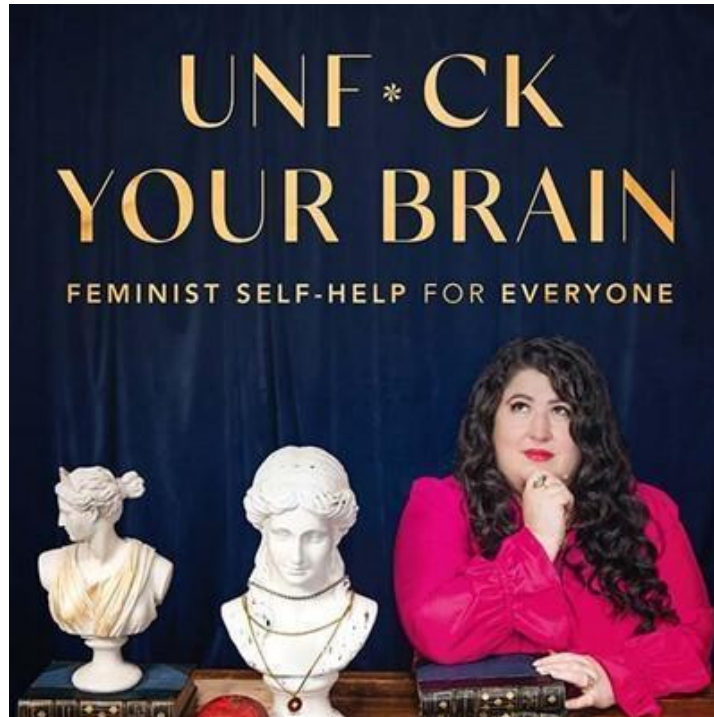


UFYB 13: How to Love Photos of Yourself



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 13: How to Love Photos of Yourself

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. Speaking of chickens, this past weekend, I was in Savannah for a coaching retreat with my coach, which was totally amazing. And the most incredible part was being out on this farm, where there were some of the most beautiful chickens I've ever seen. I didn't know I would have such strong feelings about chickens. They were gorgeous. But also, we did something called Equus, I think that's how you pronounce it, it's unclear, Coaching, which involves getting into the ring with a horse, and learning how to communicate with a horse using your energy. It was super wild. I am not really a woo-woo person or coach, as you guys can tell, but this was really intense. I may tell you guys about it at some point, because it brought up a lot for me, and I really learned a lot.

But today I want to talk to you about a different part of the weekend. So as part of this retreat, my coach arranged for us to all have photo shoots. We had professional hair and makeup, and we had a great photographer, and I was excited about this because I haven't had new photos taken for a couple of years. I did a photo shoot in the beginning when I started my business, I'd have photos for my website. And since then, that's kind of that. And I had a little bit of a battle with a hairstylist to keep her from completely Southern volumizing my hair. I mostly lost that fight. If you guys have seen pictures of me, I have a lot of hair anyway.

And when a Southern hairstylist gets her hands on it, it really turns into a pageant situation. So that was a little bit of an issue, but it looked great in the end. I liked my makeup, which is really rare with professional makeup,

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because I have the complexion of a Victorian vampire, and people usually get it wrong.

So anyway, we go out for the photo shoot. I immediately fall in love with the photographer. Her name is Teresa Earnest, and she lives and works in Savannah. So if you live anywhere near there, you should hire her immediately. Anyway, so she's shooting the first set, and she says, "Oh my God, you're so photogenic." And all of a sudden, my head just exploded.

So, let me back up to explain why that happened. Until the last couple of years, I hated having my photo taken. I hated it. I hated all photos of me. It didn't matter where they were taken. It didn't matter what I was wearing. It didn't matter how I looked. I hated them all. All I saw were my flaws. My hair looked frizzy, my face looked fat, I had stomach rolls. This was back when I thought fat was a bad word. Now I might say my face looks fat, and feel fine; but back then, fat was a bad word. I had stomach rolls, I had a double chin, I was too short, my legs were stocky, right? The self-criticism was endless.

It might take me three days to write an email, but I could untag myself in a Facebook photo in 30 seconds flat, probably three seconds flat. And family events were a nightmare, because all of the photos that would be taken and shared, right? And online dating was super stressful, because I hated every photo of myself. And I vacillated between trying to pick the most "flattering photos," to hide my self-perceived hideousness, or sometimes I wanted to pick the most "unflattering photos," to make sure that my matches knew what a monster they were meeting. Right? Because God forbid someone showed up, and thought I was less attractive than my photos. The humiliation that I imagined I would feel was unbearable, even in theory, even just thinking about it.

