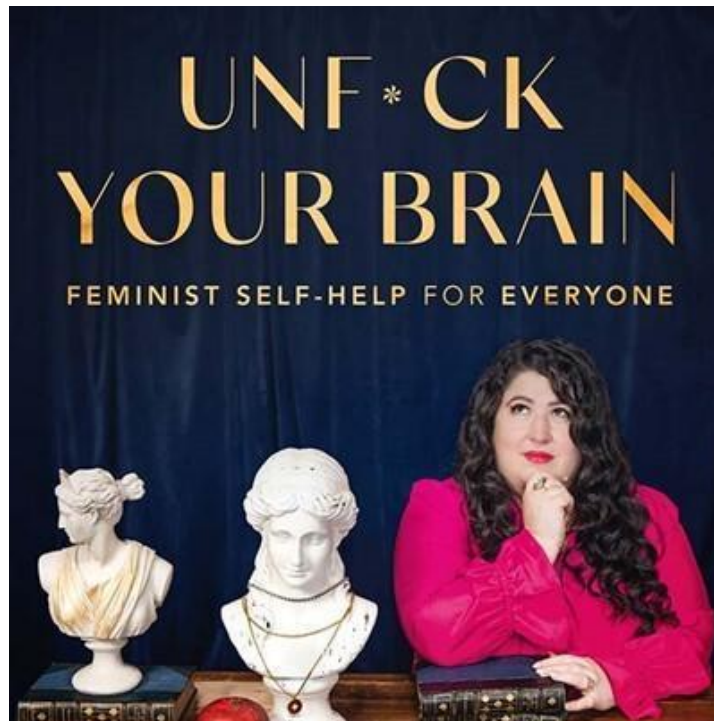


UFYB 161: Anticipatory Stress (Insomnia, Public Speaking, etc.)



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 we all doing? I am recording this from inside a closet. My podcast producer's dreams have finally come true. I have moved into an apartment that has a closet that's big enough for me to sit in it and record my podcast.

I was constantly telling him that that couldn't be done in my old apartment, which it couldn't because there was no closet that a person could possibly fit into. Alright, how are we all doing? I'm actually recording this while the election results are still being tallied, and we're all getting an education on living with uncertainty right now.

This has been kind of a fascinating cycle for me because this time four years ago, I was in so much pain over the election results. And this year felt really different. And not because I don't care or didn't care about what happened. I voted obviously, I donated money, I used my platform to encourage voting and participating, I spent so much time coaching and teaching and providing free resources to empower my students and my listeners to participate in their local efforts and in the national efforts.

I obviously have a preference about who wins or who won. My politics are not a secret. But my emotions are not tied up in it the same way. And I think the easy answer or what we think is the easy answer is always to say that if somebody isn't emotionally invested or emotionally debilitated by the news or something, current events in the world, it's because they're privileged. It means their privilege is showing.

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And I'm not saying that it's never the case. Of course, your life circumstances impact the way that you think about the world, and sometimes you do need to hear other points of view or other ideas you haven't heard before, of course.

But part of the problem with that narrative is that it creates an ego-based investment in being outraged and terrified all the time to prove that we are good people who are aware of our own privilege. And that's fucking counterproductive because people who are outraged and terrified and horrified and exhausted and emotionally upset all the time as I talk about on this podcast all the time, this is the hill I will die on, are generally not able to contribute to the world in the same way.

Do not have the creativity to imagine new ideas, don't have the courage to stand out, don't have the optimism and resilience to believe in change. And I'm not saying never. For some people, anger and outrage and negative emotion may drive actions that they like. Those people don't come to life coaching.

If you are listening to this, you are more likely like me, where those emotions just burn energy and lead me to want to numb out and don't produce good change in the world. And so I think we have to be really careful that we don't kind of accept this subconscious premise that if we are not emotionally devastated about current events, we're not good people.

And you can see how arbitrary it is, right? Because it comes in waves, in let's say the United States political context. Meanwhile, there's people in other countries who don't have that thought at all, and meanwhile, there's lots of stuff happening all over the world that involves human suffering all the time.

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And that people aren't as up in arms about in one place or another. So it's all kind of an arbitrary lens and I think we have to be careful not to buy into the idea that if we are not emotionally devastated and broken and sharing that all the time, it's because we're privileged and we're not good people, and so it's more important to enact and demonstrate and create that suffering for ourselves to prove our virtue.

That's virtue signaling to me. That's not - it's understandable because humans don't want to be rejected, but it's not actually helping the world. It's actually very ego involved. So something for you guys to think about.

