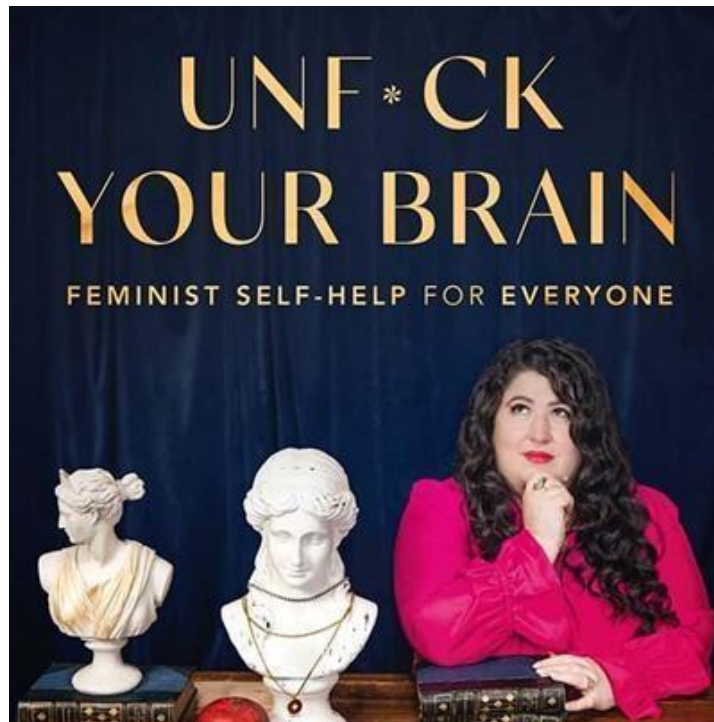


UFYB 41: Drama & Toxic People



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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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 chickens. So today, we are going to talk about drama and a couple of kind of related concepts. And I just have to warn you guys that there may be some cat drama on this podcast. I've been out of town for a week and my cat has a lot of feelings about it and morning is usually when we have a little hangout time, so he might make some drama. There might be some yelling. I'm trying to pet him with one hand while I record the podcast. This is modern entrepreneur life.

Alright, so we're going to talk about drama. And I think today's topic is appropriate – probably why I was thinking about it – because I just got back from a trip to the beach with my parents and my gentleman caller, as I like to call him, and my brain had a lot of drama. And this is after all the coaching I've done on myself about my family and my relationship, which has really transformed my life.

So it's nothing like what it used to be, if I look back at what I used to feel about family vacations, which was just a lot of dread and then a lot of crying while they were happening; not because of my family but because of my own thoughts. Compared to that, I actually looked forward to this weekend and it was totally calm and nobody cried because I have control of my brain.

But even so, I do normally live alone. I operate all my own schedule. I've created my life to allow for that. We all have different things that we value and I have always valued having control of my own time and my own schedule more than anything else really. I mean, I love that I have figured

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out how to create a life where I'm also passionate about the work I do and it's also lucrative and I also make money.

But even in my previous career, one of the reasons I chose academia was I really wanted to be able to have some control over my schedule and I was willing to trade money for that. you just have money and time and life, right; these are the resources, money time and effort. You've got to figure out how you want to distribute those.

Anyway, so I normally live alone. I operate on my own schedule. And so being on a trip with a bunch of people, all of whom have different ideas about what you should be doing at any one time, there's a lot to negotiate. So I just had a lot of conflicting thoughts and feelings and desires, and then everybody else around me did too. And so it was just an opportunity to really watch my brain being dramatic all over the place because nothing had actually gone wrong.

Nothing had happened. Just there 10 people in one physical space who had different thoughts on their brains, that's all that had happened, but my brain thought that the world was ending. And I recently had one of you write to me requesting an episode on drama and I think that's a great idea and it really showed up for me this weekend because our brains are so dramatic.

