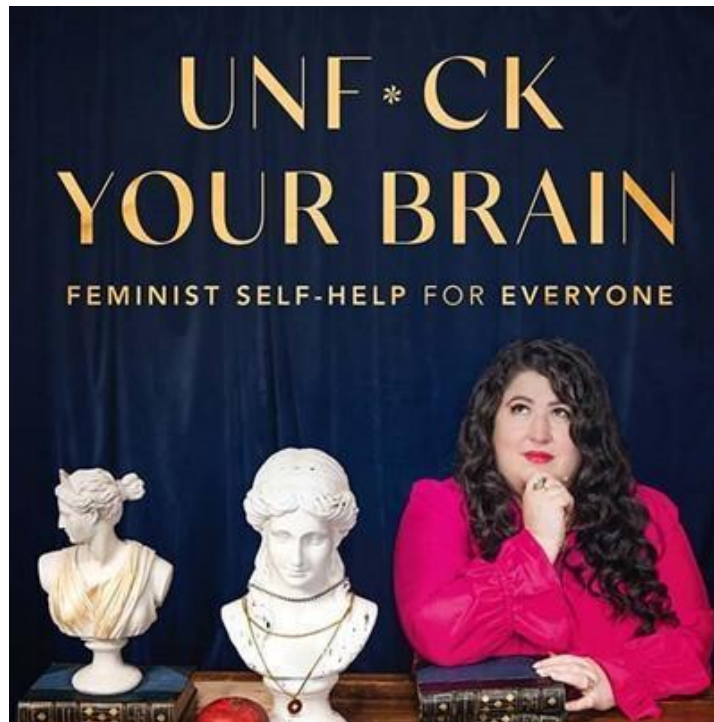


UFYB 104: Performance Anxiety



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 my fine feathered friends? I don't know where that comes from. Is that from like a children's TV show that I've forgotten? I have no idea. I have to say, when I started calling you all chickens and then created the name The Clutch, I did not really think about how I was inviting a lifetime of chicken gifts.

But I love most of them. No live chickens though please. Darwin does not enjoy them and I don't have a chicken coop. So let me first just say before we dive in today, if you're just catching up on the podcast, Clutch College is sold out. I talked about it when I recorded the last podcast, but I record these a few days before I release them, so I know a bunch of you went to the Clutch College info page as soon as you heard the podcast and then it was already sold out.

So if that was you, do not freak out. I will be doing another one of these next year and I'm going to give everyone plenty of notice next time. I didn't expect it to sell out as quickly as it did. It was the first time that I'd done it. So I'm going to make sure next time everyone has a chance to hear the announcements about it and everybody will know when we're about to open registration so you don't miss anything.

It's such a - what's the right word? It's kind of a trip. It's kind of a mindfuck. I remember when I first started my coaching business, I tried to do a body image retreat with a coach friend of mine. It was literally the first summer I had started coaching. We did all this work on it, it was going to be amazing, and we sold it all summer, and I think we sold - we were trying to get 10 people and I think we got maybe two.

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And then both of those people had to cancel. I think there were two and one got sick and one got a new job or something, but they both had to cancel. It's possible it was just one person. Anyway, we each lost a few thousand dollars on it and that was significant at the time.

And I just remember watching other people sell out retreats in a week or a few days and thinking about just how far away that seemed when I was trying to sell this retreat for three months and we got one person between the two of us or two people.

But this week, I'm heading to Nashville to host a confidence retreat that sold out in 24 hours from just a Facebook post. No website, I didn't even send an email. And then Clutch College sold out so fast too, so it's just amazing to think that first retreat attempt was only three years ago.

Seriously y'all, that was summer 2016 and it's now October 2019. I feel like often, I look around my life and I'm like, what the fuck is happening? But I know I created it by slogging through all the discomfort and the negative emotions and the self-doubt.

I was at my mastermind meeting this weekend and we were talking about how the first part of your business, but really this applies to anything. You don't need a business, like the first part of creating a new habit or the first part of a creative project or the first part of parenting or whatever, I think anywhere - we were talking about business.

We were talking about anywhere from that kind of first 100K to 200K, depending on who you are and your niche, it's like trying to push a train uphill from behind it. It's so much effort. There's all the action you have to take to get momentum and you're sort of fighting yourself the whole way because your thoughts are still a mess.

