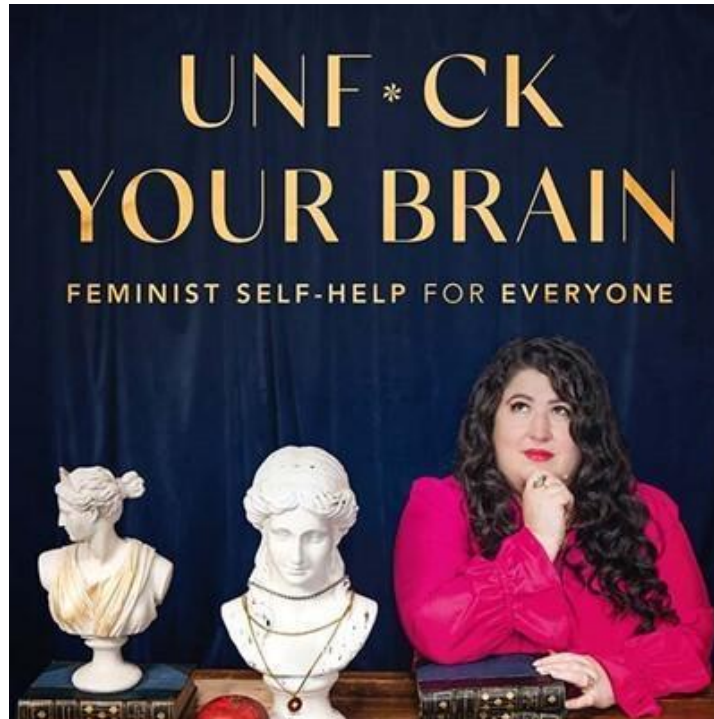


UFYB 130: The What If Parade



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. How are you all? As I am writing this episode, I am watching the snow fall out the window. It's very peaceful outside. It is not so peaceful in my brain. At least it was not this morning. I woke up, my brain was running a million miles a minute into the future. I know you can all relate.

So my brain loves to go on what I call the what-if parade. It's like I'm watching a parade but it's a parade of horrors. So every single float is just a what-if of every possible catastrophe that could arise. Here's everyone you love dying. Here's your business collapsing. Here's your cat running away and getting run over. Here you're losing a limb. Here's global apocalypse, breakdown of the supply chain, and you don't even know how to sew, so then what are you going to do?

My brain is so creative when it wants to be about the bad things, and probably yours is too. So the first thing to know is that this is just what brains do. We tend to freak out and think that either our brain is telling us the truth and we need to believe it all, or that our brain is malfunctioning and we have a serious problem. Something has gone really wrong.

But neither of those are true. I'm someone who has dedicated myself to this practice of managing my mind, and I probably spend more time doing that actively than literally 99% of the world. And my brain still does this. It's totally normal. Managing your mind is called managing it because you will always have a human brain.

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So yes, the frequency and the severity of the freakouts go down over time, but it's not a project that's ever finished. It's not turn yourself into a positive robot and you never have to do it again. Just the first thing to know is when your brain is doing this, it's normal. It's trying to protect you.

Your brain has a bias for the negative. You know that friend of yours who likes kind of melancholy music, and full disclosure, that friend is me. Whenever my brother gets in my car with me he says, "Can we please not listen to your sad girl music?"

I don't think it's sad. I like it. But that's what your brain is like. It prefers to imagine sad and scary things because it wants to protect you and it thinks that that is what it's doing. That's why it subjects you to the what-if parade. The problem is most of us don't understand it's a parade and costumes. It's like Mardi Gras.

We don't understand it's Mardi Gras. We think it's logical and objective and just a reasonable prediction of the future. We think we're psychic instead of watching a made-up parade. So we freak the fuck out. It's like we're a little kid who doesn't know that the parade is just actors and floats and costumes. It's all imagined and made up and acted out, but we think it's really happening.

Your primitive brain especially does not know the difference between what's really happening and what you are only seeing or imagining. This is why people like scary movies. Because they legitimately get scared. It's on a screen. It's on a screen and you're completely safe, but your primitive brain evolved way the fuck before technology, so it doesn't know the difference.

So step one is to remind yourself that the parade is an illusion. It's not real and it's not really happening. In the moment that you are watching the parade, most of the time, nothing is happening to you right now. So when

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that starts happening, you can notice that your body is physically safe, that what you are imagining is not actually around you.

