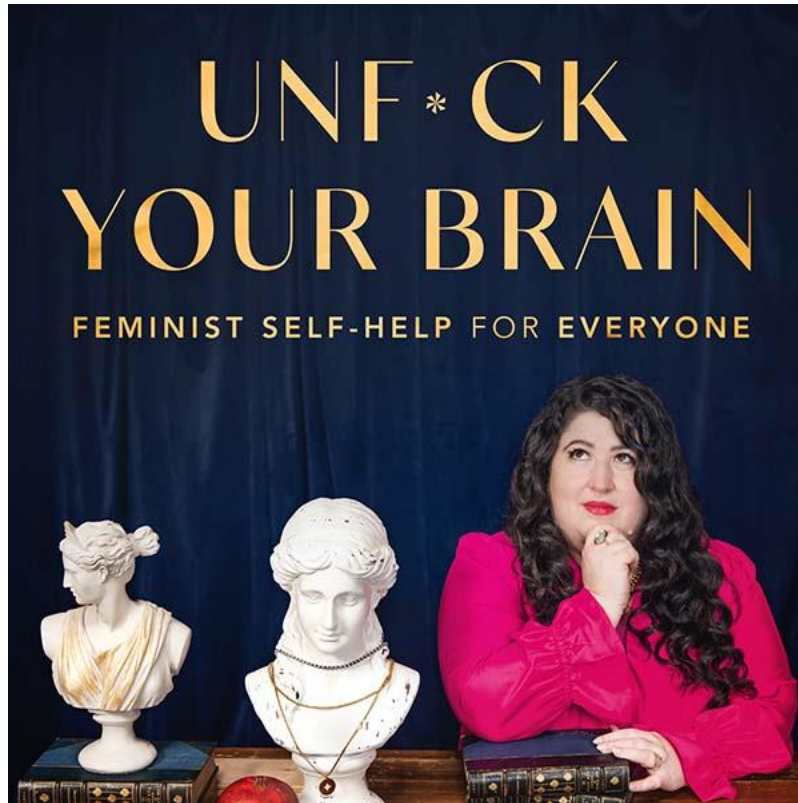


UFYB 345: What is Happiness?



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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When was the last time you felt happy? And do you feel sure that you know what happiness is or feels like? We're socialized to think that we're supposed to feel happy all the time, but I think many of us aren't even sure what that means or how to know if we're happy. So, in today's episode, I'm going to talk about two different kinds of happiness and about the biggest confusion people have around happiness.

I'm also going to explain why I think that expanding our capacity to feel happy and understanding what that even means are a crucial part of both the feminist project and our personal life satisfaction, and how our brain sometimes gets in the way of doing both those things.

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.

Have you ever heard someone stereotype feminists as angry or too serious or unable to take a joke? Usually it's a sexist joke, of course. Sure, being a feminist means caring about serious things like maternity leave, access to reproductive healthcare and pay equality, but I don't think that feminism has to be all serious. True story, when I first sold my book proposal, the title of the book was *How to be a Happy Feminist*. And neither the publishing house nor my agent liked that title so it got nixed.

Although now that the book is a New York Times bestseller, a USA Today number one bestseller, I kind of think it would be amazing if its title was *How to be a Happy Feminist*. But I still think it's a genius title, a genius idea. So, I'm bringing it back here on the podcast because part of taking back our brains from the patriarchy is taking back our ability to be and feel happy and to know how to create that emotion for ourselves.

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So, in this episode, we're going to talk about what happiness is and what it isn't, and how to think about it as an emotion and as a kind of state of being. And over the next few episodes this month, I'm going to be talking about what I think are the kind of big pieces that make up happiness, and particularly being a happy feminist. And I'm going to talk about it on the kind of level of the feeling of happiness in our body and the level of the big picture happiness.

So, let's get into what the two different kinds of happiness even are, what that word even means. So according to the dictionary, happiness is, well, first of all, actually the definition of happiness is just the state of being happy, which is not a super helpful definition. But when you look up happy, it has two definitions. So, the first is feeling or showing pleasure or contentment. And the second one is having a sense of confidence in or satisfaction with something like a person, arrangement or explanation.

So, what I noticed about these two definitions is I think they map pretty well onto the two different ways that we use the term, which makes sense. But the fact that we use the same word for both things I think leads to a lot of emotional and mental confusion for us. Because we're using the same word both to mean a temporary feeling state in our bodies, which is a set of temporary physical sensations that feel good and a much bigger, more amorphous sense of life satisfaction and contentment.

