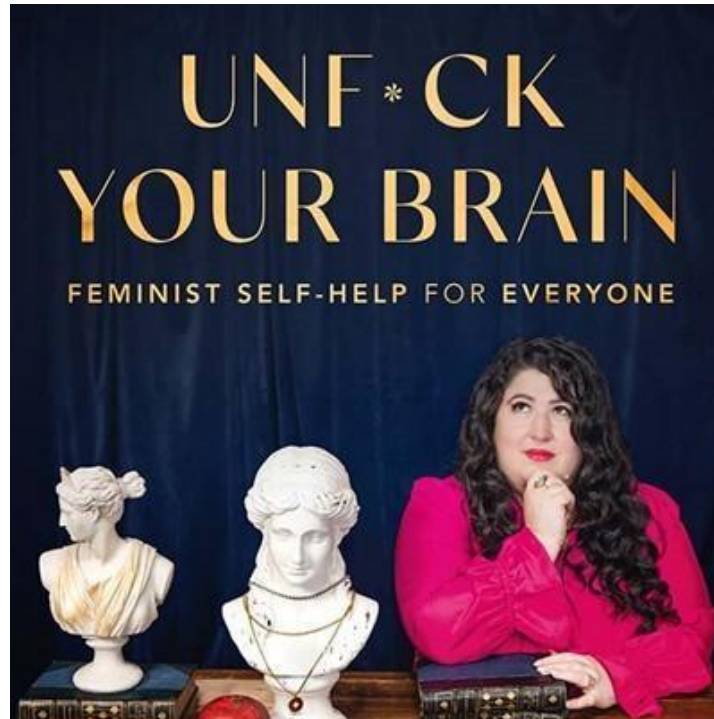


UFYB 49: Friendship



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. How are you guys? I am amazing. That's what I'm going with; I'm amazing. I have a lot of feelings about the fact that it's dark outside so early. I have thoughts, I have a lot of thoughts about it. September man, it's a lot, there's a lot going on.

Alright, so all that being said, I do not have a segue to today's topic. We're just going to keep going. But what I want to talk about today is actually something – let's put it this way; it's a little more heartwarming as we turn into fall and things start to get colder and it gets darker earlier. We just want to kind of create that warm and loving atmosphere for ourselves, so I want to talk about friendship today.

And I think friendship is a fascinating topic because, when you think about it, friends are kind of our first voluntary relationship. So we're born into our families and we don't have a lot of say over that, but as soon as we start encountering other little kids – I like that I said we don't have a lot of say over it. We have no say over it; at least in my world view.

I think in some people's world view, we choose our families. In my world view, we don't have any say over it. But as soon as we start encountering other little kids out in the world, we start developing friendships. We start creating voluntary connections with other people. And that means we also start experiencing all the positive emotions that come along with that connection.

And we start experiencing all the negative emotions and frustration and sadness that come along with other people not behaving the way we want

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or not wanting to be our friends, because that's what we all think. We think it takes two people to be friends.

We think that friendship is a voluntary mutual association which you each benefit from. And you have probably never thought about it this way explicitly, but you have a list of conditions for someone to be your friend. There's the basics that most of us share. You probably think you need to know each other. They have to be aware that you exist, and vice versa, and you have to actually have to interact with each other, either virtually or in person.

And then most of us also assume there has to be affection or positive feelings on both sides. And then there's a whole other unwritten manual you have about what people need to do to stay your friend; what it means to be a good friend. And, not surprisingly, it usually looks like exactly the way you prefer to express your affection or support for other people. That's what you want mirrored back to you exactly the way you think you'd do it.

So then you're a good friend to someone and they're supposed to be a good friend back to you. The truth is, we use our friendships just like other relationships in our lives, to provide emotional validation and as a measure of whether we're popular enough or good enough or loved enough. I see this in my clients all the time.

They're upset with their friends for not doing X, Y, Z because my clients are thinking that means their friends didn't care about them and they're not good enough, or they're upset that they don't have enough friends because they're making that mean something about them. So, when they interact with people, they're not actually curious and interested in the other people, they're just focused on themselves and whether the person likes them and if then they can feel okay about themselves.

