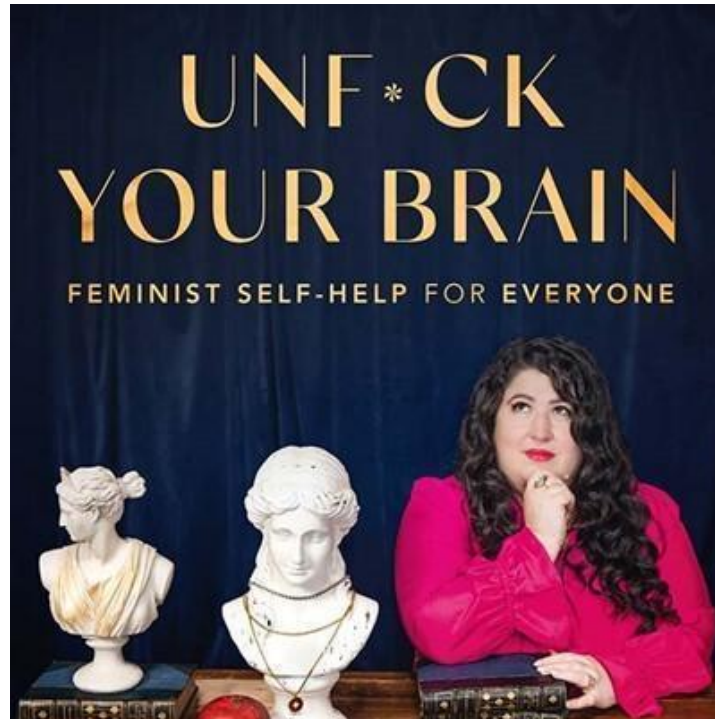


UFYB 5: How to Survive Family Time



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to Unfuck Your Brain. The only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard Law School grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello, my little hens, I decided I should address you guys by a different animal kingdom group each time. So we're going with poultry for Thanksgiving. All right. So before we get started today, I just want to tell you guys, I went through a kind of unexpected personal loss over this weekend. And not going to bore any of you with the details, because this is about changing your thoughts, not mine. But I do want to talk about it a little bit with you guys before I get to my planned content, because coaching yourself on a day-to-day basis, it definitely produces results.

It decreases procrastination, it decreases stress and anxiety. It increases your ability to connect to other people. It decreases your dating anxiety. It improves your body image, it does a million amazing things, I talk about all the time. But honestly, the times that I really find that coaching has prepared me the most and in a way that blows my mind is when something unexpected does happen.

Because before I knew how to coach myself, when something unexpected happened, I just would lose my shit in different ways, but my brain would be running crazy all over the place, and my thoughts would be in a huge swirl and my emotions would be all over the place and I would feel super overwhelmed. And I would just feel like I was totally at the mercy of my emotions and that I had no control over them. And what I've really noticed, I've noticed this in the past, but particularly in this new situation that I'm dealing with is that the emotion and the feeling flows through me so cleanly now. And it's something that's almost hard to describe if you've never experienced it, but when we are really suffering and we feel like stalking, like we can't get over something and we're devastated, it's usually because

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we have a set of thoughts and story about the situation that is causing all of that suffering. And I feel like what I'm experiencing now is really the difference between pain and suffering.

There's a Buddhist saying that pain is inevitable, suffering is optional. And so what I have been experiencing over the past few days is I absolutely am feeling intense waves of emotion at different times, but they don't last long and I don't get stuck. It almost feels like life force pouring through me. It's like the emotion flows through, whether that's sadness or grief or loss, it pours through me. It's like an intense five minutes, maybe 10, I might cry and then it's gone. And then when it's over, I feel pretty normal. And that is so different from how I used to feel when something negative would happen. If I broke up with somebody or somebody died or I lost someone, or I had a career setback, like when something major and unexpected happened, my emotions would just take over. I could never understand how anyone could get any work done when they were in a breakup or had lost someone or had gotten fired or whatever happened to them.

I didn't understand how anybody got on with their life because I was so in the grip of all of my stories, which I didn't even know were stories I just thought were true, and so I was suffering so much, and this has been such a different experience. I am able to totally get dressed and leave the house, I've been doing work. I've been spending time with friends. I got to pause and cry once in a while, but it really just feels like I'm a totally different person having this experience. So I'm going to share that with you all, because I just want you to know that there's so much more to this work than... Reducing your stress is an incredibly important thing to do and I would never minimize the importance of reducing stress and anxiety and unfucking your brain and deprogramming it from the patriarchy and all that stuff we talk about. But there is this other, almost deeper level to this work where it actually just changes how you experience the world. It really

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rewires your brain to such a degree that you can have a different human experience.