Those are very different things that arguably should not have the same name. The fact that they do, I think, leads to a lot of confusion and unnecessary suffering for us. That's what I'm going to talk about in this episode. So we can't change the word probably in the language, but we can understand that it's a word that means two very different things, so that we know which one we're talking about when we're talking about it. And we know how to create them, which are kind of two separate projects.

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So, happiness in and of itself, the kind of simplest pure thing, I think, is best defined as a feeling. It's an emotion. It's a set of sensations in your body that you label happy. And as the dictionary acknowledges, that kind of happiness is an experience of pleasure. And this leads us to the reason that so many women feminists are not, I think, have trouble experiencing happiness as an emotion. Because women are socialized to believe that we have to deserve or earn pleasure, it's supposed to be a reward for being good enough or doing enough to deserve to feel good.

But those are perfectionistic standards that our brains never, ever tell us that we've met. Our brain never tells us that we've done enough to deserve to feel good. And that's why the next episode in this little mini -series next week is going to be all about rest and pleasure, and why we have such a hard time sometimes accessing and experiencing those things.

I think that being able to experience the emotion of happiness in our bodies through pleasure and through relaxation is absolutely crucial to a life well lived. But women are socialized to be suspect of physically pleasurable experiences. And this is deeply patriarchal religious socialization, especially western Christian socialization that views the body in general as kind of suspect and wrong and views pleasure as something that is the root cause of original sin and man's fall from grace. And views pleasure as something that is corrupting or will lead you down the wrong path.

That pleasure is sort of inherently suspect and potentially evil. And you don't have to actively believe the Bible is true to have been impacted by this socialization because it's deeply embedded in a society founded by puritans here in America who were the religious extremists of their day. So next week we're going to get deeper into how and why pleasure and rest and relaxation are so core to the ability to experience the emotion of happiness. That is going to be our focus next week.

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On this week, I want to talk about actually that second definition of happiness, because I want to talk about the conflation of the two of them. Because you're going to need to really understand which one we're talking about, when as we go through the next few episodes. And I think the conflation of them creates so much unnecessary suffering and brain drama for us. And so, I want to explain why conflating the temporary emotion and the kind of state of being is such a problem right after this.

So why is it a problem that we have two different definitions for happiness? It's a problem because we're using the same word to describe, number one, a specific but temporary sensation in our bodies and number two, a thought or collection of thoughts about our lives. And our brain is not really aware that this is a conflation, it's just using that word and thinking they mean the same thing. But happiness as an emotion is a temporary sensation in our bodies. That's what all emotions are. It comes and goes depending on what we're thinking and experiencing.

But we use the same term to convey our overall Gestalt kind of, our composition of thoughts and feelings about bigger picture things like whether we're happy in a relationship or happy in a career or happy in our lives. And when we use the term happy that way, it confuses our brain because we're unconsciously trying to evaluate whether we are happy, big picture with this much bigger long term thing using the definition of a temporary feeling and sensation in our bodies.

So, asking ourselves, am I happy in my life and our brain thinks we're asking, do I feel happy in my body all the time? And of course, we don't feel that physical sensation of happiness all the time about anything we aren't supposed to. But we're taught that happiness is an important goal, and we're thinking of happiness as that physical sensation, or if not, we're thinking about it at the very least as the absence of a negative emotion.

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So, we're either thinking of it as feeling positively good all the time, or at least we think happiness certainly means that we're not feeling anything bad or negative. But that's not realistic or possible over the long term of anything, a job, a friendship, a creative endeavor, a home you live in. Literally anything longer than probably 10 minutes is going to involve negative emotion. And for me, maybe for you, anything longer than five minutes or 90 seconds, there's going to be some negative emotion sometimes.

So, when we use the word happiness to mean, I feel physically good in my body, and then we also use it to mean, I am overall satisfied with the experience of this longer term or bigger picture thing in my life. We're conflating an emotion in the body with a set of thoughts we have about something and the long term kind of collection of feelings those thoughts create over a period of time.

And I think that that conflation has some negative consequences for us. First, it gives us a warped idea of what our experience should be like. We may start believing that we are unhappy in this larger sense because we aren't feeling the physical emotion of happiness all the time. It's absolutely normal to feel a mix of positive and negative emotion about anything in our lives, especially over a longer period of time.

