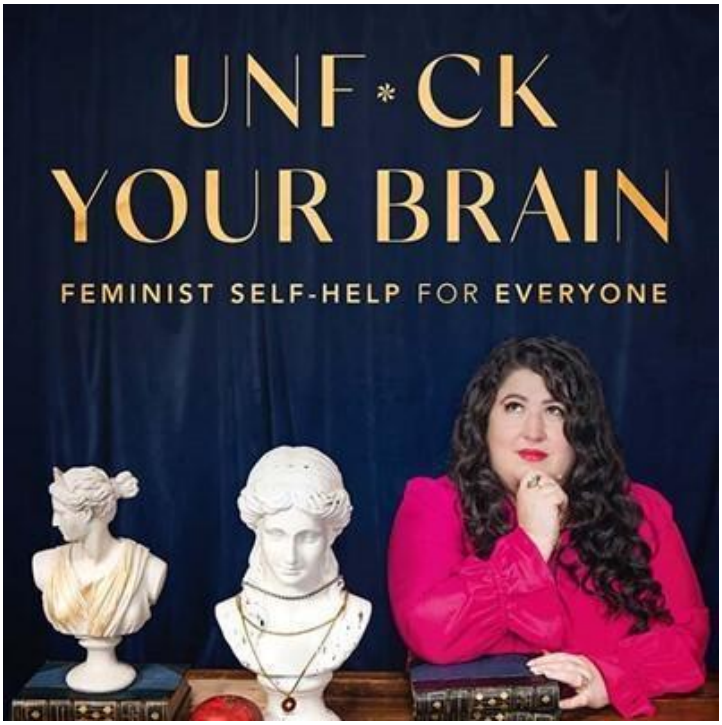
UFYB 102: Internal Bias & Being a Better Ally



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil

UFYB 102: Internal Bias & Being a Better Ally

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 you guys or girls or people who don't identify as either one or people who identify as chickens? So now that we have 100 episodes under our belt, that would be our collective belt, I guess. I actually don't own any belts.

If you follow me on social media, if you follow me on Instagram, which by the way you should because I post random little teachings and obviously pictures of my cat and various other things that I think are useful, it's just my name on Instagram. There's only one me, @karaloewentheil.

Anyway, if you follow me there, you see a lot of pictures of me and you will see that I am basically never wearing pants. I have a couple pairs of leggings and I wear pants to work out and that is it. All dresses all the time. So I don't have any belts.

But still, got 100 episodes of *Unf*ck Your Brain* out there, I kind of feel like we're at a new level. So last week, one of the things I talked about on the podcast was the human ecosystem, which by the way, if you haven't listened to that one, you should because a lot of y'all seem to love it. I got a lot of feedback about it.

So if you skipped it, seems like it was a good one. I mean, I thought it was a good one judging by everybody else's reaction. Sometimes I record things I think are brilliant and you guys are like, whatever. I just like to think you don't quite see the brilliance yet.

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Anyway, one of the things I talked about on that podcast was learning to love yourself exactly the way you are now before you finish all your self-improvement projects, before you become a mind management ninja or whatever you're trying to do. And I talk about this paradox on the podcast all the time that you have to love something before you try to change it.

Not because it makes you a better person. Just efficiency wise. It just is necessary to actually create the change. When you try to change something from resistance, it generally does not work. And just to recap for those of you who are newer to the podcast or to this work, that's for two primary reasons.

The first is when you have negative thoughts about something, your tendency will be to avoid those thoughts, which means you can't change them. If you aren't willing to hang out with your current thoughts and be curious and allow them, you can't look directly at them, which means you can't change them.

This is going to be a really important part of what I'm going to teach later in this episode. When you are in that mode, you're in too much of a rush to change your thoughts and so you try to do that without understanding them and that doesn't work because you can't solve a problem when you don't understand it.

So when you are trying to change something because you think it's bad and you want to get away from it, then you're in a rush and you can't actually fully understand the problem.

The second reason is that when you try to change something in your life so that you can love it, whether that's your job or your relationship or your body, whatever it is, what you're implicitly doing is believing that a different circumstance, a different external thing would make you happier.