And that just blows my mind. So that's what's going on with me. What's going on with you guys is that it's Thanksgiving, and this week is the start of the November, December holiday season. And we all know what that means, which is one mental breakdown after another. Between family and work stress and the holidays and breakups and New Year's resolutions, it's a stressful six weeks until you turn the corner into 2018, but you do not need to worry, I've got you. Every episode in the next six weeks is going to address the particular challenges of this time of year and how to navigate them. And you can unfuck your brain no matter how much it seems like everyone around you is trying to fuck it up more. So today we're talking about how to survive family holiday time. And this podcast is going to drop on Thursday when you'll already be a Thanksgiving, but you can use it over the weekend and then you can definitely use it for the winter holidays also.

If you already feel like you're just surviving your family, you can use these tools to actually enjoy the time. And if you're one of those people who dreads time at home for the holidays, these tools are going to help you get through it. So first things first, have reasonable expectations. Holidays, as the kids say, triggering for a lot of people. And I don't love that word because I don't think our thoughts and our feelings are out of our control, but there are certainly situations that may be more challenging and that bring up more difficult thoughts to manage. And family time is one of those stimuli for a lot of people. So I want to be clear, it's so important you guys, this does not mean have reasonable expectations for how you want your family to behave. We have all spent years of our lives having very validating conversations with our friends about how our families are so unreasonable and how our expectations for how our family should behave are totally reasonable. Reason has never changed how your family behaves, it doesn't change how you behave.

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I'm not saying that you should have reasonable expectations for how you want your family to behave, that way madness lies, when you have expectations for what you think is reasonable for other people to do, and you are committed to those, and you spend a lot of energy thinking about how people aren't keeping them, that doesn't serve you. I mean, have reasonable expectations about the fact that you may feel a little bit emotional and you might feel all over the place. You may experience a lot of stimuli that brings up a lot of intense thoughts and feelings for you. A lot of us, when we get around our nuclear family, we just revert, it's like you're 16 years old again and you're fighting with your siblings, you just go right back to that. That's okay, if you brace yourself, hoping it won't happen, you're going to be exhausted before you even get there. And then you'll have less energy when it does happen. But if you just expect that you may have some thoughts and feelings and you remember that they aren't fatal, you'll be much better prepared to weather what comes up.

So just expect it may be challenging, you are going to have thoughts and feelings, this is the human condition. It's okay, nothing has gone wrong, your feelings are not going to kill you. And your thoughts aren't even necessarily true or real. They are just sentences in your mind and your feelings are just sensations in your body. In addition to having reasonable expectations for your own experience, so that's the first step. I want to teach you a great tool for family time, the best thing you can do to prepare for family time is to practice deciding what to think ahead of time. Most of us do not do this. Most of us act like our emotions and our thoughts just happened to us, we're like, I hope the happy bus goes by today. I hope I don't get hit by the sadness freight train and we go through the day acting like we have no control over how we think or feel. And we just hope to get lucky to have the feelings we want.

We wake up and we're like, man, I hope I feel good today. I hope that just happens. I hope some good feelings just run into me. I hope I don't get on

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the stress bus, we act like they just happened to us and that we have nothing to do with them. We have no control over them. But imagine doing anything else in your life that way, imagine doing your job that way, you want to wake up in the morning and be like, I hope I happen to show up to the right office to do my job today. I hope I remember what my job is. I hope I manage to get something done. Well, that one you may say. We're talking about feeding your body. You're not like, well, I just hope I encounter some food that shoves itself into my mouth today. I just hope that some food jumps into me so I can be sustained and keep living. You don't give off all power and control over those things to just whatever happens to go by.

So the very first mental orientation difference, well, the very first one is to expect you're going to have some thoughts and feelings, that's okay. The second one is to really get clear with yourself that you have control over how you're going to think and feel, you do not just have to feel whatever feelings come by as though you can't do anything about them and you can't select them at all. So I'm going to talk you through how you decide to think and feel on purpose. But the first premise is just the concept that you can, that you can have some say in how you feel, that feelings don't just happen to you without your permission, and that you don't have any role in deciding how you're going to feel.

So let's talk about this in the context of spending time with family. So family time goes into the category of what I like to call, of course, they did. Let's talk about what that means. You have been around your family for years, so you know exactly how they're going to behave most of the time. And yet every time you're about to interact with them, you get yourself all stressed out, thinking about how you hope they don't act the way they always do. And by the way, this is not just your family. You do this with your job, you do this with your partner, you do this with your kids, you do this with everyone. You spend time with someone, you know what their patterns are and then your brain decides that a really great way to deal with that would be to

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spend a lot of time and energy hoping that the person in question doesn't act the way they always act.

