top of the world thoughts," and that's fine. That's good. You don't believe the amazing, "I'm on top of the world thoughts." We want to find a thought that is just a step up. It's really in between the current thought and the goal thought.

It needs to be a thought you can believe now. Here's how you tell if you believe a thought. You think the thought, and then you check in your body and see if it feels any better than what you usually think. If it does, then you believe it. It might just be a little bit better. That's okay. Baby steps are awesome. So you have to make sure you can believe it. It won't feel amazing necessarily, but it should feel better than what you usually are thinking about yourself. So I kind of lied, it was a baby lie because there is a fourth step. You have to practice whichever thought you brainstormed that you liked the best, or you practice all of them. We came up with three in the example, you can read them over every morning, you can read them anytime you feel insecure. You can put them on a post-it note on your computer. You can set an alarm on your phone to remind you to think them.

Literally the more you can think them, the better. You do not have to think them all the time. Don't let perfectionism, don't let the perfect be the enemy

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

UFYB 2: Imposter Syndrome

of the good here. If you read them over once a day, that's great. If you read them over 10 times a day, that's even awesomer. The more you think them, the quicker they will become your new, natural thoughts, but even a little bit of consistent practice every day helps. When we think about changing our thoughts or changing anything in our lives, we tend to get overwhelmed by thinking about how much we would have to do. But the truth is the human brain has a bias where it overestimates, how much would have to be done to change something like a big dramatic action and underestimates the value of small daily, consistent practice.

I did not change my brain in my whole life by working really, really hard at it for six months, all the time in some giant feat of discipline that I can never do again. Of course not. I had a job. I had a relationship. I had a family. I have hobbies. I did not go sit on the mountain and meditate for six months. I just practiced a little bit every day and just like compound interest, that will pay off.

All right, my loved ones, my lovely chickens. I will talk to you guys next week.

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