And I have my own experience that I talked about a few podcasts ago of in 2016, being basically the same life circumstances that I have now, I mean my business wasn't doing as well but I was still privileged in the same ways. And I was a complete and utter mental and emotional wreck.

I shared that story about the practical nervous breakdown I had around Trump's election the first time and my thoughts about it. So I know that it's not about - my emotional state right now is not about that privilege in either direction because I still had it in 2016 and I was a lunatic.

And because of all of that - that whole bonus teaching I just did about why participating in emotional outrage culture to prove to yourself that you're a good person who's aware of their privilege is actually counterproductive.

So anyway, the point is really that it's not the actual circumstance that causes our feeling. And one of the beautiful things about being a coach and having such a big diverse following is that I just get to see in real time how there's people of any identity group, of any political affiliation, of any background or experience who are all over the map about anything.

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The election, anything in current events, anything in the world. There's really not a consistent theme because people's thoughts are what determine their feelings. That's the point of this podcast.

So I do feel like I've now spent enough time teaching my brain that circumstances aren't what determine my emotional state, that I truly believe it and so it's become my unconscious default belief. And I know that whoever wins the election or by the time you're listening to this, whoever won the election, there will be work to do on my political goals and values, there will be positive and negative emotion in my life. Those two things are going to be the same.

And the other thing I find so fascinating is how many of my more liberal or progressive friends are suffering because of what they are making the closeness of the vote in some places mean about their fellow citizens, which I think is fascinating for a few reasons.

Because number one, I think coming up in the reproductive rights movement was just a real education in how people's values and thoughts may seem totally illogical to other people. Even before I got into coaching and learned about cognitive biases, my social justice education was in the reproductive rights movement, which is a world in which people will be out on the corner protesting at clinics that provide reproductive health services, including abortion, and then they'll come in to get their own abortion services.

So I just was aware so early on of that cognitive dissonance of the way people sort of reason from their own flawed premise and make exceptions for themselves or the people they care about, the way people aren't consistent in their thinking. And it was real exposure to the ways that sexism and racism infect our political structures and motivates so much.

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So when I found coaching, one of the first big things I had to grapple with was making emotional peace. Again, not the same as political peace. Emotional peace with the anti-abortion movement. So I've worked through this process before.

And so many of the people I've coached in the last few days, including other coaches, are in so much emotional pain because of their expectations of what would happen. And even coaches I've coached have had the belief that - their thought was basically I saw what happened the last four years and it made me think this, and so I think that anybody who saw it should have the same thoughts I do, and that people who supported one side or supported President Trump after seeing what I saw, their thoughts should now match mine.

But that's not how brains work. The circumstances of the last four years did not change anybody's minds because circumstances don't change thoughts. Some people's own thought process changed their minds in the last four years in either direction.

Some people saw what happened and decided I'm no longer supporting this candidate, and some people saw what happened and were like, well, I didn't support them last time but now I'm in. But that was their own thought process. It wasn't the circumstances.

We all went through the last four years with our own cognitive biases, right? If an administration is elected and you think they are terrible, then you're going to find evidence that they're terrible for the next four years. And if you think they're awesome, you're going to find evidence they're awesome.

So this idea that's sort of like, we're all observing this same objective - that our thoughts are just observations of the objective reality and that anyone else who saw that same objective reality should have our same thoughts,

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we're missing the point. Our thoughts aren't the objective reality. Our thoughts are our thoughts and other people's thoughts are their thoughts about the same neutral circumstance that we interpret one way and they interpret in another way.

I mean, I am much more surprised when someone's opinion changes on its own, if they don't know about thought work than when it doesn't. If you're not managing your mind, if you don't know about thought work, all that cognitive bias, it's operating on an unconscious level.

You're just going about your day; your brain is interpreting everything it sees to fit your existing beliefs without you even knowing. A lot of the suffering comes from not having reality meet our positive expectations. Actually, that's where all of our suffering comes from. Reality not meeting our expectations.

And in my election anxiety podcast, I talked a lot about how so much of our suffering comes from our negative expectations about the future and what will happen. And I was teaching about this at a pretty big scale. We worry about illness or death or poverty or big picture challenges in our lives.

But the same concept actually holds true for the small-scale challenges in our lives. And those are actually often what we spend more time dealing with over the course of our lives. So I want to talk today about anticipatory stress in your daily life.

And I'm going to use the example of insomnia to teach that. Because this is something I end up coaching about a lot. Some people, it's not being able to fall asleep, some people it's waking up and then being up for a while in the middle of the night, lots of different kinds of struggles with sleep.

