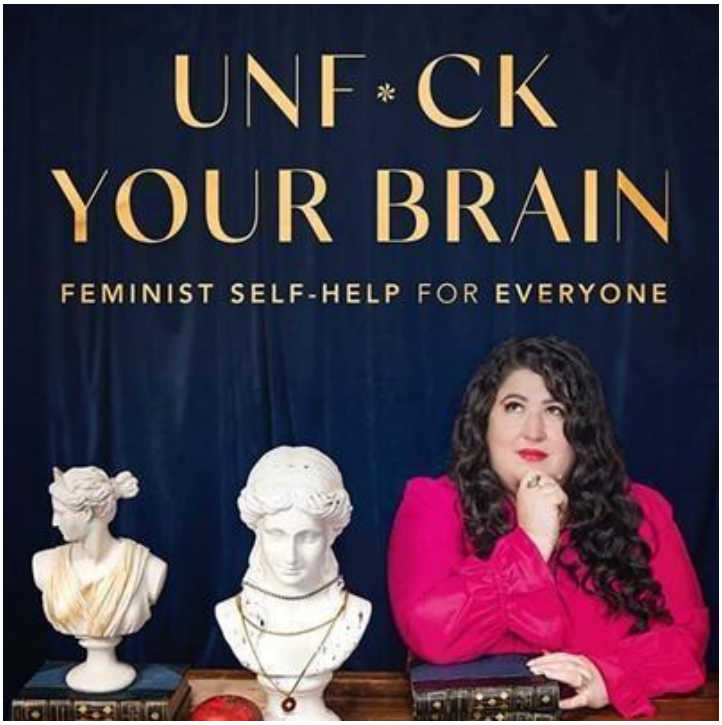
UFYB 44: Catastrophizing



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

UnF*ck Your Brain with 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 I am actually around some regular chickens this week, like actual chickens. My family has a place upstate and we have some chickens. So I have been thinking about you guys and all the chickens. And if you've never hung out with actual chickens, chickens do not have managed minds. Chickens get freaked out all the time.

Like, seemingly for no reason. I'm sure we've all heard the term "running around like a chicken with its head cut off," which is actually quite gruesome, but chickens kind of run around like that even with their heads on. And I think that much like real chickens, a lot of us run around clucking and squawking even when nothing's really happened yet, right?

So today I want to teach you about catastrophizing, which is basically mentally running around like a chicken with its head cut off. So catastrophizing is the habit of imagining all the possible future negative scenarios that could happen and emotionally reacting to your brain as if they're real.

So let's say you get an email from your boss and immediately you start worrying that she hates you and you're going to get fired and end up living in a van. There's someone you've been dating calls you and doesn't leave a message and you immediately panic, assuming that they're calling to break up with you and now you're going to die alone. I'm sure this sounds familiar to some of you.

When you do this, you are catastrophizing. You are predicting a worst-case outcome, a catastrophe when nothing has actually happened yet. And the

problem is that your brain doesn't know that nothing has happened. Your brain just knows what you tell it, and when you think about the catastrophe happening, your brain thinks it's actually happening. So it releases cortisol and adrenaline, the stress hormones, and then your body feels like it's actually happening to you.

I think spinning out from any innocent event to the worst possible outcome can arise from different sources. Some of us come from families where we were taught to think this way, there's a Jewish prayer at Passover that's like - my family is Jewish obviously, in every generation they have tried to kill us. Like, some of us are raised with a story, some of us had professional training like lawyers where we were literally taught that it was our job to imagine all the possible negative outcomes of anything and that if we messed up doing that, it was malpractice.

But I think that a lot of humans, even if you don't have the family background with a professional training are predisposed to this because our brains evolved to find this helpful. So remember, your brain evolved to keep you alive so you can pass down your genes. That's it. The primitive part of your brain, it's the part I usually call your lizard brain, we can also call it your chicken brain, doesn't care if you're happy or fulfilled or sleep well at night. It just wants you to stay alive.

And you can imagine that when humans were in literal physical danger much of the time, people who played it super, super safe survived. If you didn't leave the cave, you didn't discover anything new, you maybe didn't have much fun, but you also didn't die. That's all that your lizard brain cares about.

