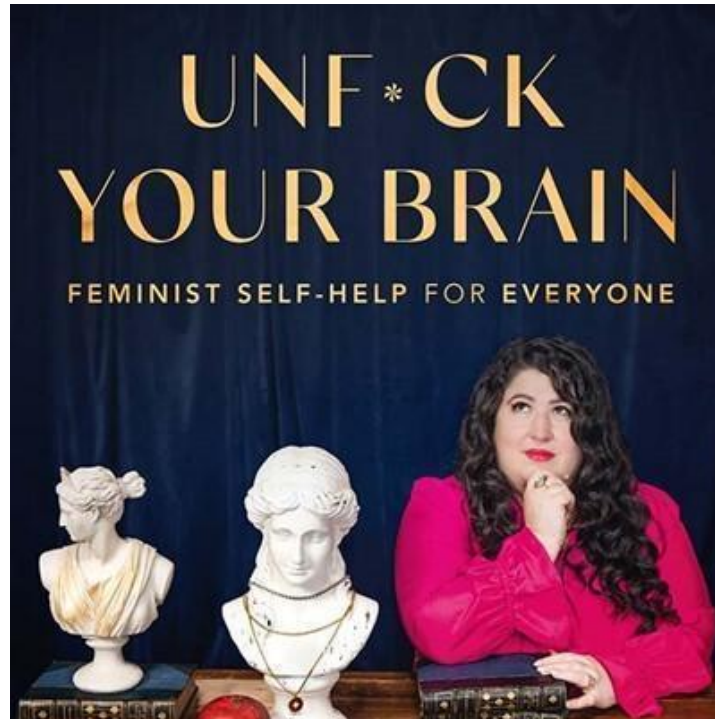


**UFYB 285: True Self-Care:
A Conversation with Dr. Pooja Lakshmin**



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.

Alright my chickens, I am super excited to have this conversation today because I think it's one that we all need and you all know how I feel about kind of the wellness industry telling you that the key to true self-care and self-empowerment is paying money to be groomed for patriarchal media standards. So my chickens have heard me rant about that quite a bit and it's totally fine. Listen, I did my hair today. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with doing that but this is not how I empower myself.

So we are going to be talking to Dr. Pooja Lakshmin who is an expert on self-care but has a really important take on it. And as you'll know, I was just saying to Dr. Pooja that I like to let my guests introduce themselves because I feel it's so socially acceptable for women to sit quietly while someone else praises them. And I think women should get on this podcast and be like, "I'm a fucking badass, listen to all this shit about me." So please, tell us who you are and what you do and how we got here.

Pooja: Well, Kara, I am so excited to be here. And yeah, I am Dr. Pooja Lakshmin. I am a psychiatrist specializing in women's mental health. So if we're talking about women's empowerment I will say I have an MD. I went to medical school. I have all the credentials.

Kara: Unlike some of us.

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Pooja: Well, and we can talk about my personal story too which I think is just as important. So I'm a psychiatrist and so I see patients two days a week right now. And all of my patients are women. And they live and work in Washington DC, although during the pandemic I moved to Austin, Texas. My patients are basically all of your little chickens in your audience who are high achieving, perfectionistic, boss ladies who are doing all the things and really struggling, not that we would know anything about that.

Kara: No. I always say I'm a perfect example of pure mental health that everyone should aspire to or an example of what to do in a half managed mind [crosstalk].

Pooja: So I see patients two days a week and then I also am a writer for the New York Times. So folks might know me from some of my New York Times writing. I wrote a piece called This is the Trail, Not Burnout, during the pandemic. So a lot of my, I call all of that my advocacy work because I can only see so many people one-on-one as a psychiatrist. And so I went on social media a couple of years ago, I started this professional account to really help educate because there's just so much crap out there. And so we need people that are actual experts and people that are willing to kind of call things out.

So I write for the New York Times and I'm the founder and CEO of a women's mental health platform called Gemma that I founded with two other psychiatrist friends, colleagues. And I have a book that I wrote that's called *Real Self-Care: Crystals, Cleanses and Bubble Baths Not Included*.

Kara: Oh my god. I knew the first title but I don't think I'd seen the subtitle which I love so much.