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And some of us don't, of course. I'm the opposite. I'm a stress sleeper. Before I knew how to manage my mind, I took so many naps because that was just the only way I knew to give myself a break from my own brain and consciousness.

It's like some people use drugs or drinking, I used napping. But now I've done this work with so many clients on insomnia and trouble sleeping and I've used the same technique on other areas, so I think this will be really useful for a lot of you.

Whether you struggle with sleeping or not, I'm going to use some other examples. Public speaking, fear of public speaking, fear of a difficult conversation, actually all the same, but I'm going to talk about it through insomnia. So just substitute in the times that I'm not giving another example, you just substitute in your own.

So the first thing we have to do when I'm coaching someone around insomnia and trouble sleeping, and of course, I always say you should get checked out by a doctor, make sure that there's not anything biochemical going on. Sometimes people who have uneven blood sugar wake up in the middle of the nights, there's things you can check like that.

But assuming that it's not that, and even if it is because it takes some time to resolve it, you still can go through these steps. So the first thing is we just have to accept that we're going to have trouble sleeping and stop fighting that.

Is this sounding familiar? We just have to accept reality as what it is before we can ever hope to change it. One of the biggest mistakes when we're dealing with something like insomnia or any situation where we anticipate we'll be upset or stressed out is we start resisting it.

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We want to make it go away or avoid it. So if you struggle with sleep, you'll find you're thinking that you just want to be able to sleep for the night, you don't want to wake up. If you struggle with public speaking, you'll find you're thinking you don't want to be nervous, you want to be calm.

And if I ask you what you want or how you want to feel, you'll say I just want to sleep through the night, I just want to feel totally calm. But right now when you're starting this process, that's obviously not an option. So stop pretending that it is. Stop wanting things to be the opposite of how they are.

It's like going to a restaurant that only serves Italian food and spending the whole time wishing they would make you Mongolian hotpot or something instead. It's not going to happen. It's not on the menu. It is a waste of energy to wish that it were.

So first, we just accept it. Right now, you are someone who wakes up in the middle of the night. Right now, you are someone who gets nervous before they give a speech, whatever it is. First up is always acceptance.

Then we look at what you're making that anticipation mean. Because the whole reason we're so upset that the thing is happening is the meaning that we make of it. And with insomnia, there's often a lot of mental drama about how the next day you're going to be so tired, you won't be able to function, you're going to be even more stressed out, you're going to feel terrible, et cetera, et cetera.

And what does that do? It makes you feel all those things right now. It makes you feel stressed out and terrible right now. With something like public speaking or a difficult conversation, it may be thoughts more like I'm going to feel nervous, I'm going to do a bad job, the audience is going to hate me, or my partner, or my boss that I'm talking to isn't going to like what I'm saying, I'm not going to be effective.

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You're not effective in preparing when you're thinking that way and that's what you're spending your time doing. So once we accept it is going to happen, we're not going to change it yet, we're just going to accept it's going to happen, then we can start to work on the story we're telling about what it means when it happens. Because remember that whatever we believe is true we will create.

If you tell yourself that when you feel physical symptoms of fatigue, those are stressful and awful and they make you bad at your job, what do you think will happen when you start to feel those sensations? Which again, we've accepted for now you're going to.

Your brain immediately implements the feel stressed and do worse at my job program. Your brain literally will create what you've told it will happen. Many of us have heard of the placebo effect. It's when someone gets a non-active medication, but they get better or receive relief anyway because they believed they were getting a medication and their body actually responded the way it would to the medication.

There's also something called a nocebo effect, which is that you can be given an active medication, but if you believe that you didn't get one, it won't work as well, or it won't work at all. So if you tell yourself that you'll be exhausted and stressed and unhappy, that's what you're going to be. It doesn't matter how much sleep you get.

So first you have to accept you're going to have the emotion or not get the sleep or whatever it is. And then you have to decide ahead of time what you're going to think when that happens. Decide ahead of time what story to tell yourself.

So when you wake up for instance, instead of launching into the litany of what a problem this is, you might practice something like, I'm awake right

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now and that's okay. Even if I don't fall back asleep, I will be fine. I have gotten by on this much sleep before, this is not a crisis, or whatever you want to practice.

I always tell people to think about what happens when you fall in love and you're up all night. When you first fall in love and you just stay up all night talking or having sex, whatever you're doing, you're not skulking around feeling sorry for yourself and exhausted the next day. You feel amazing and you can't wait to do it again.

You're like, sleep? No, I don't need sleep. I could do this all night. Because your thoughts are how amazing and fun and wonderful it is, and you may even feel those symptoms of fatigue. But they don't stress you out or bother you when you're in that stage because you think of them as being the markers of this amazing experience you're having.

