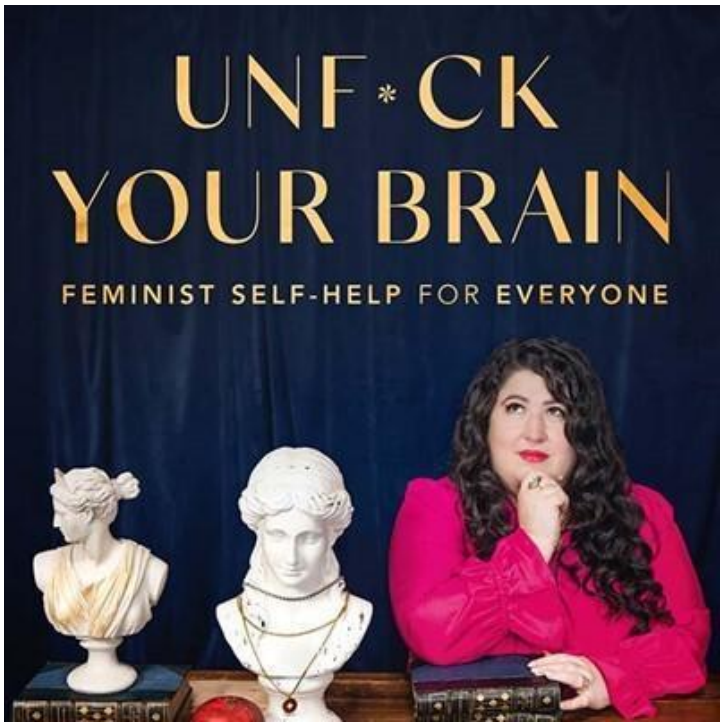
UFYB 190: QA: Body Image



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. How are we all doing? There is a lot going on at Unfuck Your Brain headquarters these days. We have just expanded from three to 11 employees I think and my brain is a little bit broken. It's like a serious up-leveling in identity, which is what happens when we grow.

But it's one thing to think about it, and it's another thing to experience it in a compressed period of time. I went to team meeting two weeks ago and there were the three of us like there always are, and then we skipped a week because I was traveling and it was Memorial Day, I think it was a holiday, and then I came back and we had our team meeting and there were 10 people there.

I was like, what is happening? But I'm so excited about everyone that we have hired. We had so many amazing applications. So if you did apply and weren't hired, it is awesome that you applied and I'm proud of you for doing that and it is no reflection on you. We just had so many amazing candidates and I'm super excited about the people we hired.

Some of them you'll be seeing coach if you're in The Clutch, and then everyone else will be introduced on my social media if you're curious about who's working here and what it's like for them. All of it is so much good stuff.

So now that the weather is turning warmer and a lot of places are easing or even eliminating COVID restrictions as the vaccination rate goes up and infections go down, a lot of us are just going to be back out there in public seeing a lot more people than we have been.

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And in our society especially, that always gets tied up with our body and our relationship with our body and our body image and how we feel about our body, what we think other people will think about our body, what we're told to believe about our body, what other people's bodies look like, just all that body image stuff that some of us have been thinking about the whole time, and maybe some of us were able to ignore during the pandemic if it's only particularly kind of triggered by other people or going out.

It's just all on display and it's summer, so you might be wearing a bathing suit, you might be wearing shorts, you might be wearing shorter skirts or dresses or whatever you're doing. So we wanted to revisit body image on the podcast. It's not really revisit because there's so much to talk about with body image forever that you never would really have to repeat a topic.

But I know that so many of you not only are struggling with the same things, but feel very alone because you think that you are not struggling with the same things as everybody else. And so today we have a listener Q&A episode on your relationship to your body and we are really talking about all these different aspects that go into our body image, our thoughts about our body.

I talk all the time on the podcast about how this is one of the first things that I ever worked through with my own thought work, and it was a fucking grind for a long time. And now it is really so different and so much better that it's kind of hard to believe that I used to spend all my time thinking about what I was eating or what I should eat or what I shouldn't eat or how I was going to exercise, all of that. It's really such a wild difference. I wish you could see a split screen of my brain.

So that's what we're talking about today.

So first question is a short one but I think one that a lot of you struggle with. So that's why I want to address it. So the question asker says, "I'm stuck in

believing that my body is a human body. I've gained weight recently and I'm having a hard time loving myself and not making my weight gain mean something about me. How can I learn to love my body when I keep thinking that my fat gained is causing my health issues?"