I just remembered, I need to tell you guys – sorry, I should have done this at the beginning – make sure you listen to the end today because I have a fun surprise for you, but I'm not going to tell you about it until the end. So don't – like, I sometimes stop podcasts when I can tell they're wrapping up. I don't know why. I'm just like, I'm done. Stay, listen to the whole thing because I'm going to tell you about a fun surprise for you; something you can get for free. Who doesn't want things for free?

Okay, so brains are dramatic. I like to imagine my brain as various dramatic characters. So I know I've said on the podcast before, sometimes my brain

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is like a turtle that just flips over on its back. This is what my brain does whenever I have to figure out something new that I've never done before. My brain is just like, well I can't fix this so I guess I'll just lie here until I die now. It's just like a turtle on its back, can't right itself.

This actually happens a lot less now. I would say now that I'm into my third year of business, because I mostly had this about business things. I mean, in law, I had it all the time, but in terms of coaching, I've rarely had this about how to coach someone. That I always felt really confident in. but I used to have this all the time about anything business or technology or financial, like anything related to running my business, my brain was just like, never done it before; guess I have to die now. So it's really gone down over time now that I think about it, but it still comes up. There are still things that I really have to coach myself about or I will just procrastinate them for months because my brain just wants to lie on its back.

So sometimes, it's a turtle. Sometimes, it's a very dramatic teenage girl that runs to her room and slams her door and yells, "You don't get me, mom." Like that's sometimes what my brain is like. And then sometimes, I think it's like an 18th century woman who's wearing a corset and faints onto the settee – I think that's how you say that word. I come from Jews; we don't have these things – at the slightest inconvenience and calls for her smelling salts. You know, just like hand to the forehead, like so dramatic.

So you might have your own images, whatever image makes sense to you. The point is that our brains are very dramatic – capital V, capital D. And that's because of evolution. There's only two settings that your lizard brain really has. This is a little bit of a tangent, but it's related.

One of the reasons that it's so fascinating to me when my clients are really committed to the idea that what their story about the world is more true than if they come up with something to think on purpose, your brain is just a story-making machine. It's constantly filtering out everything around you.

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You read into the cognitive psychology and the neurobiology, we are not perceiving everything in the world at all. Literally, your entire experience of the world, including what you see and smell and touch, your auditory and visual experience of the world is a complete illusion.

It's not exactly that it's not there, but really what's happening is your brain gets an overwhelming amount of stimuli. So for some reason, the image I just got is like 1000 minnows rushing at you. So you've got like 1000 minnows swirling around you – you've seen those big flocks of minnows in a lake or the ocean or somewhere – they're all swirling around you and that's going on in your brain constantly and your brain can't handle that. It's overwhelming, so your brain is just like, I'm in a meadow with five minnows, or this is a swimming pool and there are 12 minnows.

Your brain actually just selects from all of that what it thinks you need to know about and puts it together into a nice little story for you. It happens completely unconsciously. So the idea that if we manage our minds we're selective thinking or choosing only to look at one aspect of things, your brain's already choosing to look at limited aspects of things, but it's just doing it unconsciously and you don't even have any say over it.

So managing your mind is like taking some ownership over it. So the point of how this relates to drama is that's happening to your brain constantly. It's being overwhelmed by stimuli. There's so many things to see and smell and touch and taste and hear, right. There's just everything all around you all the time and you would just become paralyzed if you actually got that stimuli all the time.

And we know that people with sensory processing disorders, part of what happens is that they're too sensitive to the stimuli. They're able to perceive more of the stimuli and they get paralyzed and their brain can't handle it. So because your brain has to do that, your brain has to come up with a mechanism, right; how am I going to decide what to care about? There's a

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million minnows; how do I decide which minnows to actually look at and tell the brain they exist?

And your primitive brain, your lizard brain, the decision-making question it basically uses is, is this life or death? Anything that seems like it might relate to me dying, I'm going to pay attention to and I'm going to ignore everything else, which means that your primitive lizard brain is a drama queen because everything is either fine or life and death. Those are the only two settings it has.

