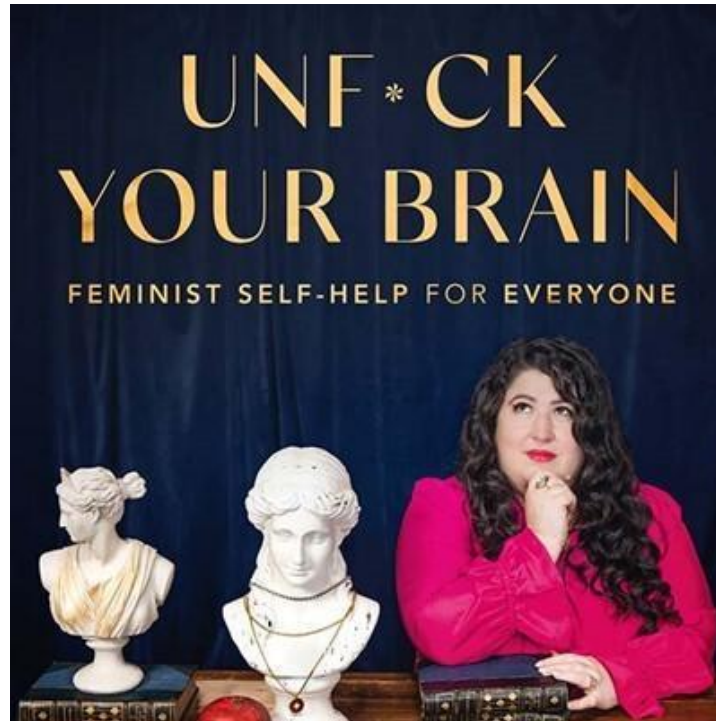


UFYB 40: Reactivity Vs Resilience



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 very confused about how it's already August. I just don't approve. I don't understand. I am both confused and disapproving about it. But I'm actually excited about August because I have two trips this month - that's not true. I have like, three trips this month but two of them I'm particularly looking forward to. One is a beach weekend with my family and my kind of main human, and honestly, the fact that I can look forward to this trip is 100% a testament to the power of thought work.

I don't talk about it as much on the podcast but managing my mind has impacted my feelings about my family so dramatically. It's just really amazing. I kind of wish I had kept journals so I could go back and like, re-read all the mental drama I had. But for better or worse, it's lost to posterity.

So I'm going to the beach and then later in the month I'm going upstate for a weekend with friends, and I'm going to take a whole week off. And as an entrepreneur, I've had to coach myself about that. You know, everybody - like, the flexible lifestyle of being an entrepreneur is amazing; when you take a vacation as an entrepreneur, there's no one covering your shit.

I mean, I have - of course, I have a team and yes, they will cover me, but you know, the sort of box stops with you and of course, if you make your income through consultation calls or live sales or live events or anything where you have to be working to make money, you also don't make money when you take a break.

Now, as a smart entrepreneur, I have things set up so that I can take time off. But it's definitely a transition from the first kind of when you start your

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business and you really have to hustle and work quite a bit to learning how to work smarter and take more breaks and have more time for reflection and thinking and less hustle is definitely an adjustment. Like, that's where I am right now.

And the truth is, I just kind of love my business and I'm obsessed with it and think about it a lot. And it's really interesting because before I was an entrepreneur, I would have assumed that people who couldn't stop thinking about their business were like, stressed out and anxious and that's why they were doing that. And I think that's true for some people, and a lot of people, a lot of my clients who work for someone else have that problem. They're stressed out and thinking about work all the time because they're anxious.

Whereas I'm thinking about my business all the time because I'm just obsessed with it. I just like, it's like being in love or having a new amazing friend or a creative project. Like, I'm just really interested in it and into it and want to be working on it and I'm always thinking of things I want to do and like, new ideas I want to teach you guys and how to bring more value to my clients and what I can do to spread the word about this work throughout the globe.

So it's almost harder to turn off that part of my brain and really take that break. But I've committed to 10 days without working which is - it's so long. And it's true that the great thing about loving your work is that you love it and the downside is that you don't want to stop doing it. But I think it's really important to kind of force myself to do that because - and I'm sort of telling you all this because I know I have a lot of workaholics who listen to the podcast, and some of you can't stop thinking about work because you're stressed out about it and some of you are like me and you can't stop thinking about it because you're just kind of a go-getter who's obsessed with what they're creating in the world.