Okay, so there's so many important assumptions embedded in this and it's such a common theme. So number one, let's think about this. If your brain had the agenda that there's something wrong with your body, what would we expect? We would expect that let's say it focused on what you looked like. And then if we removed that, it would then just focus on your health or focus on the next thing.

Your brain has an agenda that there's something wrong with your body. That's a thought pattern you've had for so long. And we know that brains like to double down. So if you start believing that it's okay for your body to look the way it does, your brain just looks for something else to tell you is wrong with your body.

So that's number one is just noticing what the brain patterns are. Number two, you've got health and weight all conflated here, which is common because we're not taught the correct science about this. I really encourage any of you who think that weight and health are synonymous to dive into the Health at Any Size movement and read the real research on weight and health.

Basically everything you've been told about weight and health is wrong is the short version. Weight itself does not cause health problems, and losing weight does not resolve health problems. There are some health consequences for certain ways of eating. I'm giving you the very simple version right now, but let me put it this way.

This is a bigger topic I'm trying to condense and keep kind of understandable for you guys. I'm going to teach a whole master class abut

body image and health at any size next year for those of you who really want to dive into this because it's a lot to do on a short thing.

But there is something called metabolic syndrome, which is basically insulin resistance that leads to instabilities in your blood sugar and your insulin release, and uptick by ourselves and that is sometimes associated with weight gain and sometimes not, but that is what causes actual health problems.

And so you can be thin and have metabolic syndrome, and you can be fat and not. They're not actually causally related. And when losing weight does happen to impact a health problem, if it can be maintained, which is often not the case, it's because the weight is the side effect of resolving the metabolic syndrome.

Sometimes the lifestyle changes that help improve metabolic syndrome also may create some weight loss. But you can improve your health markers and improve metabolic syndrome without ever losing weight just by changing your lifestyle, which usually means more exercise and keeping an eye on not just eating carbs, which are fine, but if you eat a lot of refined carbs with no protein or fat, that can cause a blood sugar spike.

So the conflation of weight and health is so problematic and we all just believe it. And so you are believing that your fat is causing you health issues, that your weight gain is causing you health issues. When the truth is, you really have no idea if that's the case, and a lot of it has to do with what created that weight gain.

Is what created that weight gain potentially - if you really are having a health problem, is that what's maybe creating the health problem? Whether that's a medication side effect, or from a change in behavior or whatever, and the weight really has nothing to do with it. The amount of fat cells in your body actually doesn't have anything to do with it.

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So you have to divorce this automatic equation with weight gain and health. And this is like weight stigma in healthcare is a huge issue because fat people go to the doctor and just no matter what is wrong with them, they're told to lose weight even though weight loss really wouldn't change anything for them.

So that's number one. The even deeper more radical concept here is that even if you gained weight and weight had an impact on your health, that would be okay, in the sense of there is no moral value on health. It is not morally better to be in "better" health.

We have a real obsession with health in our current society and we completely have linked it to morality. So we think it's more virtuous to be healthy and it's like, sinful or terrible to have a health problem, especially if it's a health problem that is ever impacted by behavior like lung cancer and smoking, or - I mean, diabetes actually has a genetic predisposition and if you're genetically predisposed to diabetes, it's unlikely that you can go your whole life without having it, although you can sometimes hold it off with behavioral modification.

If you don't have the gene, I believe it's also impossible for you to develop Type 2 diabetes no matter what you eat. But of course most of society doesn't know that, so we have all of this shame and stigma around diabetes because it's a health situation that people think is caused by personal behavior, particularly eating, which is the most moralized thing.

So you really have to break this association between health and morality also. And you've got the issue a little confused for yourself also because you're actually asking two different questions. You're like, I'm making my weight gain mean something about me, and your thought is, "Well, because my fat gain has caused me health issues so of course I have to make that mean something about me."

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But it's two different assumptions there that you have to unpack. One is that your weight gain caused your health issue. And the second is that that has to mean something about you, that it's morally a problem if you have a health consequence.

We all drive cars, which is quite dangerous, but we don't ever say to each other like, "Well, you really should take better care of yourself and not drive a car." Seriously. We all do lots of things that can have health consequences. Overexercising can be bad for your health but we never say that to people.

We don't think like, "How could you do that to yourself?" When you run a marathon. So you got to break down the association between weight and health and you have to break down the association between health and morality.