And over time, of course, we've talked about this a lot on the podcast, all of the various stimuli that actually could have killed you are mostly gone. If you're listening to this podcast, you have some kind of electronic equipment that allows you to this podcast, probably your life is not probably in danger all the time.

So our brains, our drama queen brains, they're still in that day and time where it was just like, things were life or death or not. And that's why our brains are constantly telling us that everyone hates us, everything's a threat, life is terrible, we're going to die alone, right. It's like, constant life or death. Your brain is constantly responding to even selected stimuli like they're life or death because that's the only way it knows to evaluate things.

So that is why your primitive brain interprets things so intensely. But what's hilarious and tragic, or hilariously tragic, or tragically hilarious, maybe it's all those things, is that we think that other people cause our drama. It is so common to hear this term these days. If you listen – I blame a reality TV shows. There's too much drama. She always causes drama. I don't want to deal with the drama. I do think this is from reality TV; the idea that humans interacting with each other can be drama.

You know what drama is? There's a definition. It generally happens on a stage. It's part of an art form, you know. The Greeks have a definition.

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Other cultures have other definitions. That's what drama is. But we just take human interaction and we call it drama and our lizard brain loves this because lizard brain likes life or death things. So lizard brain is like, yes, drama, life is so dramatic. I could die at any moment. Lizard brain loves this.

But the truth is that drama is only ever in your brain. No one else can cause drama for you. Did you know that? You probably did not know that. Well if you're one of my clients, you know that. Otherwise, you may think that other people can cause drama for you. Other people can be toxic. I'm going to talk about that a little bit later in the podcast. Other people can be draining. That's what you think.

I have a lot of digressions, you guys, today. I have another digression. If you follow me on Instagram, you saw I did an Instagram story about this because I'm like, I can't take it anymore. In the life coaching world, there's so many people talking about high-vibe living right now, which makes me want to blow my brains out because it's a meaningless phrase and it keeps people focused on completely the wrong things.

But one of the reasons this came up right now as I was recording this is that what I see all the time is people posting stuff like, "Only surround yourself with high-vibe people because they affect your vibe." No. No. First of all, unless you're a fucking tuning fork, you can't tell what vibration somebody else is at.

Other people don't affect your vibe. Other people don't cause drama. Other people are not toxic. Other people are not draining. It is your brain. It does not matter what they say. It doesn't matter what they do. It doesn't matter if the other person shit-talks you to your boss or if they cry in a meeting or if they get drunk and pass out in your living room or if they bang your boyfriend and lie to you about it.

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It doesn't matter what they do; no one else can cause drama for you. Only you can cause drama for you because drama only exists in your own mind. What other people say and do are neutral circumstances and your thought about them is what causes your feeling. So no one else can cause drama for you because drama isn't a real thing that exists.

Like sometimes in the beginning, I have my clients look at a feelings chart or a faces chart, to learn how to identify their feelings; drama is not on there because drama is not an emotion and it's not a real thing. Drama is just an interpretation. It's an opinion. It's a thought you have. Drama is a label that you apply to someone else's words or actions. It's not an objective thing.

So no matter what someone else does, it isn't drama. There's only drama if you decide to have the thought that it's drama. When you think something or someone else is drama or dramatic, how do you feel? Well, you feel all riled up. You feel stressed out and overwhelmed and out of control. So who is really causing the drama?

Spoiler alert, the call is coming from inside the house. Your brain is the only thing capable of causing drama for you. Other people's words or actions are not drama. They don't cause drama. The drama is your own negative thoughts that you don't have the ability to manage yet. So what happens is you try to avoid the people you think set it off because you're blaming them for your feelings.

So there is so much, like, pop-psych advice out there and when Googled how to avoid drama, there were 100 million articles – I'm looking at you Psychology Today because you're supposed to be an industry publication. That is some bullshit. But everywhere, right, about how some people cause drama and the best thing to do is avoid them. And this is just like those people who are obsessed with high-vibe living.

