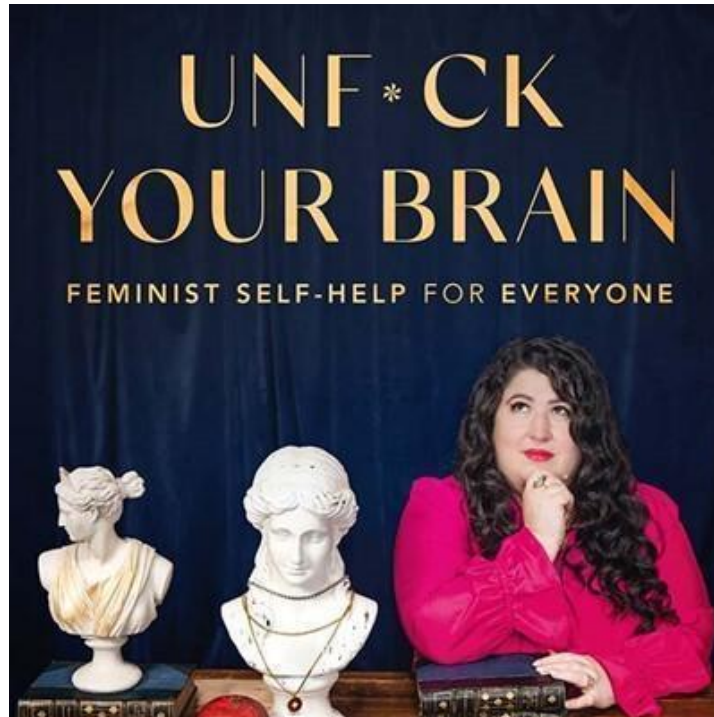


UFYB 12: Negativity Bias



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, as you can probably hear, I am still suffering from this head cold. I think we're on day, I don't know, 74, that sounds reasonable. And part of my brain is telling me that I will actually never speak clearly again. So hopefully that's not true, but it is a good example of what I'm going to talk about today, which is negativity bias. That's what I want to teach you about today. So once my clients learn how to notice their thoughts and become aware of what their brain is saying to them, they pretty much all have the same question, which is "Why the fuck am I like this?" Right? So what they're noticing is that for every positive thought they have, they will have four to five negative thoughts at the same time, or right afterwards. It seems to them that their brain wants to be negative.

And you guys have probably experienced this, one, because you have a lot of negative thoughts. But two, if you ever think about a time where somebody gave you positive feedback, and there was one thing for you to work on, and that's the thing you remember is the thing to work on, right? Or you go on a date and there is a lot of signals that the person likes you. And then there's one thing that's maybe ambiguous and your brain fixates on that one thing. It looks for the negative. And I think often when my clients start paying attention and seeing how negative their brain is, they worry that this means there's something wrong with them, but the truth is it's completely normal for them, and for you, and for me, everyone, everyone's brain is wired with a bias towards negativity because that bias helped us to survive.

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So today I'm going to teach you why your brain operates like this and how you can begin to retrain it to focus more on the positive and less on the negative. So imagine you are a primitive human. You are one of the original homo-sapiens. Your environment is filled with dangers. There are animals that want to eat you. There are rushing rivers that might carry you away. There are poisonous plants that look very similar to non poisonous plants, and you don't have written language. There's no plant encyclopedia. You can't consult about which berries are safe. And there's certainly no internet. You can't Google, "how do you hide from lions?" The only way to ever get any safer in that world is to retain information and knowledge about dangers. It's much more important for you as a primitive human to remember which berries are poisonous, than to remember which berries are delicious.

If you make a mistake on whether a berry is delicious, you just have a kind of gross meal. You might eat one that's not so delicious. If you make a mistake on which berry is poisonous, you will die. So if you are a primitive human, who is good at remembering which berries are delicious, but you always forget which ones are poisonous. You probably died pretty early on. On the other hand, if you are a primitive human who's really good at remembering which berries are poisonous, you actually probably survived much longer. And you passed on your propensity for remembering which berries are poisonous, and you've probably taught your children what you had learned at a certain stage of evolution, begin transmitting retained cultural knowledge to offspring. So over the generations, those humans that survived were the ones who are really good at remembering which berries are poisonous, where the lions like to hunt, which rivers have the current that will carry you away.

In fact, our brains have a structure in the brain that we share with other vertebrate animals and that's associated with what scientists called negative feedback or negative rewards. So in other words, this part of your

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brain is specifically dedicated to remembering things like pain, suffering, injury, or other negative outcomes. It basically exists to remember all the negative things that have ever happened to you and to keep you worrying about them and looking out in case they happen again. And we share that with other vertebrate animals, but as humans, we also possess the more evolved brain structures that can imagine the future. And it would be nice if our brains automatically imagined wonderful outcomes for us all the time, but let's go back to the evolutionary pressures. Imagine again, you exist in a world full of physical life-threatening dangers. And now imagine two primitive humans.