Okay, second question. "What is the reason for wearing makeup if thought work is supposed to help us create a healthy body image?" So there's no reason for wearing makeup. It's totally a personal decision. Everyone gets to decide.

I personally don't wear much makeup in my daily life. I wear makeup in photos because the way that photo technology works, if you don't wear makeup, you can't see your features often. Like in professional photos or videos, you will look washed out, your features won't stand out. So I wear makeup in photos so that I look mostly like myself without makeup on is the best way I can say it.

But I do occasionally like to wear a bright lipstick and it's just because I think it's fun. It's not because I think my lips in their normal state aren't good enough. So it's just like wearing clothes. I think my naked body looks great and I think my body looks great in clothes, and different kinds of clothes make it look different kind of ways.

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So there's no should. Something about this question seems to imply that we're supposed to wear makeup or we should wear makeup. But no, I mean, of course not. If you don't want to, don't. But I think that if you have learned to love how you look, you still often wear something other than a burlap sack, even though that would technically just cover your body enough to go out in public.

Because I think if you look anthropologically, humans for millennia have been interested in decorating their bodies and using - people use clothes and makeup to communicate their own aesthetics, their own style, their own creativity. These are all things that humans have always done in all societies, have decorated themselves, have had special outfits for special ceremonies or special rituals or rites of passage.

I think that aesthetics and that visual sense are really built into humans. And even if you look in animals, peacocks will display a beautiful tail when mating. It's very evolutionary, very biology-based in the beginning. So I absolutely don't think anyone needs to wear makeup or should wear makeup if they don't want to.

And I personally don't wear a lot of makeup day to day because I can't really be bothered. But that was true before I did my body image journey and afterwards, which is part of my point almost. It's like, there are people wearing makeup because they haven't done the work to love their skin and face the way it is, and that work is worth doing.

And for some of us, I just wasn't that into makeup and so I just still am not that into makeup and that hasn't changed. And someone else might be super into makeup before doing the work and after, or not, and then yes. Or was and then isn't. There's no consistent pattern it has to follow.

This is the thing you guys; always in the model - this is why I'm always trying to get you out of your action line. It's not a useful question to ask

should I wear makeup or not. It is a useful question to ask, what are my thoughts about wearing makeup? What kind of feeling do I have about wearing makeup? What am I trying to do by wearing makeup?

So the question's never should I take this action or not. The same action can feel amazing or can feel terrible depending on what you're thinking and feeling. Wearing makeup can feel amazing when you're thinking, "I love my face and it's beautiful without makeup, and it's beautiful in this very different way with makeup and I love them both."

And it can feel terrible if you're thinking, "My skin is horrible and no one will look at me if I'm not wearing makeup and I won't look professional and no one will take my seriously and I'll die alone." Same action, totally different thought and feeling. So always, the question is what do I want to think about this, how do I want to feel about it, before we get into what action am I going to take.

"Hi Kara, I wanted to know your thoughts about PMS. I understand that most of the stigmas around PMS come from the patriarchy, but I do find it harder to manage my mind during my time of the month. I'm usually more irritable, overly sensitive, short-tempered, and overall less emotionally resilient. Even when I know I'm about to start my period and try to bring awareness to my overload of emotions during that time, I still find it harder to manage my mind. Do you have any advice on how to think about this? I'm confused about whether this is normal or if it's all in my head. PS, super excited about finally joining The Clutch."

We are excited to have you. Alright, so this is a great question and I think this question applies to more than PMS because really, what it applies to is any time that we think that some other biological system in our body might be impacting how we think and feel or our emotions or our emotional resilience.

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So it might be PMS, it might be menopause, it might be depression, it might be anything else. Those aren't obviously the same thing, but just other hormonal systems or some people find that they're more irritable when they're hungry. Their blood sugar changing has an impact on how they feel.

So here's what I think about this. I think that ultimately, it's hard for us to know if we don't have some kind of actual diagnosis what is actually biological in some way or hormonal or blood sugar related or a chemical imbalance or whatever. It's hard for us to know exactly what it is.

Often medicine doesn't know exactly what is it either. They diagnose on symptoms. They don't know actually what's happening in the body all the time. We often don't know, but I don't think that it matters in the sense that a lot of the tools just still apply.