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If any of you listening are into that type of thing, I still love. I choose to love you all unconditionally, and maybe I will do a podcast someday about why I don't think it's a helpful framework. Since I control your feelings on this podcast, I don't want you to feel singled out, but you should think about this.

Other people don't cause our vibes. Other people don't cause our drama. So when you try to avoid drama by avoiding those people who cause it, what you are doing is abdicating emotional responsibility for yourself, and the same is true when you try to not be around people who don't have high vibes.

You are just acting like a toddler who's like, well if I turn around, it's not there and I don't see it then I don't have a problem, right. It's like shoving all your junk in a closet. I will tell you guys a story. When I went to law school it was way before I knew how to manage my mind, so I was, like, fairly traumatized, because of my thoughts, but I didn't know they were my thoughts.

At the time I moved to law school, it was very overwhelming when I started. I was in a city I didn't really like. Anyway, I always have hated doing things like breaking down cardboard boxes. Now I just hire people to deal with that kind of stuff if I have a lot of it, but I couldn't afford to at the time and I just couldn't cope. So I basically took all the cardboard from my move, and I had a lot of closets from my apartment in Cambridge, and I just shoved it in a closet.

One of my best friends from college came to visit and she saw the closet and she was like, oh, honey, no. we need to deal with this. And that's what you're doing when you try to just avoid people who you think are drama or who don't have high vibes or who are toxic or whatever.

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You're like, okay well I'll just shut this person in a closet and then I don't have to deal with this. But other people don't cause your feelings; your thoughts do. So this is one of the tactics that, fine, it works as long as you can control it, so maybe you don't need to hang out with that woman from your book club who causes drama, but soon enough, there's going to be someone in your life who you can't avoid.

My clients ask me this all the time. They're like, it's easier if I just avoid this person or quit this job or whatever, if I change my circumstance, I don't have to manage my mind. And my answer is always, like, number one – I don't know that it's that much easier because you're going to feel crazy the whole time while you do it, so it's still going to be stressful for you because your thoughts are going with you.

But even if you could, even if it was easier to just change the circumstance, it's only easier as long as the world cooperates and soon enough, you're going to hit a scenario where you can't change the circumstance and then you're going to be sorry that you don't know how to manage your mind. So you can avoid the drama book club woman if you want, but eventually, there's going to be someone in your life who you can't avoid.

You're going to have a boss who you think causes drama or you're going to have a new sister-in-law who you think causes drama or your kid, who knows? And if you believe that they can cause drama, then you are always going to feel stressed and out of control around them and emotionally exhausted from interacting with them.

So when you cut people out of your life or you avoid them because of your own thought in your brain that they cause drama – which they do not, that's a total lie, your brain causes it – when you cut them out of your life so you don't have to manage your mind, number one – you're just going to feel drama about something else because it's your thoughts that cause it. But number two – you're never going to learn how to deal with it. So it's like a

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shortcut that ends in a volcano and you die. It doesn't actually help you. It doesn't serve you.

So I recommend the opposite; don't avoid people who cause drama. I think you should spend time with them. The people you think cause drama are your greatest spiritual teachers because they trigger all of your negative thoughts and because you've completely abandoned your emotional responsibility for yourself around them.

So by spending time with them, you will get access to the thoughts that are causing the negative feelings that you are labeling drama and blaming on them. And that's true for anyone you think is toxic also. Like if there's any word that's used more than drama these days, it's toxic. It's such a common term in the self-help-light world, I think, and so misleading, right.

Unless someone has radiation poisoning, they aren't toxic. People cannot be toxic. Certain chemical compounds can be toxic. People cannot be toxic. There is no such thing as a toxic person because toxic implies that a person can poison you, that they can cause your negative emotions and be bad for you emotionally, but that's not true.

Your thoughts cause your feelings. Other people don't cause your feelings, even the ones you don't like, even the ones who you think cause drama, even if all your friends agree that they're toxic. A toxic person is just someone you aren't managing your mind around; that's it. What causes stress is your thoughts.