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When I started my coaching business, I had made a lot of progress in my body love in the real world, right, in the mirror, and in the way that I looked at myself, but I was still struggling with photos quite a bit. And I tried a couple of different photographers, but I had such a strong belief in my story that I was unphotogenic, that I was never happy with the results. And this was something I would tell people all the time, "Oh, I'm just really unphotogenic. I'm the most unphotogenic person in the world."

And I would try to kind of disguise my self-hate about photographs by sort of pretending it was just photographs. Like I would say, "Oh, I love how I look in person. But some models who look great in photos look weird in person, and I'm the opposite. I just look terrible in photos." I completely believed this, and I had all sorts of evidence and reasons I would explain to people, like, "I have a round face. I don't have defined cheekbones. I'm so pale." Now, newsflash, if you look at a photo of me, I actually do have cheekbones, and yes, I am pale. But what does that have to do with anything? Right? The story didn't make any sense. But I was really invested in it, and I totally believed I was incredibly unphotogenic, because I hated every photograph of me. So obviously the reason why must have been that I was innately unphotogenic, right? That's how my brain worked.

So cut to my photo shoot in Savannah. What I realized in the moment that Teresa told me I was photogenic, was that number one, it was the first time anyone had ever said that to me, that I could remember. I probably just deleted it from my brain if it happened before, right? And number two, I actually believed her. And that blew my mind. I realized in that moment, that building my body confidence, and all the work I've done on loving photos of myself, was changing both my own thought process, and it was actually changing how I looked and showed up in the world, and what other people saw.

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Because Teresa wasn't lying to flatter me. In that moment, I was super photogenic, because I was showing up confident and happy. I was glad to have my photo taken. I was actually looking forward to seeing the awesome results. The different mindset I had actually changed my external reality. The confidence and the self-love and the excitement and the enthusiasm, really radiating outward. They were actually making me more photogenic. In fact, when I went into the photo shoot, what I thought to myself was, "I want to embody the result I want for my clients." Right? "I want when prospective clients look at these photos, I want them to see the kind of self-love and confidence that they can have, no matter what they look like." And that totally came through, and actually made me look more photogenic.

And that different mindset also allowed me to hear the compliment and accept it. I chose to believe that I was photogenic, and not surprisingly, the photos from the shoot came out amazing. And partly that's because I had a great photographer, and I had great hair and makeup and the lighting was good, but also it's because I had learned to actually love my body, to think that I was photogenic. Right? I accepted that compliment. I decided to believe it. And so I showed up on camera in a totally different way. So seeing how far I've come in this area really blew my mind, because when I started working on my thoughts to change my body image, photos were one of the most challenging areas I worked on, and it's a place a lot of my clients have trouble.

So today I'm going to teach you my favorite brain hacks for learning to love how you look in photos. And as a bonus, those thoughts will translate into liking how you look more in real life, too. So number one is exposure. Scientific studies prove that your brain gets used to the images it sees most often, and it comes to find those images visually pleasing. So think about your partner or a friend's or child's face. Why is it so dear to you? Partly because you simply see it all the time. One of the reasons that unrealistic

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images of women's bodies and the media is such a problem, is that your brain adapts to whatever it sees most often. And it comes to find that beautiful and normal. So on the one hand, you have all this social conditioning going on that tells you that unnatural thinness and Photoshopped features are beautiful.

But then on top of that, there's an automatic process happening in your brain that acclimates you to those images. If all the images you see in the media are of a size zero woman, your brain actually kind of cognitively begins to see that as the default, not just in a conscious sense, but in an unconscious sense as well.

So if you've ever wondered why knowing that these images are unrealistic, or being philosophically opposed to Photoshopping or unnatural fitness ideals, doesn't actually really help you feel better about your body, this is partly why. Some of it is unconscious beliefs you need to work on, which we're going to talk about in a minute, but some of it is just literal exposure and proximity. If you want to feel better about the way you look, you have to change your visual diet.

So first, expose your eyes and brain to non-Photoshopped photos of real people who look similar to you, or even better, who have a more exaggerated version of the features you don't like about yourself. Are you self-conscious about your nose? Then look for photos of women with even bigger noses. If you think you're too fat, look for photos of women who weigh even more than you do.

I cannot stress enough how powerful this is. I changed my Instagram feed, and stopped reading women's magazines when I was doing this work, and now plus size models and plus size bloggers and fat bloggers look like normal size to me. And plus size models are often still smaller than real-life fat women most of the time, but even so, all of that has really changed my

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default visual kind of image of what a woman should look like. Straight size models actually look strange to me now, like if I go to the front page of Nordstrom, and look at the regular models, I'm confused. And that's even though I watch regular TV still, which means you don't have to give up all your media.