Pooja: Yeah. So I am just really excited to be here to kind of pull back the curtain on what we're calling self-care and share a little bit about what I

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think it really is. And just kind of dive in to how, especially if you're somebody who has tried all the things and still feels like you're just kind of drowning, what you can do instead.

Kara: Yeah, I love it. Okay, so let's just start with what is, how would you define self-care?

Pooja: So real self-care.

Kara: Yes, the real one, not the fake one.

Pooja: Yes. Real self-care is an internal decision making process that is threaded through every single big choice that you make in your life. So real self-care is something that you practice when you're deciding who your life partner is, what type of career you're going to have. Whether or not you want to have children, how you show up in your friendships and in your relationships.

It's actually an internal process of making really hard choices about how you spend your time and what you gave your energy to. And that is something that is also applicable to every single season in your life. It's not just something that you cross off, once and done. So in the book I share four principles. My whole schtick is very psychiatrist. I can't tell you the answer because everybody's answer for what is real self-care is different.

Kara: [Crosstalk] coaching too.

Pooja: Right, exactly. And the thing is that I think in a lot of self-help and I'm interested in your take on this too, Kara, in a lot of self-help I think people come to us because they really want an answer. They really want to know, "Well, okay, Pooja, fine, but what do I do? What do I actually do right now?"

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Kara: And that's what people think life coaches do. When I tell somebody who doesn't know about life coaching, when I do, they're like, "You tell people what to do?" And I'm like, "No, literally the opposite." I tell my partner what to do sometimes but I've never told a client what to do in their lives. But wait, let's back up, this is all so important and I want to touch, dig deeper into something you said earlier before we get to this part.

So the thing that I love about what you said about being threaded through your life and these big decisions and who your life partner is even if you want a life partner, even if you want to be single is that it's proactive. I think so many women think about self-care, it's like a cycle of I burn myself out with social expectations and self-imposed pressure and externally imposed pressure. But I get burned out, then I do a little self-care so that I don't lose my mind, then I burn myself out again and I do a little self-care.

It's sort of similar to one of the examples I often give for why you should change your thinking. Is that when people do things, like I have a friend in my life who uses exercise to manage her stress. There is beneficial effects of exercise on stress for sure. But obviously if you never change your thought pattern or your circumstances, you just create the stress, you exercise to release it, then you create the stress again, then you exercise to release it. And you're not building more resiliency really. And then if like my friend, you sprain your ankle one day, now you have zero tools. You don't know how to deal with your stress at all.

Pooja: Right, you're screwed.

Kara: Yes, it's like the drug that you used is not available anymore and now what are you going to do? And I think that what you're saying is so important because we treat self-care in the same way. It's like this pressure valve of, I really feel like I'm going to lose it so I'll go get a massage which is fine, I love massages. But as opposed to, wait, this actually has to be

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part of how I make proactive decisions about my life and I'm not just reacting to whatever happens to me. That is a very important piece of this.

Pooja: Yes. And so what you just touched on, so in the book I kind of differentiate between faux self-care, the massages and sort of these different methods that you're describing that we end up using just as an escape valve or a pressure valve. It's not that it's bad. You end up needing that escape because you feel like you're drowning. But one of the differentiators that I talk about is that faux self-care always keeps the status quo going in your relationships.

Whereas real self-care is going to cause small shifts or maybe big shifts in your relationships and in what people expect of you. And that's how we get to actual systemic change because the whole thing, a perfect example is a patient that comes in and is like, "Okay, Dr. Lakshmin, I'm stressed out. I'm burnt out. I'm not eating well. I'm not sleeping well and I feel like it's my fault because I have this meditation app on my phone that I know I'm supposed to be using but I just can't bring myself to use it."

And I'm just like, "Well, one, it's not your fault. You can't meditate your way out of a 40 hour work week with no childcare, without access to good health insurance, without equal pay." These are all systemic issues, but when we sort of use these faux solutions whether it's the massage, whether it's the wellness retreat, it's a band-aid. And it just keeps you still in that same cycle. Not to demonize the band-aid because there are times that we all need it for sure, but you have to then be able to understand, okay, I took that time out.

And now I need to come back and do the strategic internal work of having to make really hard choices in my life so I'm not constantly stuck in the cycle like you're talking about.