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But even if you love your work, I think it's so important to take breaks and let your body and brain slow down into a different rhythm. Because there's a creativity that comes from kind of fast paced production, and I think that's generative in its own way, but then there's like a creativity and a vision that comes from slowing down and taking all the daily tasks off your plate. And what I usually find is that I have to like, sleep for three days straight and then I start to be able to like, see and think in a much more chilled out picture way.

So that's what I'm doing later in August, and one of the reasons I'm talking so much about this is that I think vacations are a really interesting concept because you know, a lot of us are prone to saying like, "I really need a vacation," right? People say that all the time if you listen for it.

And we say it because we think that external circumstances are what cause our stress, right? So if you think your job is the problem, it makes sense that you think the antidote is removing yourself from your job. So we want to get away from work or get away from our apartment or get away from our families or our kids even. And we think that when we go on vacation, we will be magically happy and perfect.

And then we are shocked that on vacation, we're still pretty much the same people we were at home. You guys, it's almost like your brain goes with you. Did you know that? Did you know that when you go on vacation your brain goes with you? So all your thoughts go with you too.

So I do think vacations are awesome because it's good for your brain to see new things and have new ideas and like, cross fertilize, but vacations themselves are not going to like, reset your life. And in fact, studies show - I think this is so interesting - that most people enjoy the anticipation of a vacation more than the vacation itself.

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So most people enjoy planning and anticipating a vacation more than they enjoy going on the vacation, which I think is such powerful proof that it's our thoughts that cause our feelings and that are the most important thing. Because when we're doing that anticipation, we only anticipate the positive emotions, right? We don't anticipate taking our brain with us and having that same fight we always have with our partner but doing it in Rome instead. That's not what we imagine.

But here's the good news: you don't necessarily need a vacation. Again, they are nice. I am not at all like, hustle all the time person. I think people should enjoy their lives and take breaks and actually get more done and create more when you rest enough. So I'm all about rest.

But a vacation in and of itself, or a night off in and of itself is not going to solve your problem when your problem is actually your thoughts. When people say, "I just really need a vacation," what they're really saying is I'm burnt out and I don't know how to replenish myself, and so I want to take time away from the circumstance and I think that will help.

So what I want to teach you is let vacation be vacation but let's not depend on vacation to be like, the emergency reset button when you've burned yourself out. Because what you really want and need and don't know how to get is emotional resilience. Emotional resilience is the ability to maintain a calm and happy emotional state.

When you don't have that, what you do is you drain your tank so much that you're like, sputtering on empty, then you go on vacation hoping to refill it. At best, you get like, a quarter of the way full again, you come back to work, the whole process starts all over.

So emotional resilience is the thing that you're missing that leaves you feeling so burnt out that you think you need a vacation just to feel like a human again. And that's really what this podcast today is about. It's about

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emotional resilience and emotional reactivity. Those are the two opposites. They're a pair of opposites, so I'm going to teach you what each of them are.

So emotional resilience is your ability to kind of spring back to your normal state after an intense emotional stimulus. And the opposite of resilience is emotional reactivity, which is when you have intense reactions to non-emergency stimuli, or really even to emergency stimuli, or really what's going on is you think that things that aren't emergencies are emergencies, right? But basically, having intense reactions to stimuli outside yourself, and having an inability to manage your mental and emotional reactions to those circumstances.

So emotional resilience is the ability to kind of weather whatever's going on around you without deviating too much from your normal state, where your normal state is calm and fairly happy. And then emotional reactivity is constantly being flung in a million directions away from that state by anything that happens outside of you.

Before I discovered coaching, I had very little emotional resilience. I was extremely reactive. And if you look around you, most people have little emotional resilience and are very reactive. Any little thing going wrong sets off sighing and eye rolling and frustration and exasperation, and those are just the small things. And everyone is constantly talking about how stressed and how burnt out they are.