And you think that would be motivating, but it actually creates an enormous amount of resistance because it makes the stakes too high. You want to change it to feel better, but you also subconsciously fear that changing it won't make you feel better, which is correct. That's the secret truth, which you kind of know deep down.

So you have these competing motivations where you want to change it to feel better, but you are afraid of changing it and finding out that you don't feel better, and then feeling hopeless. And because you want to feel better, you don't want to dig into the problem because you anticipate that dealing with the problem will make you feel worse.

So you're pulling in all these different directions and it creates all this spinning in place. So I don't know if any of you remember that movie, My Cousin Vinny. My brothers and I were obsessed with that growing up. I always think about when they get their car stuck in the Alabama mud and they can't go forwards or backwards because the wheels just spin and spin and spin.

That's what happens when you try to change something about yourself or external to you by hating it or rejecting it. And this includes yourself and your own thoughts, internal change as well.

Now, all of that I have taught before and that's the short version, but I wanted to give you the refresher because today I want to extend the concept and teach you about why stepping out of this spin and accepting yourself the way you are and not rejecting yourself, even loving yourself, but at least accepting yourself is essential not just to changing you and your own life, but changing how you show up in the world and how you can be an ally or part of a social justice movement if that's something you care about.

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Because one of the ways I see my students get into this stuck spin where they're trying to change something by rejecting it, I see that a lot in their relationship to external things, but today I want to talk about internal. And I see this around their thoughts about their own privilege and their own biases.

So today I want to teach you how to think about your own internalized biases from the thought work perspective. So let's start with the premise that we live in a society where a lot of people have thoughts about who's better or worse, and those thoughts tend to operate in predictable ways along gender, race, size, ability, sexual orientation, et cetera.

So obviously better or worse is incredibly simplified. There are a lot of complex ideas and thoughts that we're taught to think, and thoughts operating in predictable ways is also obviously simplified because there are a lot of different strands of thoughts in any society.

But I personally do believe that we live in a society where we are taught sets of biased thoughts about different kinds of people who don't match a kind of conventional "norm." Now, technically if you're in The Clutch and you're doing this work and you know the model, this is a thought. But it's a thought that I believe and I want to believe it and I like my reasons for believing it. And I like the results I get from it.

This is a belief that for me, fuels my work, not out of anger, frustration, or resistance but out of understanding and compassion and love. So I like those results and so I keep this thought. And this is my podcast so we're going to go with it.

If you don't believe that thought, that premise about society, you're allowed not to, but the rest of this podcast is probably not going to be useful to you. So we live in a society where people have a lot of thoughts that rank different kinds of people on various different appearance or intelligence or

worth or value or athletic ability or whatever else, based on different characteristics. And often, those are characteristics that are kind of common to a certain group.

And I think we can also say the way that I think about it is that prejudices are basically just thoughts that people think and act on. And so they are replicated through society by both explicit and implicit example. So the way that we learn to believe biased thoughts, which we all do, is that we are either told them explicitly or we are taught them in sort of implicit or indirect or story form, just by the way other people around us are acting and talking and what we're shown in the media and whatever else.

So if you grow up in a white supremacist society, meaning not if you grow up in Nazi Germany – that also, but if you grow up in a society where white people are considered more valuable than people who are not white, you were taught to believe the beliefs that undergird white supremacy.

When you think those thoughts – they're thoughts – you're taught to think and believe those thoughts about what white people and people of color. If you grow up in a patriarchal society, you're taught to believe the beliefs that undergird the patriarchy. So you are taught to think the thoughts that prioritize men above everybody else.

And these things are intersecting, so if it's a white patriarchal society, white supremacist patriarchal society, then you're taught to think thoughts that prioritize white men, and then if it's also a homophobic society, straight white men. Goes on and on.

And some of these, I would say these days, often it's much less explicit and much more often implicit, but that also depends on your parents, your social community, your school. Sometimes it is still explicit. We can say the same about any belief system that elevates some people over others.

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Ableism, sizeism, nationalism, homophobia, transphobia, religious intolerance, all in addition to racism, sexism, all the isms. All the isms, all the phobias. So I teach all the time that your unconscious thoughts are shaped by whatever you were taught to think by your parents, society, your education, the media, and that includes all of these kinds of negative biases about other people and ourselves.