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Kara: Yeah, there's so many paths, threads and so on [crosstalk], okay. So in a minute I want to talk about systemic versus personal. But one of the things I want to say about this and the band-aid, the massage, the whatever. I actually think those things are wonderful but the whole reason we call them self-care is that women are socialized to never feel like they're entitled to use their own time or their own money to do anything or to relax. So I actually think the whole reason that we're like a massage is self-care is that is a label that makes us feel somewhat it's okay.

It's like I'm putting on my own oxygen mask as opposed to just being like, "I want to get a fucking massage, it feels good, I want to spend my money to do that." I'm allowed to ask my partner or my mother or whoever to watch the kids for an hour. It's almost like self-care, I think the reason that it's not that you need to give up doing these things. We don't even need to be calling those self-care, that's a cover story in some ways. It gives us a sort of rationale.

Self-care has become one of the acceptable things for people to do. And so that validates the fact that maybe we just sometimes want a massage or just want to watch, whatever it is that you feel guilty doing otherwise. And this gives you a justification framework.

Pooja: Well, and if I can pull on that thread if it's okay. I have a feeling this conversation, we're just going to be...

Kara: We're going to unravel this whole sweater.

Pooja: Yeah. Well, I think part of what you're talking about too is because for women we're conditioned to put our power in others. So we're constantly looking sort of for permission, for someone else to say, "This is the right thing." So when you call it self-care it is sort of a cover that you're

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able to say to your partner, “Well, I’m supposed to be doing self-care. We listened to that podcast together and that expert said.”

And whereas actually taking ownership of your choices and your time and saying for yourself, “No, this is something that I really like. This is something that’s important to me and I’m going to go do it.” And that is a lot more uncomfortable.

Kara: Right. And that’s so hard, [crosstalk] trouble with that. Totally. And it’s much easier to be like – and we have trouble saying that, much less being like, “Actually I want to sit down and renegotiate the terms of this whole marriage. Actually I want to sit down and renegotiate how we take care of the house and the kids. Actually I want a divorce or whatever it is.” Just it’s hard enough for us to be like, “I want to go get a massage.”

So I’d love to hear your thoughts on, it feels like this should be the end of the podcast, but since it came up I want to talk about it, which is this relationship between the individual and the systemic. So you’re dealing with systemic issues, maybe you don’t have access to affordable childcare. Maybe you don’t have access to healthcare. And I know my students have heard my schtick about this endlessly, about the relationship between individual empowerment and social change, but I’d love to hear your perspective on it and how that works with self-care.

Pooja: Yeah. So my perspective on the personal and the systemic really comes from my own life experience. So at this point I’m a psychiatrist, I’m 39 years old, I have this sort of professional life. But about a decade ago when I was in my late 20s I basically blew up my life. At that point I had done all the things that a good Indian girl was supposed to do. I went to the ivy league college. I became a doctor. I got married.

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Kara: That's similar to a good Jewish girl, I went through this whole process too on the lawyer side, yeah.

Pooja: Exactly. So you understand. And about two years into my psychiatry residency I was totally burnt out. I was also just really disillusioned because it was sort of okay, I'd checked all the boxes. And for the first time in my life I was like, "Okay, well, let me try to be happy now." And that was a failure because my whole life was built on everyone else's values, not my own. And then I was training to become a psychiatrist and I was seeing all these inconsistencies in mainstream medicine.

Okay, somebody comes in, a patient comes into the ER and they're unhoused, and it's like, okay, I can give you Zoloft, I can do therapy but what you really need is housing.

Kara: And while you're being seen by a resident who hasn't slept in 60 hours. That's a totally fine way to do medicine.

Pooja: Right. So obviously the American medical system is just a complete cluster.

Kara: Fuck.

Pooja: Okay, am I allowed to say that? Great.

Kara: It's *UnF*ck Your Brain*, we can curse there.

Pooja: Okay, great. Yes, the entire medical system is a cluster fuck. So I was questioning all these things and also burnt out. And so I left my marriage, I moved into a commune in San Francisco that studied female orgasm, meditation, spirituality. Pretty soon after that I dropped out of my residency program. So everybody in my life was just like, "Oh my God,

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what's happening to Pooja?" And I spent two years with this group and ultimately by the end of it I left, really heartbroken.