Look around the room, fix your eyes on something that is there, feel your feet on the floor, breathe, and imagine how an animal feels who is physically present without imagining scary future things. This is something that humans know how to do and that you can learn to do, and that humans have been doing for thousands of years.

I've talked about this in the last few weeks a lot but we are living in a time when we have an unrealistic expectation of how much we can control our lives and how smoothly and peacefully everything should go. And so we've bought into the lie that what's around us determines how we're going to feel.

But since humans existed, they have been living in uncertain times and having to learn how to feel safe and kind of grounded wherever they are. It's something a lot of meditative and religious traditions focus on for a reason. So you can learn to do this.

Once you've gotten that little bit of grounding, there are two tools you can use on the what-if parade, and in a funny way, they're kind of opposites, but they do work together. You don't have to use them in order. Some of you will need to do both. Some of you can skip the first one, go straight to the second one.

But I don't want you to do only the first one. This will make sense when I explain them to you, but this is just the preface. You can do one and two, or you can just do two. But don't just do one. I'll explain why.

So the first tool is called let's go there, or just go all the way there. When your brain is showing you the parade of horrors, the tendency is to want to look away, distract yourself, or to get totally sucked into this immersive

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VR experience in your brain of the horribleness of it. What your brain is not doing in that moment is actually using your prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain that can problem solve.

So what I see happen so much in my students, and even in myself, is that my brain will go to the worst-case scenario, but then it just stops and watches it play like passive movie that we can only view. When you're watching a horror film on TV, you can't intervene. But when it's your own brain and your own life, you can.

So if you're going to go there, go all the way. Say, "Okay brain, let's say that does happen. That worst-case scenario happens. Now, I'm in that worst-case scenario. What would I do? How would I handle it? How would I want to think and feel and act? What would I do if I was there?"

Many of us get paralyzed in the face of an imaginary crisis, even though a lot of us are actually pretty good at making decisions and coping in a real crisis. So you got to bring that part of your brain online. The part of your brain that would actually analyze a real-life crisis and decide what to do, you need to use that on your imagined crisis.

One of the big problems with the current virus pandemic right now is that the vast majority of people are totally safe and fine physically right now, and there aren't any actions, additional actions that they need to take. So they're just experiencing this predicted crisis in their brains, but without thinking through whatever actions they would actually take.

The people actually experiencing a health crisis are dealing with it. They are trying to get the care they need. They may be having to make hard decisions. They are actually interacting with it, not just passively imagining it happening to them.

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Humans are incredibly resilient, including you. And humanity has survived so many crises. Many of us alive today have been unbelievably lucky to not yet have experienced anything like a war or a famine or a plague or a breakdown of infrastructure or political collapse, or any of the crises that humans have endured over the millennia, and still happen in a lot of other places around the world all the time.

We are all going to die one day. My friend actually texted me yesterday and said, “I listened to your pandemic panic podcast and it’s hilarious how the most comforting thought right now is we were all going to die anyway and we didn’t know when.” It’s true. The reason it’s calming is that that’s really the eternal truth.

But until then, we do have internal and external resources. All of us. We can figure out what to do, how to cope with whatever happens. It doesn’t mean we’re going to love it. It doesn’t even mean we’re going to get the outcome we like. But we can trust ourselves to do the next best thing that we can see, whatever happens.

So when my brain presents me with a crisis, I think through what I would want to actually do. Not just watch it happen to me in a vision of a future where I apparently cannot think, reason, talk, or do anything. I want to actually go there and be like, okay, if this did actually happen, what would I want to think? How would I want to feel? What actions would I take?

Again, knowing I can’t completely control the outcome, but you’ll be amazed how different it feels to just imagine yourself a passive victim, and to imagine yourself showing up the best you can, taking whatever actions you can take. Even though you know you can’t completely control the outcome, it feels completely different, those two scenarios.

So take it all the way there and actually have your brain problem solve, rather than just watch the horror show happening and assume you wouldn’t

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take any action, you wouldn't handle it, you would do nothing, you would just give up and lay in the street. It's why one of the greatest sources of peace for me is the thought, "I trust myself to handle whatever happens when the time comes. I have handled hard things before and I will again."