Most of the time, the main issue is not the lack of sleep you're getting. We're talking about people with kind of a normal range. Obviously if you don't sleep for four days straight literally, you're going to have a medical problem.

But for most Americans who are dealing with difficulty sleeping caused by emotional stress or cycle dysregulation because of electronics, and then they check their phone in the middle of the night, makes it worse, all those kinds of things, it's not the lack of sleep that's really the issue. It's your thoughts.

And even if the lack of sleep is causing a physical issue, your thoughts are making it much worse. And that's the part we can control right away. So even if you are having such severe insomnia that you have medical effects, I guarantee that your thinking about it is exacerbating the condition and costing you even more sleep.

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One of the things with insomnia that happens is people wake up and then they start to have all this anxiety, and then they do something like check their phone to distract themselves. But of course, on a biological level, looking at blue light in the middle of the night is not going to make you go back to sleep. And then you're going to have a lot of thoughts about all the things you looked at.

So when you allow it and you accept it and you're willing to experience it, you also see a change in the behaviors that exacerbate it. Even if you can't believe you're totally fine, you can still work on believing it's not as dire or horrible as you've been making it.

Okay, so the steps so far are number one, accept it, it's going to happen, and not being in this uncertainty of what if it happens tonight, maybe it'll happen, maybe it won't, and stressing out about that. It's going to happen. We just assume it's going to happen.

And then number two, coming up with a thought to practice when it happens. Deciding on purpose what to make it mean. Step three is we start doing prep work. When you wake up at 3am, or when you step on a stage, or when you broach a difficult topic with your boss or your romantic partner, that's not the ideal time to practice a thought for the first time.

You can. It's still worth a try. But obviously if you've practiced ahead of time, your brain will have learned the thought better. It's like practicing for a concert or a sports game. You want to practice so your brain becomes used to making that motion, so to speak.

So whatever you decide to think in the moment, you need to start thinking it on purpose ahead of time. So if it's insomnia, you may want to spend all day practicing the thought, even if I don't get a ton of sleep tonight, I will be totally fine tomorrow.

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Or if it's public speaking, even though I may be nervous on the stage, I can still connect effectively with my audience. You want to practice ahead of time so that thought becomes unconscious. When we practice a thought a lot, it's just like when we learn a skill. It eventually will move to the unconscious portion of our brain, which carries it out automatically.

Like when you drive to a destination that you know really well, you can be having a conversation, or thinking about something else, you're not even conscious of making the turns or how you get there. You still get there safely. It's because your unconscious mind has taken over the operation. And that happens with your thinking. That's when a thought becomes a default thought.

Finally, as you get experience with how this reduces the intensity of the problem, you can start working your way up a thought ladder and practice believing things like, I'm going to sleep really well tonight, and even if I wake up, I'm going to fall asleep quickly. Or I'm going to be nervous when I give this speech, I know exactly what I want to say, and even if I feel nervous a little at the beginning, it will go away quickly.

So you can be working your way up the thought ladder, thinking I'm going to sleep really well tonight, even if I wake up it's fine, I'm going to enjoy a few minutes of coziness in my bed and fall back to sleep. And then eventually you can practice believing I sleep through the night and it feels great, or I love getting on stage to speak. Whatever it is.

This is how we deal with anticipatory stress about anything in the world. Step one, accept the emotion you fear is going to happen. Stop resisting it. That will already feel better because you've removed all this uncertainty of what if it does, what if it doesn't, I have to worry about that. No, we just assume it does.

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Step two, look at what you're making it mean that you will feel or experience this thing, and decide on purpose what you can believe that is less dramatic and less catastrophizing.

Step three, practice that thought, that meaning you've decided to make on purpose as just a thought, practice that not just when it happens, but ahead of time. Step four, move your way up the thought ladder, believing less negative and more positive thoughts about what it means if the thing happens, or even that it may or will not happen at all.

Listen to me, this is important. You cannot skip the steps. Do not get off this podcast as someone who's had a decade of insomnia and start trying to practice the thought, I'm going to sleep through the night like a baby forever. That is unlikely to work right off the bat.

You can try it. But I really want you to follow the steps I laid out above. With anticipatory stress, like anything else, your drama and your resistance to it are what make it so terrible. 80% of our suffering in any situation is our resistance to the situation.

So follow the steps and don't try to skip over that first one. Acceptance is what unlocks all the rest of it. Alright my chickens, I hope you apply this to something in your life you have anticipatory stress about. Election related, sleep related, whatever it is, and have a wonderful week. I'll talk to you next week.

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