But also understanding that yes, the system is totally broken, but setting your life on fire doesn't actually fix the problem. You still have to do your own really hard work in your own life. And when you sort of make just a big dramatic change to try and escape really everything because everything feels like it's terrible or on fire.

Kara: Because you change all your circumstances but then you aren't going with you.

Pooja: Right. But you're still the same person and especially in the wellness world, I know you talk about this a lot. There's just as many hypocrisies and inconsistencies as there are in mainstream medicine. Unfortunately there's not any quick fix solution, there just isn't. Anybody who's telling you, "Here are these set of rules to follow, here is this new juice cleanse, here is this exercise plan." It might work for a couple of weeks but the actual sustainable change is something that is really hard and it is something that's going to take a long time.

So that was kind of my personal experience. And then of course I saw once I came back to medicine, built my practice, more and more patients coming in talking about the vaginal jade eggs and just all the things. And I think my take is that when the solution is commercial, when the solution is a bubble bath we have no chance of changing the larger systems. But when the solution is personal, we have a fighting change.

I tell a story in the book of a patient of mine who went through the real self-care process and that led her to having really hard conversations with her husband. And then finally on their third baby asked for a paternity leave, he had never taken a paternity leave, and got it. And so then that

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change at his workplace impacted every other employee that came through. My patient wasn't trying to be an activist or an advocate. She was just trying to not hate her husband and not get divorced.

But that's, when I talk about real self-care, that's what I mean. I can't give you exactly the answer to what that looks like in your life. But every single woman has something in their life that if you take personal action, if you show up in your relationships differently, if you start setting boundaries, if you start treating yourself with compassion, if you understand that you actually have power and agency, things are going to shift in your own life. And then that's going to cause change in your family, in your workplace, in other systems.

Kara: Yeah, I mean this is what I say all the time is, "Who do you think is making the social change?" It's humans with human brains. I come from the social justice world so I went to law school as a reproductive rights litigator. And then I was a reproductive rights academic. And I think there is this sort of story that sort of self-help or self-development is self-absorbed or selfish or just for privileged people or navel gazing. I'm just like, "You're completely misunderstanding what this is about and the power of this work."

Everybody who's ever changed the world had a different brain than the other people around them. They were thinking in a different way. They were like, "Wait a minute, I don't think the status quo does have to be this way." I don't think it's true that I am inferior or that we shouldn't be allowed to learn to read or wear pants or vote or whatever other kind of social change you're trying to create. So I mean I love that story that you truly just burned out your whole life and you were like, "Oh, shit, my brain came with me."

And that's so true. And my burned out was less dramatic but I quit my career right before I was about to become a law professor, I was like, "I'm going to be a life coach on the internet instead." And I'm glad I did that. I

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actually think my parents were equally concerned as if I had joined a San Francisco cult.

Pooja: Yeah, I mean I can imagine.

Kara: That was pretty much equivalent as far as they were concerned, that was the same decision at the time. They're supportive now, but it was the same thing, yeah, I'm glad I made that decision. Obviously the different circumstance was maybe a better fit for me but my brain came with me. I still had to do all that same work. So I just love that you took it all the way. You were like, "I'm going to change my life. I'm going to go as far as I can."

Pooja: I absolutely love what you just said, Kara, because I feel like we're spirit friends. We've never met before, for the folks that are listening, but this is truly...

Kara: Similar life tracks in a way.

Pooja: Yes. Well, and also I think part of the thing when I was writing *Real Self-Care* is I also wanted to kind of redefine self-help in some ways because I think because self-help is such a female predominated space.

Kara: Well, for men it's philosophy, men are like, "My thoughts about the world I had in the bath." They were not universal laws of nature. I saw [crosstalk] like that once and I was like, "Oh my God, yes." But women, you want to know why are we here and what should we do about it, what a cute female question. That's self-help.

Pooja: Right. Here is the style section. But the reality is that you have the people that are in the political space or in the law space or in the big think space that are trying to 'solve all the problems'. And they're turning their

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nose up at the personal development work, but they are so burnt out. They are so burnt out and cynical.

