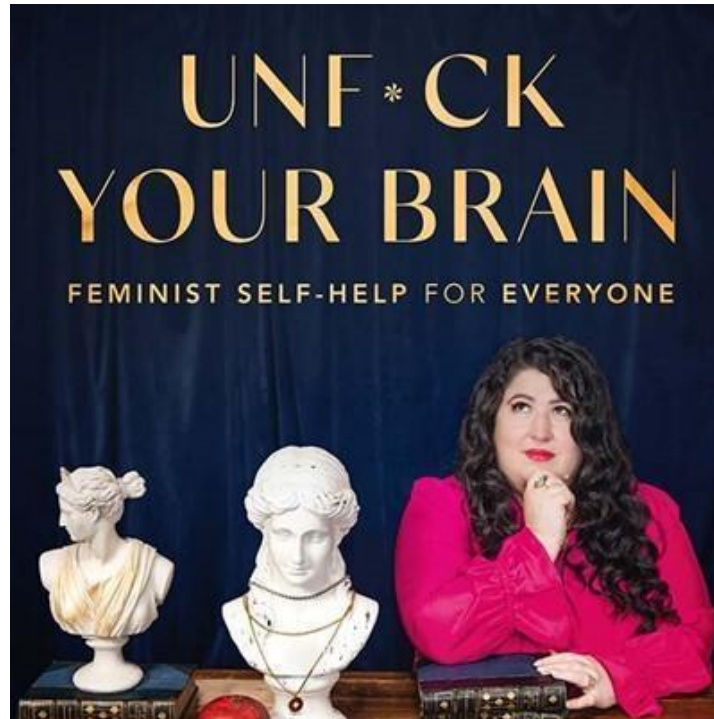


UFYB 132: Pleasure First Principle



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? It is a strange experience to be recording these podcasts right now because I often record them a few at a time, and right now we're in those first few weeks of the COVID-19 spread, and it's hard to know what's going to be happening in the next few weeks when this is released.

But at the same time, it actually doesn't matter at all because the whole point of thought work is that it's not the circumstances that create our feelings. It's always our thoughts, and we always get to choose how we want to think, how we want to show up, and what we want to feel.

And everything I teach applies in a time of peace and in a time of pandemic because it's always about we can't control the outside. How can we manage ourselves on the inside? If you are observing your mind, it's such a fascinating exercise to watch how your experience can ricochet from panic to totally fine, depending on what you happen to think or read or hear in a given moment.

Because it all depends on what thought you're having at any given time. I think this is one of the most powerful thought work practices, even in a moment like this is that you can feel the difference in your own emotional experience, just based on what you happen to be thinking about.

So if you're thinking about the news and statistics for an hour and freaking out, and then you get distracted by your cat doing something cute, in the moment you're looking at your cat doing something cute, you are no longer having those emotions because you're thinking about something else.

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So it's just such a beautiful opportunity to really observe how different our internal experience can be, based on what we think about. No matter what's going on outside. And I think that when something "serious" is happening in the world, I'm putting quotes around it because serious is an optional thought.

Now, I might have it personally about these circumstances and I might like or not like that thought, but it is a thought. And so when there is a lot of change happening and a lot of uncertainty and a lot of fear and everyone else is very freaked out, we tend to think that means we need to be freaked out too. And that if we're not freaking out, it means we aren't taking it seriously.

And I think we also tend to think that it's frivolous or not responsible to enjoy ourselves or care about rest or relaxation or pleasure. But that's not truly any different than stressing yourself out about your job, pretending that stress now will make it easier for you to be happier later. And you have to remember that it's your primitive brain that thinks you should be in a state of sort of heightened fear arousal all the time to stay safe.

So again, if you are a little animal that is about to be eaten by a bigger animal, and the bigger animal is circling you, it's true. That's not a good time to close your eyes and take a bath. You're in imminent physical threat. The part of your brain that evaluates danger evolved from evaluating imminent physical threat to you, but that's not what we're experiencing right now, most of us, and especially if we aren't ill at all.

It's not imminent physical threat. Taking a bath will not make you - it's not like if you relax your vigilance of reading the news, the virus can get you. That's not how it works. It's the wrong model for what we're dealing with. So you have to really understand that you don't have to stay in that heightened fear arousal state all the time to try to stay safe.

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Your brain thinks you do but that's the part of your brain that evolved to handle being a guinea pig or a lizard. Not a human who's dealing with a different kind of situation. So that's why I have come up with what I call the pleasure first principle.