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It's really fascinating, the same kind of use of the other person for emotional validation and more interest in whether the other person likes you, I see it in dating and in friendship. And it's usually that people have one problem. So often, they have a romantic partner and that relationship is fine, but they're like this about friendship. Or they have really good friends, but then they're like this about romantic relationships.

So it's super interesting. It's usually one area is like okay and working, and then the other area is a mess and they're using this other area as validation for whether they're a good enough person or not and whether they're acceptable and whether they're smart or nice or interesting or attractive, whatever it is. So it's just super interesting to see how we have the same thought patterns in different areas of our lives.

So, in any case, most of us think that friendship means you know each other, you like each other, and you are nice to each other, right? You spend time together, you do things together, you have fun. That's pretty much what we think, and that other people need to be a good friend to you so that you can feel loved and supported and valued.

And usually, that looks like being a good friend the way you naturally want to. So if you're someone who cares a lot about being on time and making plans then you think being a good friend means being on time and making plans. It's a mirror of the way you already naturally communicate with other people.

So, I think all of that is wrong. Big surprise – it would be hilarious if this podcast was just like – like, what if one day I did a podcast where I just described how you think about things and then I was like, “Yep, 100% right, carry on. This podcast is over six minutes in.”

This happens a lot actually; people want coaching and then they're mad that I don't agree with their thoughts, which is so interesting because then

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what would be the point of coaching? Wouldn't it be useless if I just agreed with you that all your thoughts were true? What if you told me a problem and I was like, "Yep, nothing you can do to change that. Your life is ruined." That would not be very helpful.

Okay, so for real, I think our default assumptions about friendship are totally wrong and I think they cause a lot of suffering for us. We want to experience friendship because we want to experience connection. We just want to feel love. But we actually block ourselves from those positive feelings with our thoughts.

So let's kind of break it down element by element because I think it's super interesting to question even these assumptions. So, the first one was that you would need to know someone to be friends with them. I don't think that's true. I think you can just decide you're friends with someone even if they don't know you're friends; even if they don't know you exist.

Like, think about this podcast. You probably listen to my voice a lot, and some of you probably hear me in your brain, even when you're not listening to the podcast. I know that's true because I get messages from you saying that.

You feel a connection to me. You think about me. You spend time with me via the podcast and my teachings. You know stuff about my life and, in your brain, you probably talk to me about your life and you probably kind of feel like we're friends, right? And I don't think that's weird or delusional. I think that's true for you.

We are friends for you, if you feel this way, because you experience the positive feelings of friendship and love and regard when you think about me. You feel connected to me. You care about what's going on in my life. You feel supported and helped by me. You think it would be fun to hang out

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with me; some of you. Some of you are like, “Dear god, never...” but some of you think it would be fun.

And I feel that way generally about you. I experience the positive emotions of connection and friendship with all of you as a general group, even though I don't know that most of you individually exist. So how is that possible? It's because our thoughts are what cause these positive emotions that we associate with friendship.

Our thoughts cause connection, they cause caring, they cause feeling supported, they cause feeling love, and they cause feeling loved. So you can be friends with me without me even knowing, which I think is super fun. It means you can have so many friends if you want to and you can feel the benefits of that friendship when you think about them.

You don't need permission to love me as a friend and I don't need permission to love you as a friend. If you hate listening to this podcast for some reason, I still feel warm when I think about you because I don't know that. We're friends in my brain and there's nothing you can do about that.

This is why I think it's so telling when people are kind of fixated on not having enough friends; it's so clear that it's about validation for them. Because if you just wanted to feel the positive feelings of connection and love that you associate with friendship, you could just decide you were friends with people or think about the couple of friends you have.

You can't really think about that many people at one time. If you really just want to bring up the feeling of love and connection, you really only need one person in your life that you can think about. So when people are kind of obsessed with or have a story about not being able to make enough friends and not being good at friendship, it's always just a self-referential story about how there's something wrong with them and they just want the friends to validate, so they can feel better about themselves.