Kara: Also the whole reason we need self-help is that people aren't solving the bigger problems. The whole point of self-help is you're like, "I don't think society's going to help me, I'd better fucking help myself." That's the beginning of every revolutionary movement.

Pooja: And I think that there needs to be a circle here. There needs to be a connection. And absolutely, every single person, I think Shannon Watts' story from Moms Demand for gun violence is a perfect example. And I quote Audre Lorde a zillion times through the book, a lot of this obviously self-care as self-preservation comes from Black women, Black queer women.

But every single person who has done anything in the social justice space like you're saying has a different brain, is there because they've had some sort of moment where they've realized, actually I need to fight for my own self. I need to fight for myself in my own life. And then they realized that they wanted to do that for other people. But I think it's interesting because it also, we see it in our own, it doesn't need to be big and shiny and fancy and fill up your life, start a non-profit. It actually happens just in our social lives, in our communities.

It's that person who you admire. That person, that friend who actually does set boundaries and says what she's going to do, does what she says she's going to do. And has her own internal compass with how she's living her life. And that is just as powerful I think.

Kara: Yeah. I mean I often say maybe you want to be president of the United States, or maybe you want to be president of the PTA or you just want to be president of your family, whatever it is, whatever level you're

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working on. This isn't something that's yeah, that is limited by sort of what your scope is or what you're trying to change. So I want to hear about the kind of four pillars of your framework. But I do want to ask first because I think you talk about this. We talked a little bit about how this faux self-care harms women in general.

But do you think that it has a sort of maybe different, maybe related, but kind of specific harm for other marginalized people, women of color, sort of people who are dealing with another kind of marginalized identity as well?

Pooja: Yeah, 100% because if you are somebody who, just taking Black women in the workplace in particular, one of the first tenant or principle of real self-care is setting boundaries. But if you're a Black woman in corporate America, when you start setting boundaries you're going to be called the angry Black lady. And that's real. You will be penalized. We hear things like imposter syndrome which in actuality is really just oppressive toxic environments that have seeped into our internal psyche into our brains.

And if you're somebody who is constantly made to feel that you're not worthy of taking up space or that you're less than or that you need to prove your existence or your right to take up space then you're absolutely going to be fighting even harder. For me it was interesting in writing this book because my parents are Indian, I'm from India, I'm an immigrant, Brown, I'm not Black. And my dad's a physician. So I had a lot of privilege growing up and I also had to contend with racism.

I grew up outside of Philadelphia in a pretty white suburb, but I don't know the experience of Black women. I don't know the experience of indigenous women or queer folks. So I think that what I was trying to do is really explain that in making these personal choices the risks are higher because you have more to lose often when you're in a marginalized group. You will

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probably have less of a social safety net. Your friends probably are also in somewhat precarious mental health positions.

So just when something goes off, the fall is more risky. And it's still equally as important to be thinking about real self-care as self-preservation when you're somebody who is in a marginalized group. I think that you need, my solution though I think, and this is one of the things that we're trying to do at Gemma is that I think you need a community of other folks who are in the same position as you. And you really need to be able to find allies and sponsors especially in the workplace, especially if you're in corporate America.

And that's why also the last tenant of real self-care is about power. And that if you are somebody who has privilege and when I say privilege I don't just mean white people. I also mean in the workplace, if you have any iota of power, that you give it back, that you're thinking about the people who look different than you and who have less than and are willing to step in and say something when bad things are happening or weird things are happening or someone says something. That we all need to be part of this community and moving forward together.

Kara: Yeah. One of the other things I think is that, this is part of the reason we can't ever tell anybody what to do, you have to figure it out for yourself is that part of, I think, internal self-liberation is figuring out with more discernment when you do need to keep yourself safe. If you are in a marginalized identity or you are in an unsafe situation, whatever. I mean women also, a privileged white woman can also experience being in danger from men or from violence.

But part of the way that I think society fucks us up in the head and makes us stick with whatever we have and not make any waves is kind of being taught to believe that there's nothing better anywhere else either, that sort

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of everywhere is as bad. It's not okay to ever take any kind of risk. And obviously I think your risk calculus does have to be different if you are a single mother who's a person of color supporting a couple of kids and you don't have a lot of economic wiggle room. Or if you're an heiress with a trust fund, obviously your situations are different and your risk tolerance is different, that's true.