So you're constantly trying to manage your mind and also take action, and then freak out, and manage your mind and take action. And you have to

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deal with so much discomfort and fear and doubt that will ever come together and happen. But you have to keep pushing up the hill. You can't just wait until you feel strong enough to push it up the hill.

That will never happen. You have to be pushing that whole way. And then eventually you get to the top of the hill and all of a sudden the train starts to go downhill and so suddenly, it's like gathering steam and going faster and faster and you kind of have to run for your life to hop on the train before it gets away from you. That's how fast it's going.

So then you're on the train and you're speeding downhill and it's all just happening - it feels like you're not even doing anything, like it's just taking off without you. And that is really what it's like to build a business in my experience. And so many people quit because pushing the train up the hill is so hard.

Or they quit trying to have a consistent workout routine, or they quit trying to get enough sleep at night, or they quit trying to write their novel, or they quit trying to break into a new career. Whatever it is, they quit because it's so hard in the beginning.

And I think that's what it's like to do thought work itself. It's this uphill grind a lot of the time at the beginning, but eventually you hit a certain point and your brain starts coaching itself, and you're like, oh my god, look at it go. It's so fun to watch when that happens.

Some of my favorite Clutch posts is when people post like, the first six weeks, the first three months, whatever it is, it was so hard. Somebody just posted recently about coaching herself nonstop for four months about a difficult relationship in her life, and then finally it clicked for her and she felt free.

She's such an example of what's possible because she was willing to keep doing that work. You have to be willing to experience the discomfort and the

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doubt about the process and the time period where it feels like it's so hard and nothing in changing in order to enjoy the freedom of speeding along with the wind in your hair.

You're not entitled to that downhill ride. Whether you want to change your body image or be a better parent or find the love of your life or make a million dollars, just get really good at thought work, whatever you want to do, you're not entitled to that transformation. And you're certainly not entitled to it being easy to achieve. You have to earn it. You have to be willing to go through that discomfort and stick with it.

So today I want to talk about one of the biggest areas of doubts and discomforts that I personally had to go through in order to create my own transformation, especially in my business, and that is performance anxiety. And I know a lot of you struggle with this, so I think this episode is going to speak to so many of you on this topic, whatever your work is.

And I'm going to talk about this a little bit differently because I think that we think of performance anxiety as being about appearing on stage. It's like live speaking or a sporting event, or being on stage in the theatre, but I think it's actually broader than that. I think you can have performance anxiety any time you're doing something to perform or produce or an event, or produce an experience, or even just to product content for other people to consume or experience or enjoy or learn from.

So I would include things like teaching a class or giving a presentation at a meeting. Those are maybe a little more obvious, but I'd also include things like doing a podcast. You can have performance anxiety about recording a podcast, even though you're not performing it live, but you still can have performance anxiety about it.

Or writing a blog, or even writing a legal brief or something. So they're all the same thought pattern. They're all places where you're performing some

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kind of skill or talent or ability or expertise or knowledge for some kind of audience. And where you are afraid of what will happen when you do.

So let's break down what performance anxiety really is. Why do we get anxious about our performance? We think that we are worried about what the people watching it or reading it will think. We are worried we'll sound dumb or we'll be sweaty or we'll forget what we're going to say, that we won't explain things well or we'll miss an obvious point or we'll seem unprofessional. The list goes on and on.

We imagine all the negative thoughts that someone might have about our performance. But as with any anxiety about how we are perceived, we're not truly worried about other people's thoughts. We're worried about our own thoughts.

All the thoughts that you project other people may believe about your performance are thoughts that you already believe about yourself and your own performance. And what I see with performance anxiety in particular when it's about a live performance, like presenting a meeting or giving a talk to an audience is that we get preemptive anxiety about having performance anxiety.

So we anticipate that when we perform, we will feel performance anxiety, and so we get anxious about that ahead of time. It's like how we can create panic attacks by getting anxious about how we're feeling anxiety and wanting the underlying anxiety to go away.

We exacerbate performance anxiety by dreading it, by thinking about how we will have performance anxiety in the future and thinking about how the performance anxiety itself is going to screw up our performance. So it's like this vicious cycle happening on multiple levels.