I came up with this idea after learning about Profit First, which is a book and concept created by a financial coach named Mike Michalowicz. I probably just pronounced his name wrong. Sorry Mike, who I've met, who's lovely. The basic concept is that you have to decide ahead of time how much profit you want to get out of your business, rather than just wait to see what you have left.

So stay with me. This is not a business episode. I'm just giving you this analogy and it'll make sense. Most entrepreneurs just set a revenue goal, or they don't set a revenue goal. They just kind of see what they happen to make, and they see what their expenses happen to be, and then their profit is just what is left after all those things happen to them.

It's a terrible framework because you aren't deciding ahead of time how much revenue to create or how much to spend on expenses, or how much profit you want to have at the end. So you don't have a bigger framework guiding your decisions, and it's like not planning your calendar. You're just making momentary decisions based on all sorts of different fleeting thoughts and feelings because you don't have an overarching strategy.

So what the book teaches is that instead, you need to decide ahead of time how much profit you'll take out at the end of the year. You got to set aside money for taxes, and then what's left is what you have for your expenses, rather than just letting your expenses happen to you and being like, "Do I have any money left over? I guess that's my profit."

This is a very basic version of what he teaches, obviously, because the episode is not really about that, but I want you to understand the concept

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because I'm going to use it as a metaphor for life. That's why we need a pleasure first principle.

Because so many of us start from thinking about our obligations. We think about what we have to do, all of our responsibilities, all of the required things. Some of those might be external requirements like your job says you have to be at the office this many hours a day. And a lot of them may be internal.

A lot of us have kind of "requirements" that are just thoughts, like our house has to be a certain level of clean, our kids have to go to a certain number of enriching activities a day or they won't get into the right preschool, we have to cut and color our hair for three hours every month. Whatever we've come up with as the things we have to do.

So we allocate time to those obligations to work to our families, to other people, and then whatever little time is left, that's what we think we have left over for ourselves. And what I think is really striking is that for women, people socialized as women, who identify as women, a lot of that us time that's a little bit of time left over, a big proportion of just that little bit of time is not really for things we love or true pleasure.

A lot of it ends up being things that we think we have to do to conform to acceptable social beauty standards. And we've been taught to think that that's me time. So listen, I love a massage and spa day. Don't get me wrong. A massage is for me. But nail appointments, blowouts, I like how I look with those things because I've been socialized to.

So yes, I get some enjoyment out of the end result, but it's really time spent conforming to a social beauty ideal. Not exactly time that is truly about what is pleasurable and restorative for me. I have made my peace with those things. I know I can love myself however my hair looks or without nails. Part of it is the professional upkeep for me.

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But I still recognize that that's socially constructed. What we've decided is professional, right? And for you, it might be whatever, buying a lot of makeup or tanning, whatever else we do. In other words, those are things we do that, yes, we may get some pleasure from. People get pleasure from makeup, but they're still things that are sort of created and assigned to us as our idea of what should be our me time or our down time or things we do just for us, when really, they're still socially created and sometimes they are pleasurable.

Often I think we're doing them - what's pleasurable is that it helps us stave off self-critical thoughts about our appearance. Like if you wear makeup because you feel better with makeup on because when you're not wearing makeup, you think thoughts about how bad your skin is, is that really pleasure or is that more just trying to avoid pain?

And I just think it's important to notice that that's what we are told and think are supposed to be our self-care or pleasure time is all these activities that are still part of conforming to a socially constructed beauty ideal. And for some of us may really be just about trying to tamp down our self-criticism, not actually pleasure.

And then the other thing we're sold as pleasure are activities that are really just numbing out. Things that could be pleasurable when done a certain way, but that many of us do in a way that is not pleasurable. So drinking or eating or Netflix or shopping.

When we're doing those things, sort of in inordinate amounts or amounts of time just to get relief from our anxiety or distract ourselves or get a temporary burst of dopamine because we can't bear to be alone with ourselves, all of that is socially condoned as pleasure for women. And I think that's because it's basically just self-medicating, and it profits all the companies who sell you all that stuff.

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Now again, of course, eating, drinking, watching TV, even purchasing something lovely, those can be activities that you really experience as pleasurable and obviously, especially eating is biologically pleasurable for us for a reason. But it's just interesting to notice what is marketed to us as women's pleasure, which is like, food or wine or Netflix or shopping. Things that involve us numbing ourselves out often and spending money.