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Which, of course, it's very difficult to make friends that way because you're just using other people for emotional validation. So I don't think that you need to know someone in order to be friends with them. And here is something even crazier; you can be friends with someone who knows you exist but doesn't even like you.

It's totally true, whether you know they don't like you or not. If you want to feel connected to them, you can. If you think about the things you like about them, you will feel affection or love for them. You are enjoying their existence and the friendship in your own mind, they don't have to participate at all. They don't even have to agree that you're friends, which is so crazy when you think about it.

If you think about how funny and interesting and smart they are, you will feel friendly, you will feel connected and affectionate towards them regardless of what they feel about you. So this sounds crazy to us and here's why; because most of us think of friendships as inherently transactional.

Now, we don't think that we think that. In fact, we think we think the opposite. We think that we think friendship is about loving and giving support and being there for the other person. But we only want to do that if we're getting a direct return on investment. We only want to love and give support and be there for the other person if we believe that they're doing the same thing in equal measure for us.

We want them to deliver emotional support and validation and amusement and presents and maybe invitations to their summerhouse; whatever our particular brand of expectations are. We have different ones. A lot of us really want our friends to validate us, right? We track who gets invited places more and who texts or calls more first and who asks what kind of questions and who initiates the plans.

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We keep this running tally constantly to analyze whether or not someone is performing to match our unwritten job description for the role of friend. And meanwhile, all this measuring and analyzing is actually blocking us from feeling connected, which is the whole point of friendship. And that connection, it comes from our thoughts.

So for instance, I pretty frequently get questions from people who want to know when they should stop putting so much into friendships where, for instance, they're the person who always initiates plans. I answered a question like this in the last listener Q&A you might have heard.

And it reminds me of the idea that I have to work on with my dating clients a lot, that you shouldn't have sex with people who haven't earned it by following your manual about how they should behave. That's a think your friends will say to you, like, "You can't reward that behavior by having sex with them."

This is so backwards to me. Sex is fun. Hanging out with your friends feels good. Why would you deny yourself that pleasure in either scenario based on your opinion about someone else's behavior? Friendship, affection, or sex for that matter, are not rewards that you dole out for other people acting the way you want them to.

If you enjoy spending time with your friends, you can either keep spending time with them, or stop spending time with them because they aren't cooperating with giving you the validation that you want them to provide in the way you want them to provide it. Now, you get to choose between those two alternatives, but it's just good to know why you're making the choice you make.

Your friends aren't there to create your feelings, solve your problems, do the heavy lifting for your self-esteem, or otherwise take responsibility for your unmanaged mind and emotions. Your friends are there for you to love

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them. This is true of your romantic partner too, but that's a whole other episode.

Really, that's it. Your friends exist for you to love them, because when you love them, you get to feel the love, and that feels amazing. And when you choose not to love them, when you choose to withhold or trade your love based on whether they are following your manual for how you want them to pretend that they cause your feelings, because they don't, you're the only one who's hurt.

You're the only one who feels the opposite of love, whether that's anger or hurt or resentment or shame. So the next time you're thinking about a friend, I want you to try remembering that. Their only job is to be there for you to love them. It's not to validate your choices. It's not to make you feel popular or special. It's not to invite you to their birthday party. It's not to initiate plans the precise amount that will solve your feeling of insecurity and your story about not being good enough to have friends once and for all, because guess what – there's no right amount.

It's just to be there being who they are, and you get to decide whether to love them or not. But the more you allow yourself to simply enjoy someone else's presence by focusing on what you like about them, the more you will feel the whole thing you want to feel in friendship anyway, which is connection, affection, enjoyment, love.

And the more that you have a manual for how your friends have to act in order for you to give them your love and affection, the worse you're going to feel. The more you work on loving them, the easier you'll find it to love yourself. And then, eventually, you'll be your own best friend, which is an incredible place to be and allows you to just truly enjoy other people for who they are.

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So, think of a friend that you love. Think about how much you love them. Feel that love and then maybe share the podcast with them. Share the podcast love too. Alright, my friends, as my teacher would say...

You are all my friends, even if you don't want to be, because I just get to decide that and it feels amazing to love you all. I will talk to you next week.

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