So the first thing we have to do as always is allow the anxiety. You cannot desperately try to coach yourself out of anxiety by giving your brain and

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body a deadline, for a time by which anxiety must be gone. Like, we have to get rid of it before the event. That's just going to create more anxiety about it.

Here's what I want you to know. It's possible to feel sensations of anxiety in your body and still give an amazing talk, or still do an amazing podcast, or still write an amazing brief. It's really true. It's not anxiety or any other emotion that causes the problems we have. It's how we act on those feelings and our resistance to them.

And our acting out, especially to get away from them, or our hyper focus on them and our hyper focus on resolving them. Those are all the ways that we create these problems for ourselves. It's not having the feeling. It's our reaction to it.

I mean, my experience with thought work personally has been that it has resolved pretty much all of my chronic anxiety. But I also know amazing coaches and businesswomen and just all-round fantastic people who have done a lot of coaching with coaches and themselves, and they still feel a lot of anxiety.

And who knows why it's different for them and me. Maybe they were born predisposed to it, maybe they had childhood trauma that they're still working through. Whatever it is. But they're able to create an amazing life, just like I'm able to because of how they relate to their anxiety. They just have decided it's not a big deal.

It doesn't mean something has gone wrong, it's fine to feel it, it's just background noise that is allowed to be there and doesn't have to impact their lives. So I teach in my experience that thought work can help you relieve and resolve a lot of your anxiety, but human life is 50/50. We're always going to have negative emotion.

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And some of us may have more anxiety than others or more sadness than others, or more happiness than others in the sense of being predisposed in that way, just like some of us may have better natural singing voices than others. But just like a singing voice, so much has to do with how you train it, and singing teachers will tell you anyone can learn to sing and having a natural singing voice actually doesn't get you to a really high level unless you train it.

So even if there's some variation in the experience that we're having between us, it's how we think about and react to it, how we cultivate our gifts or abilities, how we work on our relationships to our emotions that matter most.

I'm going into this because I think that sometimes what happens is you hear me talk about thought work and resolving anxiety, and of course you're so desperate to resolve your anxiety that that's what you focus on. But you miss that the first step is always to accept the anxiety and change your relationship to it first. And then you see if you can change it or if you even need to.

So what if that were true about performance anxiety too? What if it was fine to feel anxious about performing? I used to feel anxious for days before performing. For me that means giving a talk or leading a group or whatever. And now it's like, I don't feel anxious before performing most of the time and maybe I'll get the butterflies for three minutes before a particularly big event.

But the way I got there was by not making that anxiety mean anything. I worked on my thoughts about dreading the performance anxiety first. I just embraced that I was going to feel anxious before I gave a talk, and that is fine. It didn't mean I wasn't prepared or anything had gone wrong. It was just part of the experience of giving a talk.

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The first step is always allowance and acceptance. Just letting go of resisting the idea that you might feel anxious when you perform will make the whole thing feel so much lighter for you.

I teach a tool called of course they did that has to do with other people's behavior and not being surprised when other people act the way they always act. So of course they did. We just prepare for that.

But that applies to your own brain too. Of course you're going to feel anxious about performing if you have been for so long. Just accept and expect that rather than spending a lot of energy worrying about whether it will happen. Let's just decide it will happen and how we're going to handle it.

And the paradox is when you accept it, it will actually release quite a bit and it won't seem like such a big deal. And that is when you can then start to dig into the thoughts that create the initial anxiety. The anxiety you're fearing you'll feel, what thoughts are you predicting will create that.

There's the anxiety about feeling anxiety in the future and that we release just by accepting we might feel it, and then there are the thoughts that you anticipate thinking during or after a performance, which you're already thinking now, that you imagine would cause that performance anxiety in the first place.

That you're not smart enough, you don't look good from that angle, your voice is off, you won't be able to answer the questions you get asked, you forgot something important, your idea isn't good, the people won't like what you teach or how you perform. All those kinds of self-critical thoughts.

Once you're willing to feel the anxiety those thoughts create and to just expect it's going to happen, that's when you can start working on the actual thoughts causing the anxiety more directly. And here's where the first part

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of the podcast comes back because of course, all those thoughts are just your thoughts about yourself.