So here's how to know if you are emotionally reactive. Are you emotionally exhausted by the end of the day? Can email or a phone call throw you into a panic? Do you obsess over whether other people are upset with you? Even if they haven't said anything or there's not actual evidence they're upset. Do you find that you can't control your mind and that you are fixating or ruminating on things you'd like to stop thinking about but you can't seem to stop your brain?

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Does your emotional life feel like a rollercoaster where you're just holding on for dear life? When you wake up in the morning, do you have no idea how you'll feel at the end of the day? Do you find that you're often telling people that you're too sensitive or you take things too personally, you just feel too deeply, you're too empathetic?

These are things that we all think are good qualities, but they're actually a sign that you don't have appropriate boundaries and you don't have emotional resilience. So all of those are signs of emotional reactivity and any one of them is a sign. You don't have to have all of them, although a lot of people do.

Emotional reactivity is caused by an out of control brain. Your brain is like a toddler with a knife or like a German Shepherd puppy who hasn't gotten enough exercise and got out of its crate. It isn't trying to make a mess but there's going to be at least a ruined house and possibly a fatal wound if you don't take charge of what's going on up there.

I think men and women tend to exhibit emotional reactivity differently since men tend to be socialized to default to anger, and women tend to be socialized to be default to sadness or fear. So speaking really generally, people socialized as men are more likely to exhibit emotional reactivity by yelling or acting aggressively or lashing out or lecturing. And people socialized as women are more likely to exhibit emotional reactivity by internalizing big swings of anxiety or fear or sadness or even panic.

So obviously a big generalization, and in intimate family relationships especially, I do see my female clients exhibit reactivity through anger. You know, the home is a little bit of a safer space for women's anger. So more snapping or yelling. But in general, there is a difference in the socialization for how we express emotional reactivity.

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That only matters because it may help you identify the ways in which you're being reactive, even though they may not look the same as the ways other people are doing it. So you might obviously be able to see that somebody who yells whenever they're upset is emotional reactive, but then you might not identify the fact that your big swing of insecurity when someone's upset with you is also emotional reactivity. It's the same thing, you're just expressing it in two different ways.

So regardless of how you display it, emotional reactivity is what happens when you don't manage your mind and you just act on your unconscious thoughts and you lash out at others or kind of lash inwards at yourself. You catastrophize, you take things personally, you always see the worst, you kind of freak out, all of which creates an enormous amount of emotional stress and suffering for you, especially if you're someone who finds that you often freak out and then it turns out like, nothing was really wrong. That's a sure-fire sign of emotional reactivity.

When you are emotional reactive, you don't have control over where you spend your emotional or even your physical energy because your emotions happen in your body. So it's using up a lot of physical energy to have those reactions. You're basically on like a hormonal rollercoaster with your stress response firing all the time.

The other problem with emotional reactivity is that you don't have the ability to refuel yourself. So when you don't have resilience, when you are reactive, you end up always scraping the bottom of the emotional barrel. It's kind of like driving a car where the fuel gage is always on empty. So many of you, I'm sure, have been around someone like this or you may be this person where even tiny things produce huge emotional responses and dramatic meltdowns. Like a train being late or a small mistake that really isn't a big deal.

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You're unable to cope with the normal events of life and then if something extra challenging happens, you're totally fucked because you have no resilience left, you have nothing in the tank, your fuel is always empty. That's emotional reactivity.

Emotional resilience is the ability to maintain an even emotional keel and to process emotions appropriately without being derailed by your thoughts or feelings. I like to kind of analogize it to the biological function called homeostasis. So in biology, homeostasis is the ability of an organism to maintain a consistent environment - internal environment - even in a variety of external conditions.

So that sounds science-y, but just think about the human body, right? We all know the average human body is about 98 degrees Fahrenheit, and it really doesn't deviate that much, right? You get to 101 and that's called a fever. Like, you're sick. Three degrees up and you have an illness. Seven degrees up and you're very - you're like, likely to die.

So it's a real narrow range around that 98 degrees. Even when it's really hot out, right? You can be in a desert where it's 120 degrees, and your body temperature will still be 98. And you can be in the Arctic where it's zero degrees and your body temperature will still be around 98. So your body is incredibly adept at maintaining its temperature, its internal condition regardless of the external stimuli. It calibrates and compensates.