That is part of the human experience. My teacher says being a human is not supposed to be a vacation. And that does include the ultimate thing we fear. The illness or death of loved ones and even ourselves. Those are inevitable parts of life. We will have to handle them at some point, no matter what.

Our brain basically tells us that if this current crisis, whether it's COVID-19 right now or you're listening to this podcast in two years and it's something else, didn't exist, we could live forever and never experience grief or sadness or loss and we and everyone we love would be immortal.

So then we get obsessed with avoiding or solving the current crisis, as if once we do that, we'll never have to grapple with our own mortality or lack of control ever again. That's not true. The day of reckoning with our own mortality and that of our loved ones is always out there on the horizon, and how lucky are we for that to be true? Because it means we're still alive now.

So there's no avoiding that day. We don't get to control when it comes ever, whether there's a pandemic or not. And just coming back to that truth is so grounding. So go all the way there. That's true. Now, if this worst-case scenario happened, how would I want to show up knowing that ultimate truth? What would I do?

So once you've done all that, you've actually taken it to that worst-case scenario but played it out, thought about how you would want to think and feel and act and show up, realize that you can trust yourself to take that next best action, now you're ready for step two. And that is let's turn around and watch a different parade.

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And this is what I like to call the parade of possibilities. Because left to its own devices, our brains will only create and watch a parade of horrors. But horrible outcomes aren't the only outcome that can happen ever. And horrible imaginings aren't ever the only imaginings available to us.

So it's important to give your brain a better project, which is to imagine the parade of possibilities. You can call it whatever you want. Parade of positive outcomes, parade of beautiful happenings, it's up to you. To me, possibility always seems inherently positive if I haven't attached anything negative to it.

So I like parade of possibilities. Either way, the truth is that we do not know the future and we spend so much time imagining a negative version of it. And you have to be wise to your brain. A lot of us were doing this well before the pandemic. For most of us, this is not the first time that our brain has decided to fixate on possible terrible outcomes.

Let's be real about that because our brain likes to pretend that it totally wasn't like that before and this is now the really serious true one that you need to listen to about. No. Your brain was already like this, and we spend a lot of time imagining negative outcomes, so it's important to try to use our brains on purpose to imagine the counterproposal possibilities.

What if you and your loved ones get through this period just fine? What if doctors discover a cure faster than we thought? What if society changes for the better after this is all over? That doesn't mean we are denying that some people may and will probably suffer and die during this period, but again, that statement is literally true of any given moment in all of human history.

It was true before the pandemic, it's true after. Past, present, and future, that statement has always been true. The biggest lie your brain tells you is

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that when an external circumstance changes suddenly, everything is different and terrible in some new real way.

But it's all part of human life. It's part of the human experience. Every circumstance humans have ever experienced, it's all part of the package. There's always suffering and illness and death in the world, and there's always beauty and joy and birth in the world. Always. There's always both.

So you have to direct your brain to spend some time imagining the parade of possibilities. What if you're closer to your friends and family after this? What if you show up in a different way because of this experience? What if you get inspired to create the life you really want when you've been on autopilot? What if it shakes up your relationships in a way that needed to happen? What if there's meaning or wisdom to be gained from going through this growth?

We resist coming up close to the reality of the impermanence of human life so much and yet it is that very impermanence that gives it meaning. So don't just watch the parade of horrors. If your brain starts playing it, go all the way there, but then turn around and watch the parade of possibilities, of what could be, of the most positive outcomes you can imagine.

When you think about what we teach of your thoughts creating feelings, actions, and result, we need people imagining that parade of possibilities. Otherwise they never come into being. The scientist we want to invent a cure or a vaccine, they have to be imagining those possibilities.

The people we want to create political change based on this; they have to be imagining those possibilities. We have to imagine the positive possibilities in order to make them come true, whether that's in our own life or in our community, or nationally, or internationally. All the same.

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It's a beautiful parade and it's always available to us. We just have to remember to turn around and look at it. So remember to turn around, look at the parade of possibilities. So if you want to do your part to make the what's possible parade come true, you have got to know how to use and organize and manage your time.

All of us struggle with time management or have struggled with time management. I certainly used to. And a lot of us are working under very different conditions now than we used to. Have a beautiful week, my chickens. I will 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.

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