We don't have to take a poll of the audience to find out what they really thought. It's all your thoughts. That's why even if you get compliments about a performance, you don't really believe them because it was never about other people's thoughts. It's always about your thoughts.

And trying to convince yourself everyone will love it and will think you're amazing does not work because it's obviously not true. I see this a lot in the coaching and it's something that I cracked all the time in *The Clutch*, which is that we try to coach ourselves out of fearing other people's judgments by just trying to convince ourselves that no one's judging us.

But what we're taking for granted there is that the judgment is a problem, that if they were judging us, then we'd have to feel bad. So we try to convince ourselves they're not judging us. That never works because you know on some level that's not true.

Other people for sure are judging you, just like you judge other people. It's all just thoughts. Other people have thoughts about you when they interact with you sometimes. So trying to convince yourself everyone will love what you do and think it's amazing won't work. It's obviously not true.

Some people might be bored or disinterested or disagree with you or not like your hair or think you remind them of their third-grade teacher or whatever. Everyone who is receiving your work or is in the meeting or whatever it is is a human with a human brain who is perceiving you through the filter of their own thoughts. They aren't objective.

But so what? That's fine. If I give a talk about thought work and some people think thought work is dumb, I don't believe that's because I didn't do a good job explaining thought work because I believe that I'm a good teacher and a good speaker, and I believe that it's just their thoughts.

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Now, that doesn't mean that if somebody comes up afterwards and says well, I didn't really understand this part, can you clarify? And I listen to them and I think - and I might see, oh yeah, I could have been a little clearer about that a little bit. But I don't make it a failure on my part and I don't assume that if I had just done it better, everyone would agree and love it.

But when I used to get very anxious about giving talks, especially when I was an academic, I would present papers, or arguing in court or negotiating with opposing counsel or whatever else, it was always because of what I was thinking about myself and my performance and projecting onto other people.

That's why you have to clean up your own thoughts about your performance. So one way to that is to change your thoughts about yourself and work on believing more positive things about your own abilities. And I think it's the perfect exercise for perfectionism because you can't make a blog or a podcast or a memo or a dance performance or a speech or anything else that is perfect.

Because perfection is a thought. It's just a sentence in people's minds and they don't all have it at the same time about the same thing. And you can't control other people's brains and what they choose to think is perfect.

You can give a talk to 20 people and five will say it was perfect, and five will think it was fine, and five weren't listening at all, they were on their phones, and five hated it. It has nothing to do with your talk. It's all their individual and different thoughts.

So one way to resolve performance anxiety is to stop focusing on what other people think and focus on what you think about your own abilities and yourself. And then paradoxically, the other solution is to focus on other people but in a different way.

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So when I give a talk, I am not thinking everyone here needs to think I'm amazing so I can feel okay about myself. What I'm actually thinking is if one person in this audience is helped by this talk, then I did my job. If one person in this class learns something, that's all I want from this.

I take the focus off my one ego and onto the people that I'm trying to show up and serve, but not their thoughts that are really just about me. In the first instance, the first solution, resolving your thoughts about yourself, you're not really caring about other people's thoughts. You're only caring about other people's thoughts as they relate to you and whether you did a good job and what they think about you.

It's still all about you. Turning the focus to other people in terms of turning the focus to who you're there to serve is the opposite because it's egoless. It's just how can I show up and teach in such a way that whoever's ready to hear learns something. How can I show up and serve?

You're actually trying to serve them rather than wanting them to serve your ego. So you may want to use either or both techniques. They both work. I've used them both. But the process always has to be to accept and allow that performance anxiety might happen in the moment.

You might freeze up, you might forget a line, you might do whatever, and work on believing you can be kind to yourself even if it does. Okay that the anxiety might happen. Let's just assume it will and decide what to think about it on purpose. And then you can work on the underlying thoughts that might be causing that performance anxiety in the first place.

Because if you are focusing on what's wrong with what you have to offer, you're denying the rest of us a chance to experience everything that is amazing about what you have to share.

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I cannot wait to teach you all this simple system. It's going to change your life for good. It's truly astounding how much more you get done when you know how to use it. Alright, I'll talk to you guys next week. Bye.

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