So let's say your mother always comments on your weight. You spend the two weeks before you see her venting to all of your friends, about how fucked up it is that she comments on your weight and now she better not do it again. And what boundaries you're going to draw on, and what things you're going to do and how you're worried she might. You get yourself all bent out of shape, anticipating this thing she might do and resenting her ahead of time for the fact that she might do it. Here's the thing, she's definitely going to do it. Definitely. She always does it. That's how you know to worry about it because she always does it. So before we even work on reframing the thought about her doing it, we just have to start with this. She's definitely going to do it, so let's just expect that. Rather than spend all this energy hoping she'll be different and worrying about whether she will and how you might feel, let's just decide ahead of time she's definitely going to do it.

Well, let's say you have to travel with your partner for Thanksgiving and your partner's always late, or your partner is always running late. You know this about your partner. You have spent years with this person. They're always fucking running late. You know they're going to run late, but instead of just expecting and accepting that this is going to happen and that you can decide how to think and feel about it, you spend the two weeks ahead of time worrying about what it's going to be like if they run late and how you're going to feel so annoyed and what is everybody else going to think? And then you're going to feel out of control and you're going to feel disempowered and you're going to be frustrated. The reason you're going to feel out of control is that you've spent two weeks hoping they won't do what they always fucking do, they're always late.

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Your mom's always going to comment on your weight, so the very first step is just accepting this thing is going to happen, that's how you even know to worry about it is that they always do the thing. That's why this concept is called of course, they did. Of course, your mom commented on your weight, she always does. Of course, your partner was late, they always are. That is not a problem, it is really a problem because you give that thing that they always do the power to control your feelings. First, you spend time worrying about whether it will happen and then you spend time being upset when it does. So worst of all worlds. The whole point of knowing something might happen ahead of time is that you can prepare for it, but you don't prepare for it, you just prepare to be upset about it, which also makes you upset about it for the whole time you're preparing. It's a total waste of energy.

Instead, we can decide what we want to think and even maybe say ahead of time on purpose, we can take all that energy we waste worrying about what might happen and being mad before anything does, and use it to actually plan how to think and feel on purpose. We can manage our own emotional lives rather than letting the potential thing someone else might say or do be in charge of us. So this is an exercise I want you to do. Get out a sheet of paper and write down what you're worried will happen. Maybe it's not your mom commenting on your weight, maybe it's your uncle saying something racist. Maybe it's your sister implying you're not taking enough care, your parents, whatever it is, write it down. So write down what you're afraid will happen. And then I want you to write down, why are you afraid of this thing? Remember that you are afraid right now when this is not happening yet, you are afraid that you will feel a way in the future you don't want to feel.

When you are worrying about what someone else will say or do in the future, it's because you are worried that when they do, you will have a feeling that you don't like, you are worried that you will feel sad or rejected

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or ashamed or angry or hurt, but what causes your feelings, your thoughts? Your thoughts cause your feelings. That means that when you worry about your family saying or doing something that will upset you, what you were really worried about is that you'll have a feeling in the future. And what that means is that what you're really worried is that you will have a thought that will cause a feeling you don't want to have. Let's go through that again, because generally when I teach this to a client, they nod at me like they understand it and their eyes stay blank. So I'm going to break this down again.

If I am worried that my mom is going to say something about my weight, I'm not personally worried about that, my mother doesn't do that. But if you're worried that your mother is going to say something about your weight, you are worried about it because you are imagining that if, and when she does, you are going to feel hurt, you're going to feel ashamed. You would probably call it having your feelings hurt, what you're feeling ashamed, almost definitely. You are worried that you will feel ashamed. Now, we know that other people don't cause our feelings, your mom's comment however heinous, does not cause your feeling. Your thought about your mom's comment is what causes your feelings. If your mom says you could really stand to lose a few pounds and you feel ashamed, it's not because your mother said you could stand to lose a few pounds, it's because you had the thought she's right I'm too fat, I'm not attractive like this. She doesn't approve of me. You had one of those thoughts, that thought made you feel ashamed.

So when you are in the current moment, worrying about how you might feel in the future, if someone else says or does something, what you are worried about is that in the future, you will have a thought and that thought will cause a feeling you don't want to have. That's it. And honestly, this is true for everything in your life, but we're just going to focus on this example for today. When you are worried about how someone else is going to act in

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the future, it's because you are worried about how you'll feel. And when you are worried about how you'll feel in the future, it's actually because you're worried that you will have a thought that will cause that feeling. And you are telling yourself, you don't have any control over that.