So the emotional version of this doesn't mean that you should only have like, a three-degree span of emotions, the way your body is basically within three degrees of 98 degrees. That is not what I'm saying. It's more like a rubber band that has the right amount of stretch, or anything that keeps its shape.

Applying force may stretch it out a bit, but it will kind of snap right back, or gently go right back. Like, that's a little more sharp and sudden, a rubber

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band snapping, than what emotional resilience is like. But the point is that your emotional life is stable. And even when there's a disruption, you return to the baseline fairly quickly, and you can kind of stay there no matter what's going on outside of you.

So if something pulls on you or pushes you, it doesn't bend you out of shape. Like, there's a little give and then you come right back. And emotional resilience is important because without it, you're just totally at the mercy of your brain and your emotional state can swing wildly depending on what circumstances happen around you.

And emotional resilience is really tied to a large kind of sweep of outcomes in life. Studies show that people with better emotional resilience do better in school, they succeed more in their careers, they're less likely to use or abuse drugs or alcohol, and they even have better physical health and lower mortality. So emotional resilience literally makes you more physically healthy and less likely to die.

It's not just to make your day-to-day life calmer. I also think it's interesting to note - you heard I said that there's a connection to substance use and abuse, which totally makes sense because the reason that so many of us buffer is because we don't have emotional resilience. We are emotionally reactive, so we are exhausted and stressed out by everything. And so then we are in desperate need of a dopamine hit and so we want to drink or take drugs or watch porn or shop for things we don't need to get that hit of dopamine to counter all of that adrenaline and cortisol that we've been flooding our bodies with all day.

And we want to escape from our mentally stressful surroundings and these things that we use do both, right? We get a hit of dopamine, get a chemical escape, and we also get kind of a mental escape.

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So emotional resilience makes your day to day life calmer, gives you more energy, helps you in your career, in school, makes you physically healthier, and it will also help you with any kind of buffering habits, overeating, overdrinking, over drug use, shopping for things you don't need, watching too much porn, any of these things that you do to an extreme to avoid being alone with yourself or because you don't know how to cope with your feelings.

Emotional resilience helps you cut down on those things. So how can you develop emotional resilience? It's the \$64,000 question, right? Obviously, you can hire a coach and work with me. That reminds me, I meant to say this earlier. I'm just going to say it in the middle right here. I got a bunch of emails asking me this lately so I realized I should clarify that you don't have to live in New York to work with me.

All my coaching is done virtually online, so I just - this'll save everybody from emailing me the same question 10 times a day, even though I love hearing from you guys. All of my Unf*ck Your Brain coaching program is done virtually. We have video calls, we have some text-based coaching, there's like, a couple different ways we connect and coach, but it's all virtual. So I have women from all over the world in the program. So if you're one of those people who just assumed as a lot of people apparently do that you have to like, live in New York, you do not.

Okay, so obviously you could always hire me to teach you emotional resilience, but you don't have to. I'm going to teach you how to in the podcast. So there's two aspects to it. You need to process your feelings, and you need to change your thoughts.

So processing your feelings means staying in your body, like staying really physically present and aware in your body while the feeling moves through you. The way that I like to - if you already have a kind of, sematically - sematic, meaning body grounding practice like a meditation or a

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mindfulness practice, you can use that. I like to teach people to describe the feeling that they're having as a physical sensation to themselves. Like, this feels hot or cold, this feels fast or slow, this feels big or small, it's tight or loose, it's up or down, where is it in the body?

I like to really describe it in really concrete physical sensations because doing this distracts your brain from its thoughts that are causing the sensation and it also just kind of like, tamps down the panic button in your brain because it reminds you that all that's happening is a physical sensation. It's not an emergency. If you have a headache or a menstrual cramp, you might not love it, but you're not like, "Oh my god, everything is going to hell, the world is ending." It's not an emergency, it's not a crisis. And neither is a feeling. Even anxiety.

Your feelings are not a crisis. So physically grounding and processing your feelings by allowing them to flow through as physical sensation and describing that and allowing that and not thinking the thoughts that perpetuate it, that's the first part of developing emotional resilience.