We internalize negative thoughts we are taught about other people. And we internalize negative thoughts we're taught about ourselves, either directly – sometimes we're taught a thought that's specific to us that other people think about us, or because we're part of a certain group.

Now, I talk a lot on the podcast about the thoughts we've internalized about ourselves, but today I want to talk also about the thoughts we've internalized about other people. So how does this relate to loving something before we can change it?

Because that lesson isn't just about loving your body before you try to lose weight, or gain weight, or workout more or less, or loving your job before you try to change jobs. It also means you have to accept and love the parts of yourself that you'd rather not look at because you think they're ugly or wrong.

The thoughts you have that you think are shameful. The privileges you have that you think you should feel guilty about. If you look at how shame and guilt make humans act, it's very clear. These are not long-lasting behavioral change strategies. Guilt and shame can lead to short-term behavior change in order to avoid further rejection from others or from yourself.

But guilt and shame do not lead to long-lasting belief change, and I believe that belief change is the only thing that creates long-lasting behavioral

change for humans, and our actions, our behaviors create the results in the world that we can create for ourselves and that impact other people.

So if you believe that anyone who has sexist thoughts or racist thoughts or ableist thoughts is a bad person, guess what happens? You think you're a bad person. You avoid being honest with yourself about your sexist or racist or ableist thoughts. You try to prove to yourself and everybody around you that you aren't sexist or ableist or racist and that you don't have those thoughts.

You're constantly trying to act your way out of feeling guilty or ashamed about the thoughts you have. But here is the thing; everyone raised in a patriarchal society has sexist thoughts. Everyone raised in a racist society has racist thoughts. Everyone raised in an ableist society has ableist thoughts. Everyone raised in a sizeist society has sizeist thoughts.

I could do that for every single phobia and ism, but you get the point. If you're raised in a society that teaches you these ideas, then you have these thoughts. Now, you may be more or less aware of them, and more or less engaged in doing the work to undo them, but we all have them.

The problem is that because you want to be a good person and not be sexist and not be racist and not be ableist, you want to reject these thoughts. But when you set up a rule for yourself that these thoughts are bad and that bad people have them, you actually make it much harder for you to truly change your own, rather than you make it easy to try to avoid them and pretend they don't exist, but you make it very difficult to actually change them and get to know them so you can transform them.

Because you're so judgmental of yourself for having them that you can't be honest with yourself about what's going on in your brain. One of the core values of all the work I teach is that no change is possible without honesty with yourself. And the whole reason we are not honest with ourselves is

that we judge ourselves, and we judge our thoughts, and we create guilt and shame, and then we want to avoid them.

And one of the biggest problems is that we are taught by society that guilt and shame are useful emotions that will create a good result for us, and that's not true. When you judge yourself for having sexist or racist or homophobic or whatever kind of thoughts, you aren't able to be honest with yourself.

It doesn't matter that your intentions are good that you're trying to guilt and shame yourself for "good" reasons. It's just like shock therapy. If you produce feelings of guilt and shame in your body when you judge your own thoughts, whatever they're about, you will naturally want to avoid them. It's like an animal instinct.

Learning to process emotions will help with this, but if you just keep generating more and more guilt and shame for yourself about your own thought process, it's going to be very difficult to actually get to know and change your thoughts. And that's the irony.

Because the whole reasons we don't want to have biased thoughts is that we don't want to be the kind of person who has those thoughts. We think they're bad and harmful. But when we believe that we shouldn't have those thoughts and they're bad and harmful, we actually make it more likely that we will keep thinking the biased thoughts we have unconsciously forever without changing them.

Because so many of these biases are subtle and unconscious. And it's easy to just ignore them. It's easy to keep the light off in the scary basement and just never go down there. We think the best thing we can do to be an ally to others and even to ourselves is to not think those thoughts.

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But we usually don't even know what we're thinking. And if we judge and shame ourselves about it, we are never going to find out. And if we don't find out what we're actually thinking, if we can't hold the space to be honest with ourselves, we're never going to be able to change it.