You don't have to go on a media fast. You just have to make a conscious effort to give your eyes at least some variety in your visual diet. And this all depends on you and what you look like. So if your medium-sized, fill your Instagram with images of medium sized people or bigger, right? If you're a curvy or a fat woman, however you identify, fill your Instagram feed with images of people your size or bigger.

Secondly, you need to expose your eyes and brain to more images of yourself. Now you're going to hate this part. It's going to be really uncomfortable, maybe even painful. Your brain is going to have a lot of mean things to say. And those thoughts are going to cause physical sensations in your body of anxiety and shame. That's okay, nothing has gone wrong. I think of it as exposure therapy.

You're also going to want to work on your thoughts, which I'll get to in a minute, but don't underestimate the power of exposure and repetition of visual images to literally reset your brain's appreciation levels. I'm going to tell you how to change your thoughts about your photos, but even if you didn't do that, and you just in the beginning, forced yourself to look at photos of yourself every day, over time, you would get acclimated to them, and feel better about them, just because of your brain's default processes.

But we do not have to do it the forceful, painful way. There is also thought work. So exposure notwithstanding, the reason that you hate photos of yourself is also what you think when you see them, plain and simple. That

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feeling of shock or disgust or shame that you feel when you look at a photo of yourself, it's caused by your thoughts. And one of the primary trouble thoughts people have about photos, is believing that photos show how they "really look."

We all see ourselves in the mirror all the time. And other people see us through their own eyes, which perceive light and shadow and height and color, and all sorts of things differently. Angle also makes a huge difference. There are some great articles online showing different angles of the same face, and how different they look on film.

But the truth is, there's no such thing as the way we "really look." There's no such thing. I'm going to say that again. There is no such thing as the way we "really look." A photo is just one lens, as is a human eye, or an animal eye. Your pet sees you differently. And as any professional photographer will tell you, different camera lenses produce vastly different photos and appearances. Your appearance does not exist in a real, objective sense. It only exists as it is perceived, right? Light bouncing off of the form of you creates your appearance. And it depends on who is looking, from what angle, with what kind of eye or lens.

So one good thought work tool, probably my favorite in loving photos is to practice seeing a photo as just one perspective of you. It's not how you "really look." The fact that your brain automatically assumes that the most unflattering photo of you available is the truest one is also a good reason to suspect it may not be acting in your best interest, or even thinking logically about it.

Another thought work tool you can use with photos is to catalog your negative thoughts, and then replace them with neutral thoughts. This is a good exercise to do the first few times on purpose, sitting down with paper

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and pen. So choose a photo you have a hard time with, and look at it on purpose. Just expect that you will feel terrible. That's okay. It's part of the process. So first write down what you see, the way your brain tells it to you now. That probably means a lot of mean thoughts about how you look. That's okay. Write them down. Now, go through your thoughts, and practice coming up with neutral ways to describe those same parts of you.

For instance, if you wrote down, "My double chin is so ugly," you could practice a neutral thought, like, "I have a human chin." Or if you thought, "My hair is so frizzy," you could practice a neutral thought, like, "I have brown hair." Notice that the new neutral thought doesn't have to contradict the old negative thought. It's just a substitute way of describing yourself that you can practice thinking about the characteristics that you are currently judging negatively.

The third thought work tool I recommend for photos is preparation. We all know that when we look at photos of ourselves, we tend to have a negative reaction. I still occasionally feel that. It's an old brain habit, right? It happens. And you guys listening, you're probably in the thick of it. So let's plan on that, right? Instead of fearfully looking at the photo without preparing yourself, and then feeling like a grenade was thrown, pause before you open that email, or click on that Facebook notification, or look at that photo your friend took; take a breath, decide ahead of time what you're going to think.

And in fact, I recommend that you do this, not just before each photo, because you'll forget, or you'll be already freaked out. While you're listening to this podcast, right, or right afterwards, decide what go-to thought you're going to use every time you look at a photo of yourself, right? Something positive is awesome, but something neutral is also great. Like, "That's a photo of my human face and body." Or, "This is just one angle and one lens." Or, "This photo is not what I really look like any more than the best

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photo of me ever taken." Any of these kinds of neutral thoughts can help vaccinate you, so to speak. So practice them before you check out new photos of yourself going forward. Obviously, the more work you do on your thoughts about your body and appearance, the easier it is to look at photos. But practicing these photo specific tools will also help make looking at photos of yourself easier.

And in our social media heavy world, that is a big accomplishment. All right.

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