So it's probably that evolution selected for this trait. People who were terrified of all the things that could go wrong and just stayed in the cave probably died less frequently from like, freak accidents or being mauled by lions. So those of us who are descended from them, those of us who are

left have this propensity. We have systems that are really sensitive to perceived danger, and if we don't manage our minds, they will run away with us dozens of times a day.

So I'm not the first person to observe this, obviously, and the advice that you'll often hear about catastrophizing is to reassure yourself that the worst probably won't happen. I actually don't think that that is effective. I think it's just empty reassurance that doesn't quiet the part of your brain that is yelling, "Okay yeah, but what if it does," right?

So I don't recommend telling yourself, "Oh, it probably won't happen." If that worked, you wouldn't have to listen to this podcast. What I recommend is actually taking it all the way. Like, play it all the way out. Because what happens when you catastrophizing is that your brain doesn't actually take the scenario all the way. It just stops at the part that it thinks you'll find the scariest and yells about that.

So your brain might be screaming that you might get fired and then you assume that's a disaster and you start to freak out. But what happens if you actually get fired? Like, really break it down. What happens? Even if you get fired, even if you can't pay your mortgage, even if you lose your house, even if you get kicked out of your rental, is it true that you'd necessarily end up on the street? Is it possible you have friends or family with whom you could stay for a while? Would you probably manage to get another job?

I'm not saying that homelessness isn't a problem that people face that can be precipitated by a crisis, but most of us do have some options for support. And for many of us, the worst thing that happens if we get fired is we have to ask friends or family for help while we find another job. And that is not the most fun ever, but it's not dying on the street. It's not the end of the world.

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Not only that, but if you did get fired, if your thoughts are, "I'm going to die on the street," then that's what you'll make come true. Because it's going to produce a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness, then you're not going to take any action to help yourself and you're way more likely to end up with no options. Whereas if your thoughts are, "Okay, I need to ask for support and figure out my next move," that's what you'll do. Your thoughts will create your reality because they will motivate you to take or not take different actions depending on what you're thinking.

So technique number one is actually play it all the way out. If your partner dumps you, then what? Get concrete. Don't just accept your brain's story that it's clearly a disaster and everyone dies. The second technique is to look at your past for evidence that you can survive. Most of us have been dumped or have been fired or gotten sick or totaled a car, everything we're worried about, and we've survived.

Might not be the most fun you've ever had, but you made it. So if your brain starts catastrophizing that you might get dumped at the altar, think back. You've been dumped before most likely, and you survived. So if it happens again, you will survive again.

The third tool is to ask yourself why you're so afraid of the possibility that your brain is catastrophizing about. Yes, for a small subset of us it's actually life or death, but for most of us, it isn't. Most of us are actually just scared of what we're going to think or feel. In other words, we are mostly scared we will be mean to ourselves. For a lot of us, I'll lose my job doesn't actually mean then I'll starve to death. What it really means is then I'll feel like a failure and be embarrassed to tell people. And we're afraid of feeling that shame.

So often we're catastrophizing out of fear that we might have a thought or a feeling that we don't want to have. But you get to decide what to think and feel. You can decide that even if you do get fired or you do get dumped,

you're never going to call yourself a failure, you're never going to tell yourself you don't deserve love. If you take responsibility for what you'll think and feel in the future no matter what happens, you have so much less to fear.

Whichever of these three techniques you choose, the key is not to just try to tell yourself, "Oh, that won't happen," because your brain knows that in some possible world theoretically it maybe could happen, and it's just going to keep fixating on that. But if you accept the idea that it might happen and play it all the way out, you will get a different result.

If you accept the idea that it happening is a disaster, then no matter how small the chance is, your brain will obsess over it. It's been trained by evolution and society to do that. So accept the premise that it might happen, but don't accept the premise that it's automatically a disaster. Accept that it might happen and then follow it all the way through mentally to see what you would actually need to do.

What actions would you need to take? What would you want to decide ahead of time you could think? That is going to free you from all of the anxiety and fear about the catastrophizing. And what you'll find ironically is that once you start doing this, your brain will calm down enough to actually believe the smaller step thoughts like, "Oh, it probably won't even happen." But you actually can't get there directly. You need to play out the scenario, you need to see that you have options even if the worst happens, and then your brain will calm down enough about the threat to see that it's actually pretty unlikely and not really worth worrying about.

Alright, my chickens with all your heads on, I'll talk to you next week.

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