So maybe you are more irritable, overly sensitive, short-tempered, and less emotionally resilient. That's your thought about that time of month. But even if there is some hormonal thing happening in your body that's different, how do you feel when you think, "I'm more irritable, overly sensitive, short-tempered, and less emotionally resilient?"

When you have that thought about PMS, you're just for sure creating more of that. You actually have no idea how different your hormones levels are. Maybe it's a huge swing, maybe it's a tiny swing. Maybe it has a big difference on your emotional resilience, maybe it has very little difference. We really don't know.

And so you just want to be careful that you're not conflating, yes, the conceptual idea that some biological systems in our bodies might impact how easy it is for us to regulate ourselves emotionally or what physical sensations we have that we might be confusing with emotions or vice versa, and the story you have about it.

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I always remember one of my very first coaching clients believed that she was going through early menopause. She was having hot flashes and they would come out of nowhere, and she really believed she had this hormonal disregulation. She'd been to doctors, they weren't able to help her.

And I was actually as a beginning coach, kind of bought her story and I was like, okay, that's interesting, let's at least see what's going on when you have them and how you're thinking about them. And what we discovered was that she had them when she was angry.

She was actually feeling anger. But she was so divorced from her own emotions and so not in tune with feeling them that she interpreted them to be hormonal hot flashes. And then she had this whole story about her hormones.

So I just really like to caution - I'm not saying there's no such thing as hormonal changes in the body that might impact your emotions, but that's a far cry from that to I know exactly what I'm like during my cycle and here's all these adjectives I tell myself I am that of course just produce more and more of that.

So that's the first answer. The second thing I would say is okay, let's just say everything you said is true and let's put it in the circumstance line. Let's pretend it could be a true circumstance that you are more irritable, more sensitive, more short-tempered, and less emotionally resilient. Let's pretend that's a circumstance.

You still get to decide what to think about that. Let's just pretend it is a circumstance that it's harder to manage your mind when there are certain different levels of hormones in your body. Okay, you're a human and you're going to have those levels of hormones for a while. What do you want to think about it?

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Even just doing that takes the drama down quite a bit. Rather than sort of being confused about it. There's nothing to be confused about because the answer is always pay attention to my thoughts and feelings and be kind to myself about them. That's just always the answer.

There's never a time that that's not the answer. Even if a doctor could tell you all this was true, do you want to keep constantly thinking that thought? How does that serve you? So what if you are those things during PMS? How do you want to think and feel about it?

If you could know that that was a physical condition that you were these things then you would just think, oh, well, this is a physical condition so it's okay and I don't have to be mean to myself about it basically. And you can just think that now.

So there's really no reason to be confused because the answer is always practice awareness and compassion for yourself. And I just think that's always what we want to be doing and that we really generally don't know where on the spectrum, the hormonal, the biological, or the sensation and the emotion may bleed into each other and it really doesn't matter that much.

If there's a medication to take for something, then you take the medication. And if not, you manage your mind. And usually if you take medication, you have to manage your mind anyway. So I think it matters less than we think it does what the truth about this is because nobody knows.

And so what are we going to do? We're going to pay attention to our minds, we're going to practice changing our thoughts, and we're going to be kind to ourselves when we can. We're not going to be mean to ourselves about it and we're not just going to give up because it's eight days of my cycle every month, I've just decided I am irritable and can't manage my mind and

there's no point in trying. We know for sure what result we'll get if that's the thought we choose. So that's my answer to that.

Next question. "Once upon a time, I had a neutral relationship with food. Then in college, I had a roommate who was preoccupied with her weight. I developed an emotional eating habit, which I've been working through over several years. Alone, I have a mostly neutral attitude toward food, but in the presence of others who repeatedly say I eat too much and talk about the new diet exercise programs they're doing, I get triggered. I get insecure about my habits that I too am eating too much or not exercising enough. I want to avoid those people but my thoughts, not their actions cause my feelings. But I'm triggered means I've not truly found a neutral relationship with food. Also there's envy that others have the discipline to stick to a program and shame because of my own inability to do so. I feel stuck. How do I work through these thoughts and feelings?"

Okay, so I'm going to answer this question but first I'm going to give you a tough love smack. This is for all of you. Any time you say I feel stuck, here's what I know. You haven't tried to do a model, 100%. Or you've done a model and just looked at it and been like, well, I did a model, I haven't tried to practice a new thought, I'm stuck.

Any time you ask how do I work through this, the answer is do a model. I'm not kidding. There's a lot of other tools I teach you, there are more advanced techniques - not advanced, but different techniques, different ways of approaching things, but the model works on everything.