Now, maybe I think there are people who will say you should feel guilty and ashamed and that's going to motivate you, and you should be willing to have those feelings. And I totally agree, you should always be willing to have your own feelings. But in my experience, creating a lot of guilt and shame for yourself about your own thoughts, for most of us, it does not lead to a willingness to spend more time with those thoughts and really look at them and change them.

It just leads to avoidance. I teach not to judge your own thoughts about anything in the world, and that includes this. Because it's a moral issue and not to coddle you, but because it's just counterproductive. Feeling guilty about your privilege is useless. It's totally self-serving. It's a way of signaling to yourself that you're a good person.

But it doesn't do anything for people outside of you. Guilt doesn't motivate productive action. Shame does not motivate productive action. No one who truly, I believe, has a liberation agenda wants your guilt and shame because those are useless. You can't donate your guilt and shame. You can't vote with your guilt and shame. You can't send them on your behalf to the organizing meetings.

And when you do take action from guilt and shame, you don't feel confident. You don't think strategically, and you generally don't get a good result. You're defensive, you're ego-driven, and you're avoidant. You're acting out of agitation to get away from your feelings and I don't think that that works.

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I have spent a lot of time observing social justice work. I was a litigator, a reproductive rights litigator. I was an executive director of a non-profit think tank. I volunteered as a clinic escort at emergency rooms as a sexual assault advocate for Planned Parenthood. And I've been a board member of a grassroots membership organization on working on women's health at the National Women's Health Center.

I've had a lot of different roles in the social justice movement. And I always found it was very clear who was there to do the work because they believe in the work, and who's there to prove to themselves and everyone else that they're a good person.

And I'm not judging those people. We are all motivated by that ego when we aren't managing our minds, but it shows up very differently. And again, I say that with total compassion. Self-loathing feels terrible no matter what variety or flavor it is. And I think so much of the posturing and virtue signaling that we have in our social justice communities these days is driven by the same self-loathing and insecurity and the desire to perform being a good person.

And it's such a waste of time and human energy that could be harnessed for whatever cause you actually care about. If I have learned anything from coaching hundreds of women and doing this work on myself, I know that to truly create change in your own life or in the world, you have to start inside your own mind and you have to start with acceptance.

And acceptance is not the same as indifference. Acceptance is actually the first step to change. Only when you can accept what is happening in your own brain and be curious and kind with yourself do you have a chance of changing what's going on in there. And if you want to change the world, you have to change what's happening in your own brain.

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If you want to change how you show up for yourself and others, you have to change how you think. And a big part of that is being willing to be honest with yourself about what is going on in your mind. Without judgment, without guilt, without shame.

When you learn to do this, that is when you can show up to help others in a more effective way. That's when you can feel confident to speak up when it's your time to speak up, and you can feel confident to be quiet when it's your turn to be quiet. You can feel confident to hear what other people have to say without taking it personally.

So much of the hesitation I see in my clients about participating in social justice causes or even just taking individual steps to create change in their own relationships, their own communities, is they fear the shame they will feel if they're told they're wrong. This is that fragility and defensiveness that comes from not being willing to be wrong and not knowing how to process your emotions and not judge yourself.

What if you had your own back enough to be willing to be wrong? What if you knew that shame is just a sensation in your body that won't hurt you? What if you knew that even when you want to fall into a pit and disappear, nothing has gone wrong?

When you stop judging the shit out of yourself all the time, you won't be so cowed by other people's opinions and judgment. When you accept that you are sexist and ableist and racist and sizeist, when you own that and you are doing the true internal work to see and change that, you won't be so terrified that someone else might call you out.

We're only ever afraid that other people are going to confirm our worst beliefs about ourselves because we are ashamed of ourselves. And when you're trying to motivate yourself with guilt and shame, that's what other

people can trigger in you when they unknowingly repeat your own thoughts to your face.

But when you have unconditional love and acceptance for yourself and are genuinely curious about your mind and genuinely believe that of course, you are inherently biased and have inherently biased beliefs and you actually want to see them, it's not a problem to be told you're wrong. It's not a problem for someone to say that you just said something or did something that they believe was sexist or racist or ableist or sizeist or homophobic.