So a toxic person, just like a person who causes drama, is just someone that you are not managing your thoughts around. If my clients tell me that someone they know is toxic, I know what that means is they have abdicated their emotional responsibility for their interactions with that person.

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Because this is the thing that's so seductive about some of the, kind of, I call it self-help-light – it's not really light, it's like most of the self-help world, most of the pop-psychology world. It feels empowering initially. It's like calling your preferences a boundary. I should do a podcast about boundaries. I think it's on my list for soon.

But it's the same thing. It seems empowering at the beginning. It feels empowering because you're like, I have identified the problem. I'm not the problem; it's you. You're toxic. But it's not empowering because you're putting yourself totally at that person's mercy and you're telling yourself you can't control your own experience.

You're telling yourself that someone else is being whoever they are, just saying and doing whatever they do, like literally just them making sounds with their mouth and putting their body in different positions on this planet is lethal and dangerous to you. And remember what I said about lizard brain earlier; that lizard brain only notices things if things are life and death and then it fixates on them.

So if you call someone toxic, you're telling your lizard brain it's a life or death threat. And then of course, your brain becomes obsessed with it and fixates on that person. And the fixation causes a lot of rumination and negative thoughts and those produce anxiety, fear, or dread. So guess who's really toxic. That's right; it's you.

Your brain, your thoughts, you are the one who is toxic to yourself. You are the one who is creating drama. No one else creates drama for you. No one else is toxic. And, by the way, that is also true of places and environments. Chernobyl is toxic. Your office is not toxic unless you work at Chernobyl.

If you have a work environment where you're stressed out and overwhelmed and you feel disrespected and you think you are emotionally

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abused, that means you have a work environment where you are not managing your mind.

There are some very rare circumstances where what is going on in your office is a true boundary violation, but most of the time, you aren't managing your mind about other people being less than the ideal perfect people you'd prefer. Okay, and now some of you are really bristling as you listen to this and you're yelling at me in your head about emotional abuse and gas-lighting and victim blaming and other keywords from Psychology Today and Bustle Magazine. Bustle Magazine kills me, you guys.

Here's the thing; who would you want to believe that someone else can gas-light you or emotionally abuse you or trick you? Why would you want to believe that somebody else can control your brain more than you can? I think that it intuitively makes sense to us because when we're not managing our mind, we're like, yeah, well someone else must be controlling it because I sure as shit don't have control over what's going on up there, right. Like, I can't manage this thing at all. Someone else must be doing it.

But it's just because you're not making the effort to do it yourself. When you take emotional responsibility for yourself and your thoughts, you don't have to fear any kind of workplace drama or toxic boss or friend or great aunt or anyone else because you know that you're in charge of how you think and feel, no matter what.

It's so interesting because even just the phrases, causes drama or toxic person, are going to stress you out. When you think, she causes drama, you feel the negative emotions you associate because of drama. That person could be sleeping at the time causing no drama whatsoever. But if you think that thought, you'll have the feeling. And the same is true for toxic. When you think, my workplace is toxic, you feel poisoned and victimized and sick.

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But your workplace just exists. It isn't toxic. It's your thought that it is toxic that causes so much suffering. I had a client a couple of years ago who had been told by a very well-meaning and ineffectual therapist that her workplace was toxic. And I think that the therapist meant this to be empowering for her.

Your workplace is terrible, you are not the problem. I understand, especially for women, we're so used to blaming ourselves in a not helpful way – blame is different than taking responsibility – so we're used to blaming ourselves thinking we're not good enough, there's something wrong with us. And so it feels empowering to be like, oh, it's not me, it's these people. They're terrible.

We think those are the only two options, right, one of us has to be terrible. We have to be terrible or they have to be terrible. So sometimes, I think this client's therapist was trying to help her by being, like, there's nothing wrong with you; your workplace is toxic. You should get out. That was supposed to be empowering, but it wasn't empowering.