Because part of what happens in emotional reactivity is you start to have a feeling and then you freak out that you're having a feeling, right? So processing the emotion kind of takes off that second freak out so that we can deal with the original freak out from the thought.

So you process the emotion to deal with the like, physical aspect of the freak out, and then you have to manage your mind to create emotional resilience. The reason that you are emotionally reactive is that you don't have any control over your brain, so it's running wild and creating horrible scenarios to scare you and telling you that everyone hates you and you're worthless and you're going to die alone every day.

So when you don't exercise any control over your brain, you have no resilience and you're subject to its every random and destructive whim.

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When you learn to manage your mind, you stop being so reactive. Now, at first, that is a painstaking practice. You have to pay attention to a lot of thoughts and you have to practice noticing and shifting them.

But you know the old saying, at least among Jewish parents is, “You don’t get to Carnegie Hall in a day.” And you don’t learn to manage your mind in a day, over time, as you keep managing your mind, you will become less and less reactive because what happens is you start to develop a longer and longer space between the stimulus and the response and you develop the ability to choose how you want to respond consciously.

That space and that ability to choose is what creates the opportunity to develop emotional resilience. When you’re emotionally reactive, you are believing all your thoughts without question. You are acting like your emotions are an emergency, right. You are believing that your emotions are somehow true and valid and have to be happening and are telling you something important, and then you’re believing that thought, whatever it is, and then believing that that’s totally true.

That’s emotional reactivity; when you are not exercising any judgment or any discretion over what you believe, you’re not taking responsibility for your own thoughts and feelings and you are just reacting to whatever comes at you, as if you’re in a batting cage without a bat, just being pelted with balls. I’m not really great at sports metaphors, but emotional resilience is maybe like having a bat so that you can decide which balls to let over and which ones to hit away.

That’s not how baseball works, probably, but you know what, this is not the baseball podcast. When you are emotionally reactive, you can’t control your reactions. You feel like they happen instantaneously, but they don’t. they’re caused by thoughts; very fast subconscious thoughts that you’re not aware of yet.

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The better you get at noticing and changing your thoughts, the less reactive you'll be. And these two things go hand in hand. You have to practice the emotional processing, the physical sensation describing, because that is what takes your kind of body's reaction down so that you can actually get access to the thought.

You have to be willing to have that feeling and kind of communicate to your brain that it's not a big deal and that you've got a hold of the ship and everything's okay, and then you can get better into what is the thought causing this feeling, what's happening in my brain, right?

So the better you get at noticing and changing your thoughts, the less reactive you will be overall. And eventually, you will develop true emotional resiliency and the daily irritations and frustrations and stressors will stop creating that adrenaline and cortisol and stress and anxiety response in your brain and in your body.

So that's emotional reactivity and emotional resilience. Most people go around in emotional reactivity all the time and the true journey towards taking responsibility for your own life is developing emotional resilience. And then once you have emotional resilience, you can create so much more in your life. It makes sense. If you know that you can handle your emotions and you're not scared of how you'll think and feel in the future, then you can do fucking anything.

Bravery, courage, all of those, come from a base of emotional resilience. I'm still scared when I try something new. I still have some self-doubting thoughts, but I have so much faith in my own emotional resilience now because I know that I have done so much work to create it and that I have the tools. I still use these tools all the time. I have the tools I need to understand what's happening as a physical sensation and then get access to the thought and decide if I want to keep it.

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That's what that true – like, true emotional resilience is knowing that you can handle anything that comes at you and that nothing can knock you off your feet. So, my chickens, pay attention this week to when you're reacting and when you can practice being resilient and I will talk to you next week.

If you're loving what you're learning on the podcast, you have got to come check out *The Feminist Self-Help Society*. It's our newly revamped community and classroom where you get individual help to better apply these concepts to your life along with a library of next level blow your mind coaching tools and concepts that I just can't fit in a podcast episode. It's also where you can hang out, get coached and nerd out about all things thought work and feminist mindset with other podcast listeners just like you and me.

It's my favorite place on Earth and it will change your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at www.unfuckyourbrain.com/society. I can't wait to see you there.