You won't feel immediately defensive and ashamed. You'll actually be curious. And you'll be able to use your judgment to decide what you want to think and believe. Because this is the other thing. I think this is the third and last super important point about this.

A lot of what holds people back from deprogramming themselves and being more vocal about what they believe and contributing to change is the perfectionistic belief that there's a right way to be an ally or to be a feminist or to be anti-racist, or whatever it is. That there's a perfect ideology to follow and a perfect way of doing it, and that if you can do that, then you're good. You're a good ally, you're a good feminist, you're a good whatever, and that anything less than that is shameful.

And so it's better not to try at all if you can't figure out the perfect thing to do that will protect you from any reproach. Internal reproach or external reproach. But that's literally impossible. There's no certified set of opinions from the universe in any movement. I was part – I still am, but someone who's been part of the feminist movement for 20 years in a professional capacity and probably 30 years in my personal capacity.

Working on feminist issues in feminist organizations. It was all I did every day all day long for literal decades. I can tell you there are as many

disagreements about what the feminist line or position should be on something as anywhere else.

Serious disagreements about what is truly feminist or more feminist or less feminist or the right feminist perspective or whatever it is. I mean, as you all can imagine, a lot of people think I am doing feminism wrong right now by having this podcast and having clients and making money, and even worse, talking about making money and not using trigger warnings and whatever else I do that is not the right kind of feminism for whoever is thinking about it in a given moment.

All a social movement is is a bunch of human brains with thoughts. Some of which are the same, and some of which are very different. It's all just thoughts. And it all just depends on what those people care about. I always remember when I was first doing this work and sort of the podcast started to get big and I was working through a lot of my own thoughts about this, my brother said to me, "Just think about all of the professional sports coaches who get death threats based on the calls they make in games."

That just immediately freed me because it was such a good example of how it's all just thoughts. I find that silly. I mean, I find that hilarious. It's not hilarious for someone to get a death threat, but to me, the idea of caring enough about what a sport game decision was to threaten to kill someone is so crazy.

But to that person, so deeply held and felt. And I was like, oh, the same must be true about feminism and any other movement. What we care so deeply about, someone else doesn't care about at all, and all these disagreements that we have that are so deeply felt to us, they matter to us but they're also just thoughts.

And all a movement or a community is is a bunch of human brains with thoughts. And they won't always agree. So there's just no possible way for

you to ensure that you “do it right” because there’s literally no set of opinions you can hold or actions you can take or thoughts you can have that someone who cares just as much as you do about an issue couldn’t believe was wrong and stupid and the exact opposite of what you should believe and do.

And when you study the intellectual history of any social justice movement, this is so clear that there are really big divisions in people’s beliefs about should we be extremist or accommodationist? Should we work for change from the inside or the outside? Which of these beliefs are problematic and which aren’t?

No matter what you say or do, someone may tell you that you did it wrong. And a lot of us take that as a reason not to do anything. But I think it’s the opposite. It’s the best reason to try to do something if that’s something you want to do.

Because there’s no objectively right answer. And there’s no way of being a feminist or anti-racist or body positive or fat positive or anything else that everyone can agree on. So all you can do is be honest with yourself about your thoughts and educate yourself about experiences different than your own about the impact of people’s thoughts in the world that you maybe don’t experience, and try to make the world a little bit better than you found it, if that’s something you’re interested in.

For me, it is. It’s a big part of what drives me. So if any of this resonated with you, and that might mean you do social justice work but you feel burnt out, or it might mean you want to get more involved in local activism but you’re scared, or it might mean you want to learn how to stand up to the racist uncle at Thanksgiving, or you want to say something about the sexist jokes at work, whatever the scale you want to work on.

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If this is work you want to do, I encourage you to join The Clutch so that I can help you do it. Because one of the things I think is so special about The Clutch and that I've created 100% on purpose is that it's an entirely non-judgmental atmosphere.

We do not operate based on call out culture. There's no shaming or guilting. But we are also not there to just validate each other and virtue signal back and forth, which is sometimes what I see on the opposite side of that spectrum. That's useless bullshit.

That's it for this week, my chickens, from my heart to yours. I'll talk to you next week.

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.