You're telling yourself, if my mom comments on my weight, I'm going to have a thought that is going to produce the feeling of shame. Has nothing to do with your family member, it has to do with believing that this thought will just happen to you and then this feeling will just happen to you and you can't do anything about it. So if you want to react differently, the solution is not to stress out ahead of time about whether it will happen and just hope it doesn't. The solution is to decide ahead of time, what you want to think on purpose when it happens. In the moment you're going to be reactive and you won't be able to think as clearly, but now ahead of time, you can think clearly. So now is when you want to decide what you'll think.

For instance, if your mom says, you look like you've gained weight, and your normal reactions is to think, she thinks I look bad and to feel hurt and cry, but you can decide ahead of time to think she's saying that because she was brought up to worry about her own weight and she's self-conscious about it. That thought will help you feel a little compassion and a little more neutral. Or if your sister says, you're not doing enough for mom and dad, I'm taking care of everything. You would usually feel criticized and hurt, again, that would be shame actually, or potentially guilt. But you can decide ahead of time to think something else. Like we've both made our own decisions about how much time is necessary, I'm not in control of her decision about how to spend her time and she's not in control of mine. Or I know that I can be a good daughter based on my own beliefs and actions or a good son.

Now, none of this is to say that you can't potentially say something, I think it's totally legitimate to tell someone, for instance, conversations about my

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weight are off limits. I'm not going to have that conversation with you. Please don't comment on my weight. When you comment on my weight, I'm going to leave the conversation. This doesn't mean that you're not ever allowed to take action in response to what someone else says, that's what boundaries are and we'll talk about those in another episode, but you never need to think she thinks I look bad, she's such a bitch, how could she say that I look terrible. You never have to think those thoughts that cause shame or anger, those aren't going to help you at all. We are not going to talk a lot about boundaries on this episode because there's only so much we can do in one, but I want to be really clear about that because often we think, well, I have to be angry or hurt so that I will set the boundary and take care of myself. That's a total misconception.

So when I say you can decide ahead of time what to think and that you can think something that helps you feel neutral, that doesn't mean you might not set a boundary or make a decision about whether to continue engaging in a conversation, but you never have to feel shitty about it, that never helps you. So you can still decide ahead of time, what to think. And you can decide ahead of time, what you'll do rather than waiting in the moment and then acting rashly. You always get to decide what to think and feel. And you can decide ahead of time. Practicing coaching yourself in the moment is great, but it is really challenging because at that point, especially when you're just starting this work, at the point you realize you need to coach yourself, you've already had a thought that has triggered a feeling.

And if you're having these intense negative feelings, one tends to have around family, it's guilt or shame or anxiety, so your body is already responding and now you have to change the thought and calm your body down. And that's totally doable, that's why I teach coaching, but wouldn't it be better to just skip that whole drama? Deciding what to think ahead of time skips the drama. It gives you the power. When you practice thinking ahead of time, you don't have to wonder if you're going to cry into your

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mashed potatoes. You don't have to worry about whether you're going to feel sad or anxious or have your feelings hurt. You get to decide ahead of time that you're not doing any of that. You can decide to feel grateful. You could decide to feel happy. You could decide to feel neutral. You can decide to feel stoic, it doesn't have to be a happy, shiny emotion, whatever you want.

Once you decide how you want to feel, you just have to come up with a thought to think that will produce that feeling. That's the last step in the process. You decide how you want to feel ahead of time and then you decide what you're going to think to produce that feeling. Now, you might want to try a thought that's specific to the trigger you have, if you know it tends to be one thing that sets you off. So we just gave some examples of what you would think about your mom commenting on your weight or what you can think about your sister saying you don't help out enough. If you know exactly what's going to happen, you can come up with a thought specific to that context. You can also try a thought that's more global. Like I'm glad I decided to give my mom the gift of my presence here and to be pleasant for the day or I chose to be here and I'm the only one who creates my feelings or one of my favorites to use with other people just in general is, that's just Bob being Bob.

I mean, you got to substitute whatever name makes sense obviously, you might not have family named Bob. But if you have a particular relative that you have a really hard time with, you can just decide that no matter what they do, you're going to think, that's just Bob being Bob. Whatever it is, you decide ahead of time what you're going to think. And then you practice it, practice thinking about it before you get there, practice thinking about it while you're there, practice thinking about it the next day, practice, practice, practice. The more you practice, the more naturally this thought will come to mind. And then you'll be driving your own emotional bus instead of letting

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it run you over. All right? So have a beautiful Thanksgiving my chickens, whether you're eating chicken or Turkey or Tofurkey or whatever it is.

I will see you guys next week. If this episode was speaking your language, sounded like it was in your brain, I want you to come check out *The Clutch* because it will help you unfuck any relationship in your life.

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.