But if we think that being 'happy' in a relationship or career or family choice or whatever else means it's supposed to always feel that one specific happy sensation does in our bodies. We're going to be thinking that a lot of perfectly great things in our lives are bad or wrong because we don't feel happy every minute.

Second, conflating these things keeps us focused on the wrong metric to use to evaluate our choices and our experiences. Because when we're just focusing on whether we feel this specific physical sensation of happy in our body, we aren't thinking about our values, priorities, and goals. We're just

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using this one metric and we don't even really have a good definition for it. So we may be, first of all, judging things in our lives too harshly, like I just described. But conversely, sometimes I think it also makes us settle for what we don't want.

Sometimes I think we recognize, well, it would be impossible to feel happy in my body all the time and then we just stop the analysis there. So, we may have made choices or been in situations that don't align with our goals or values or priorities or desires, but we just wave that off because we just say to ourselves, well, you can't feel happy all the time. So, we can kind of conflate it in either direction, either staying in situations that aren't what we want because we do recognize that it's impossible to feel happy all the time. We don't understand that difference.

Or we are more prone to leave things impulsively or complain about things or think negatively about things just because we're not feeling amazing in our bodies all the time. So however you're using this as a metric, it kind of flattens your analysis and reflections on your life and what you're trying to achieve.

And third, one of the things I see come up in coaching so often is that this conflation makes it very hard to make decisions, and it creates analysis paralysis. When you're trying to make a big decision to change jobs or careers, to leave a relationship or get more serious in it, to move cities, to have kids or not, whatever. It's impossible to make that decision based on whether you think doing it will 'make you happy'.

Because when you're conflating these two things, you're asking your brain to predict whether a big, complex decision will make you feel the emotion of happiness in your body, or at least prevent you from feeling negative emotion in your body all the time for the rest of your life. And your brain very reasonably, is like, "I don't fucking know. How would I know that? I can't predict the future." So, then we get stuck not making decisions

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because we don't feel sure that we'll feel 'happy' with the decision and that's because we don't know what that means.

We're using a word that both means am I going to feel some warm sensation in my body for 90 seconds in the future and am I going to have a collection of thoughts and feelings that are positive about something over the long term? When you have those conflated, it's impossible to make a decision based on that. When you change the decision making question to what values you want to use to guide the decision process, knowing you'll feel positive and negative emotion either way, the whole analysis changes, becomes much more functional.

So those are three of the biggest problems I see with this conflation, and there probably are even more. So, I want to really recommend that when you think about whether you're happy or whether something 'makes you happy', you keep two really important things in mind. First, remember that it's your thoughts that are making you happy or not. Happiness as an emotion caused in your body by your thoughts. That's what the emotion of happiness is. But it's also not realistic to only think thoughts that make you feel happy for the rest of your life. No one has that level of mind control.

So even though your thoughts do cause your feelings, if you are thinking about being happy as feeling physically positive all the time, or at least never feeling bad. You are setting yourself up for disappointment because nobody's life works like that. And secondly, you need to define for yourself and really understand what you mean when it comes to the big picture and talking about happiness as a term that's a stand in for sort of life satisfaction or fulfillment. Because your body is going to feel transient sensations of happiness and unhappiness on and off forever, no matter what circumstances you have.

So, we really need to understand, what do we mean when we talk about that big picture happiness, what is that deeper and richer definition we want

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to use? Because defining it as, am I having that physical sensation in my body all the time is not helpful for all the reasons I've talked about in this episode.

So, over the next few episodes, I'm going to be diving deeper into both of these topics. I'm going to talk about what I think are the necessary thought patterns and the kind of deprogramming we need to do from our socialization to allow us to experience both kinds of happiness. That emotion of happiness, the physical contentment and pleasure in our bodies, and that I think is an important part of the personal and the feminist project. Because women are systematically alienated from their own ability to feel pleasure in their bodies and from their bodies in general.

And so, learning how to create that experience of happiness for yourself is a way of reconnecting to your body in a way that is really just you and your body without that patriarchal alienation of it.

And then secondly, what creates a deeper life satisfaction and fulfillment that really should have a different name, but that we call happiness also? Because society tells us what should make us happy in this sense as well. It is basically conforming with social roles and expectations. It's supposed to make us feel satisfied and fulfilled and happy in that bigger long term sense but we know that that's not true either, because conforming to social roles is not what will create a true deeper 'happiness' for you.

So, I'm going to be talking about both of these kinds of happiness and how you can better access and create and fulfill them over the next few episodes. So, stay tuned to learn how to become a happier feminist.

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

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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.