One of them assumes there's no danger and everything is safe and wonderful. So she's constantly jumping in rivers and petting lions and eating everything she finds. The other is constantly imagining what might kill it, and acts very cautiously as a result. So which of these humans is more likely to survive and to pass on its genes, as well as teach its offspring this approach? Ultimately, what this all means is that it makes very good evolutionary sense for your brain to have a bias for negativity. So you may have heard the saying your brain is like Teflon for positive experiences, but Velcro for negative ones. You have an amazing experience and you easily forget it. Or even if you don't forget it, you can't summon up the intensity of the positive experience quite as much afterwards. But with a negative experience, you often don't forget it at all.

It weighs on you. You think about it a lot and you can really put yourself right back in it and it feels almost as bad. And this is why your brain is always spitting potential catastrophes. Now if you're listening to this podcast, the odds are you do not live in a physically, extremely dangerous environment. And your daily survival does not come down to distinguishing which berries are poisonous or which animals are going to eat you. In fact, one of the biggest threats to your health and survival now is the chronic stress that your brain creates by interpreting everything around you as a life

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or death emergency and by dwelling on the negative. There's actually quite a bit of scientific evidence showing that dwelling on the negative, worrying about the future, that these things create chronic stress in the body and negative health outcomes.

So the bias for negativity has actually become a maladaptation for us. Understanding that your brain has a bias for negativity is hugely important, because it gives you a very good reason not to simply believe all of the negative thoughts your brain throws at you. Now we all grow up just believing whatever our brain says is true. But the negativity bias means that our brains are not reliable narrators. They don't remember the good and the bad equally. They don't imagine the good and the bad equally. They don't predict the good and the bad objectively. They are wired to disproportionately remember and predict the negative many times more than the positive, in the past and in the future.

So the good news is you can actually rewire your brain out of this habit, like many, many primitive habits that humans have socialized themselves out of. But the first step is getting some distance from your negative thoughts, understanding that there's a reason your brain thinks them. And that reason is not because they're true, is one of the best ways to get into the watcher mode. Remember the watcher mode is where you observe your thinking without necessarily believing it. If you meditate this as the same idea as observing your thoughts without attaching to them, you get that perspective, you get that distance, you observe your own thinking and you see those thoughts as not just reality, but actually just as sentences in your mind.

So the next time that your brain is going off in a negative tirade, once you remember that it has a bias for the negative, you don't think all these negative thoughts because they're true. You think all these negative thoughts because your brain is an unreliable narrator. Probably most of you

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have a friend who is always acting like the sky is falling or maybe a family member who's kind of a drama queen. Everything's always terrible. Their world is always coming to an end. Everybody hates them, they're going to get fired, all sorts of terrible things. And you've learned over time not to take that shit so seriously. They come to you, they tell you all the drama and you know, because you've been through it before, you just think "It probably wasn't really that bad. Probably that thing you're worried about isn't going to happen. Probably that thing you're describing to me, wasn't really so awkward as you say." Whatever it is, you've learned to take it with a grain of salt because you know, that friend has a negativity bias.

They're always looking for the negative and they blow it out of proportion. That is true about your brain. Your brain has a negativity bias. Your brain is a drama queen and your brain is always looking for the negative. And it's literally retaining the negative memories and retaining the negative associations and creating the negative predictions at a much faster rate than it is for positive ones. It's just how it's wired. But that is so important to understand because it helps you see why you shouldn't believe a thought just because you think it. In the absence of any other explanation, we believe our thoughts because we think, "Well, if I'm thinking this, it must be because it's true. Why else would I think it?" Well, this is why. Your brain's bias for negativity is why you would think of a thought even when it's not true and why your brain would give you all of these negative thoughts, even if there isn't really much basis for them.

The other thing that's important to remember about the negativity bias is that it teaches us that the fact that your brain is so negative, isn't because there's something wrong with you or your brain is broken. And this is something that frequently happens with my clients. When they start paying attention to their brains, it's like opening Pandora's box, or my teacher calls it like turning the light on the house. All of a sudden you see what's going on in there. You see there's so many negative thoughts in there that you

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just weren't even paying attention to consciously. You didn't even know they were in there.

You turn on the light, you open the box and it's a fucking mess in there. There's so many negative thoughts. And then that same bias for negativity kicks in. And then my clients think, "Oh my God, there must be something wrong with me. I'm never going to be able to change them. My brain is broken." That's that same negativity bias, the same negativity bias that always predicts a negative outcome and looks for negative things to think is the same brain that's telling you, "This is too much negativity. I'm broken." It's like the negativity bias is your brain saying "I'm broken for sure." It's all part of the same pattern. Here's the good news. Everyone who has ever changed their thought process started with the same negativity bias that your brain has. You are not a special snowflake. I mean, at least not this way.

I'm sure you're a special snowflake in other way, but that's good news. Your brain is not any more fucked up than anyone else's. My brain started out the same way and I changed it over time on purpose, by practicing the same tools I teach you. Every brain starts with a negativity bias and every brain can be unfucked anyway.

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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.