So what I want to push you to do is to take the idea of your right to pleasure more radically, and I think that's when it starts to get interesting. There's plenty of advertising campaigns about how ice cream is your portal to pleasure. What about masturbation? What about time alone to do whatever you want that has no economic or familial or productive value?

Just reading a book that you want to read, whether or not it's great literature or educational. Having sex where you orgasm and your partner doesn't and that's fine and you don't worry about it. Going to a dance class or dancing in your living room in a way that doesn't burn many calories and isn't meant to be sexy but just feels free in your body.

Women are not encouraged to take real pleasure seriously because women's pleasure is disruptive. Society is based on women sublimating their own desires and pleasure to do everything they're socialized to do out of obligation for everyone else.

All of the restrictions on women's sexuality throughout the centuries show us how destabilizing a force women's pleasure and freedom can be. I'm using sexuality as an example of pleasure here. It's obviously not the only pleasure. But it is a pleasure that requires nothing else but your own body and belongs to no one else but you, so in some ways along with maybe eating, it's the most original primal pleasure, although even eating requires something outside of you. You need something to eat.

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The point is that pleasure is an important part of human life and it's something that you can experience whenever you want. Not every kind. You can't eat a particular cake if you don't have it. Some people don't enjoy or have trouble with sexual pleasure, but your physical body is able to experience some kind of pleasure and you don't actually need to purchase anything to do that.

It is a natural thing that you have access to. Laughing with someone you love, physical touch, even your own physical touch, looking at something beautiful in nature or in art. All of it is good for your immune system, it's restorative, it's good for your body, and you don't have to earn it. You don't have to deserve it. You don't need permission from anyone else to prioritize it.

That is why the pleasure first principle really flips our usual MO on its head. Rather than portion out all of our time and energy on obligations and then just see if we can squeeze in some pleasure at the end of the day that may not even be pleasure, just grooming or buffering, instead of doing that, we set aside time for pleasure first.

So that means when you do your calendaring, if you're following the system I teach you in-depth in *The Clutch*, or if you've listened to the overview podcast on it, which is episode six, you set aside your pleasure time first. What if you believed that time for pleasure was the most important thing you could do? What if it made everything else you do so much better? What if it made you more productive, more creative, more strategic, more brilliant? What if it just made your life more fun?

I don't think pleasure has to be instrumental. It doesn't have to make you better at anything else, but it's a fun side effect that I find it really does. Pleasure is the one thing that we are able to experience just for being alive. Babies, animals all experience pleasure. It's such a part of being a living animal, which we are. And when we deny it to ourselves or we crowd it into

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these tiny cramped moments of our lives, we end up living tiny cramped lives.

And so many of us are denying ourselves pleasure now with the idea that once we work hard enough or get good enough, then we'll finally be able to relax and enjoy ourselves. But what have we learned about the brain? That's not how it works.

If you train yourself to believe that you aren't good enough or haven't worked hard enough or pleasure isn't necessary or it's selfish or self-indulgent to prioritize it, you will only strengthen those neural networks over time. You're never going to achieve yourself to a place where your brain suddenly decides pleasure is great.

You'll never get to a place where you can suddenly relax and enjoy yourself. You have to prioritize pleasure now. And I think this work is even more necessary if you are feeling a lot of stress, if there's a lot going on. Your nervous system needs a break. Constant stress is not great for your body, and it's not necessary. It's okay to have moments of pleasure and more than okay. It's necessary. It's part of the human experience. It's physically good for you.

In any moment that you are safe and alive, you can experience the pleasure of being in your human body, of taking a breath, of feeling your feet on the ground, touching yourself gently or not so gently, if that's what you're into. When your survival drive is activated, more so than ever, that's a time to consciously deepen your breath, look for the small pleasures and beauties in life.

A flower outside, a bath, the touch of a loved one if you're lucky enough to have them around, their smile on a FaceTime call if you're not. We are never guaranteed more than this day and this hour. I don't think we should spend every moment in hedonism in case it's our last, because there are a

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lot of things that make life valuable and worth living, and if I have one hour left in my life, I probably want to spend some of it producing teaching for all of you and some of it in pleasure.

It's not about just unrestrained hedonism. But prioritizing our own pleasure is acknowledging we're not just brains. We're also bodies. Even art that we appreciate with our minds moves us in our senses, and taking the time to create and experience pleasure along with all of the meaningful work or caretaking that you do in your life is the best thing we can do for our own humanity and for our ability to show up and serve ourselves and others.

So whatever you are doing today, I hope you will pause for a moment and do something just for the pleasure of it because you can.

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