When you say I'm stuck, how do I work through this, I can't figure it out, what you're really saying is I think the circumstance is causing my feelings. And in this question, a lot of you are in this place, which is totally normal, where you sort of get it and sort of don't. Again, totally normal phase of thought work development.

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This question asker and a lot of you can say, okay, I know my thoughts cause my feelings, but then embedded in the whole question is blaming of the circumstance. Every part of this is about how other people cause your feelings. First, your story is that your roommate, by having her own eating issues, caused your emotional eating issue. So you blame that on her. That was her.

You were fine, then you were around this person and she caused this. And then you have the same story now. It's almost like when the brain has a story, it just repeats it. Your story in general is I'm fine by myself but if I'm around anyone else with any eating or food issues, I get triggered and then I can't help it.

So you have that story about college, I was fine and then my roommate triggered me and then she caused this problem, and now you have this story about being around people now. I'm fine by myself but then I'm around these people and I trigger it and I have this problem.

So that whole story you got to let go of and take responsibility for your own mind. Your roommate didn't cause your emotional eating habit. A lot of people develop eating issues in different ways when they go to college.

It's a new time, lots of hormonal changes, new stressors, you don't know how to manage your mind, you have a different relationship with food because you're out of the house, you have to rely on yourself for all your own meals, a lot of people develop eating issues in college. So even if it did happen in college, it's not your roommate's fault.

Your thoughts are what caused that habit. And your thoughts right now are what's causing your current feelings. So the reason this is so important is that when you make it other people did it to me, or it only happens around other people, then you don't really have to dig into it. It's your brain telling

you that if you just hadn't met that roommate or you just weren't around these other people, everything would be fine.

But that's not how brains work. I'm around other people who talk about diet all the time. I'm friends with so many weight loss coaches and I don't ever question myself about this anymore. I did work through it in the beginning.

So it's not about them. Here's the lie in your question. "I have a neutral relationship with food by myself." That's a lie. That's not true. It's not actually neutral. You haven't done the work to own that relationship and create neutrality around food whenever you want to, all the time.

What you are describing as being neutral when you're alone is really just that you aren't hearing those thoughts when you're alone. You're just not as conscious of those thoughts. The same thing is true of somebody who says, "I'm fine with my body when I'm alone but then when I'm around other women I don't like it."

You're not fine with your body when you're alone. You're just not thinking about it. But you're not actively fine with it, or even actively neutral about it. You still have a ton of negative thoughts about it. You're just not drawing your awareness and attention to them.

So being around other people to talk about food is the best thing you can do so you can actually work through the thoughts that come up. But you have to stop telling yourself that you're fine when you're by yourself. You always have these thoughts. You just aren't paying attention to them and you're not aware of them when you're by yourself.

So you need to be around people who bring them up or you need to bring them up when you're alone so that you can work through them. So important. So for all of you who have that kind of story, I'm fine about this thing unless someone challenges it, or I'm around someone who has this

opposite thing, or they bring it up, no, you're not really fine with it. You haven't done the work to earn being fine with it.

There's a difference between I'm truly neutral about it, I truly accept it, and I just don't think about it and I avoid thinking about it unless somebody else is there, and then my brain starts thinking about it or brings consciousness to the thoughts. So that's the answer on that.

And then how do you work through it? You put all that in a model. "Other people have discipline to stick to a program and I don't." That's a thought. Put it in a model. See what happens. "I'm eating too much." Put it in a model. See what happens. "I'm not exercising enough." Put it in a model. See what happens. "If those people think this, then what I do is wrong." Put it in a model. See what happens.

The model is how you do it. Y'all if you take one thing away from ever having heard me or met me, it is not to take I'm stuck, I don't know, or I don't know how to work through this from your brain as an answer. Think about if somebody was like, here's a logic puzzle and if you don't do it, I'm going to kill your pet or your child or your parent.

You sure as shit would try to do that logic puzzle and you would figure it out. Now, I don't think we should motivate ourselves that way. But the point is you can figure it out and you would not take I'm stuck, I don't know as an answer if the stakes were high. The problem is that you don't think the stakes are high enough to be uncomfortable in solving your own problems here.

But the stakes are high. This is your life that you're talking about and how you're going to live it. So do not take I'm stuck, I don't know from your brain as an answer. Refusing to do that will change your life.

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