It did not motivate my client to quit and leave. It just made her constantly have the thought, this workplace is toxic, and then interpret everything she saw around her as evidence of its toxicity, and that made her miserable. And when you tell yourself this place or this person is toxic, not only do you kind of abdicate responsibility for your emotional life, but you also give up any chance you have at influencing the situation.

So if you just believed, well this is a workplace and people have expectations of me and things they want me to do and I have expectations of what I think is reasonable to do and we've just got to negotiate, that's a position of power. When you tell yourself this workplace is toxic, it's poisoning me, you just don't even try because you've made the workplace or the person or whatever into this monolithic evil that you can't do anything about except run away from.

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So it's very all or nothing, black and white thinking, both emotionally and in the way it shows up and the results in your life. So that's what happens when we call someone dramatic or toxic; it doesn't motivate any action unless it's to just completely cut them out if we can, but then if we can't, which is often, we don't have any recourse. We don't have anything we can do.

We just tell ourselves we've no power and we feel helpless and we don't take action. So I want you to pay attention this week and notice how often you are telling yourself that someone is dramatic or causes drama or someone or something is toxic or draining or has bad vibes. Like, notice how it feels to label it that way.

Other people exist. Your workplace exists. Your knitting club exists. You in-laws exist. But you get to choose what label to put on that jar. Like honestly, imagine them each in a jar and you get to decide which label to put on it. Do you want to label it toxic? Do you want to label it drama? How does that serve you?

If you want to create less emotional drama, stop telling yourself that other people cause drama. You're the only one causing your own drama. If you want to escape toxic relationships, just stop calling them toxic, because they aren't. They're just other people. It's your thoughts that are poisoning you. And ironically, much like the example with my client, if you stop labeling them toxic, you will actually feel more empowered.

So I worked with my client when she was trying to figure out how to leave and she had not been able to leave at all based on the thought that this was toxic. And then through her work with me and her own work and her own self-development, she was able to get to a place where she left. It didn't come from thinking it was toxic. It came from seeing her own agency.

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So this idea that if we help people label relationships as toxic, it will help people leave them, maybe that works for some people, but for the person I used to be and my clients, that just makes us feel helpless and trapped and it doesn't motivate action. That's what I teach. Positive action doesn't come from negative thoughts and negative emotion.

So even if you're in a relationship that you want to get out of in some way, labeling it toxic isn't actually helping you. It's just making you feel disempowered. If you take emotional responsibility for yourself, you'll see you have so much more power in the situation than you thought and that's when you would be able to leave it if you decide you wanted to do that after you've taken responsibility.

So, that's what I want you to pay attention to this week. And to help you stop creating so much toxic drama in your head, I have a surprise for you. That's what I was talking about at the beginning.

I've been thinking about – I want to come up with a way that you could keep some Unf*ck Your Brain courage in your pocket at all times, and then I realized, what's literally in your pocket is your phone. And I know a lot of you listen to the podcast on repeat, but you can't listen to it all the time, but you do glance at your phone 100 times a day.

And one of the things that I know from my work is that the more often you think a thought, the faster it becomes your default, or when you reprogram your brain's body image. Like I have my clients look at images of women their size or larger and it literally reprograms their brain's default.

So I wanted a way for you guys to be reminded, all throughout the day, oh right, I can manage my mind. So I had my amazing graphic designer, who I love, create three phone wallpaper backgrounds that are Unf*ck Your Brain themed. And these are totally free, so this is not a sales pitch, just for those

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of you who are about to turn off because you think I'm going to charge you for wallpaper. I'm not.

One of them includes a chicken. It's my favorite. That's the one I have on my phone. And then two of them are a little more subtle, for those of you who don't want a giant chicken on your phone. Anyway, if you want to download these, they're totally free.

Okay, that's it for this week. Have a wonderful drama free completely non-toxic week, chickens, and I will talk to you next week.

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