And it's also true that people have more resilience and possibility and capacity and potential I think than they often think that they do which is why I do what I do and what a lot of self-development work is about. And this sort of learned helplessness, I mean I see this even in women who do have some economic and social privilege of yeah, well, it's not like I can't speak up for myself or I can't report the sexual harassment or I can't whatever. Because if I lose my job then that's it. Everywhere is the same, there's nowhere better.

I think there's this, we generalize or universalize in a way that is not always true. There are places, there are jobs where that's not going to happen to you. There are other relationships where somebody is going to pull half their weight or more than half their weight if they're my partner. I mean we split things, whatever, anyway.

Pooja: I have a partner that does all the cooking and all the cleaning.

Kara: Exactly. I was going to say, the kids are off school today, I'm here doing this. He's with the kids. I mean they are his kids so it's a little bit different, but yeah, I haven't washed a dish since he moved in. I bring in the bacon. But just that, that sort of internalized learned helplessness of everything's bad everywhere.

Pooja: And I might also call that cynicism and hopelessness.

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Kara: Yeah. And it's interesting to think, who taught me this? And who does it benefit when I think this way? We think we're being realistic, but I think that there's a way. Optimism can also be part of realism. It's not always, realism isn't always cynical, it isn't always pessimistic.

And I think there's a way in which we sometimes, maybe because I came from the social justice world, I see this way in which being aware of structural problems. If it's not balanced mentally can become disempowering because then you are just sort of like, "Well, the patriarchy's everywhere so there's nothing I can do. So I have to just deal with whatever shitty situation I'm in and I can't do anything to change it because everywhere will be like this." And that's not true.

Pooja: Yes. So the other thing that I'm thinking is that what you're describing is self-efficacy. From a psychological standpoint, that's the term that we use. So self-efficacy is sort of similar to hopefulness in that hope is different than optimism. So it's sort of exactly what you said. There's lots of stuff that is out of my control but are you able to still remember and act with agency for the small part that is in your control or do you just completely fall over and give up and feel like, well, it's all shit so there's no point?

When you were kind of describing this, it reminded me of in my practice like I was saying, all my patients live in Washington DC, are really highly educated. DC is a very high cost of living area. Even something like how to spend your money as a family is a decision making process that real self-care fits into and I think hits on a lot of what you're talking about. So for example, because I take care of a lot of women who are in that new postpartum period, we talk a lot about sleep protection.

And how protecting your sleep is actually preventative for postpartum depression. So the idea of saying, "Okay, I'm going to have prior conversation with my partner and I'm going to say, "Actually we either really

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need to have our parents come to stay with us or if that causes more trauma, we need to pay for a night nurse and figure out how we can do that.”” And I can’t tell you the number of patients who are like, “Well, but that’s really expensive.” But then meanwhile they’re renovating their bathroom.

Kara: Oh my God, I have a story about a woman who told me that she was having, this was when I used to do one-on-one coaching. And so I would do one-on-one consults. And I coached this woman, we went through the whole thing. She told me she was having panic attacks every day and so she wanted to sign up. And then when I told her the price which was a five figure investment. It was a very small high end coaching program. She was like, “Well, we’re trying to build a second rec room.” And I was like, “So you’re going to have a new rec room to have panic attacks in every day.”

So between the rec rooms with the panic attacks. It was, “But the rec room’s for the family and this would just be for me.” Which, number one, inaccurate, because if your mother’s losing her mind every day that actually does affect the family. But also you aren’t part of the family. Women are socialized to spend money on the other members of the family or to invest or care more about them but then you’re somehow not part of the family. Your mental health doesn’t matter.

Pooja: Yes. Well, and it gets to, when I talk about the martyr mode, when you’re in that martyr mode it’s so compelling, it’s almost addictive to be in that place where nobody’s taking care of you. But I think it also is about how our culture doesn’t value the internal work. So we totally devalue any type of caretaking work.

And so whether it’s the coaching or whether it’s seeing a therapist, whether it’s seeing a psychiatrist, all these different things, spending money on something that is for you internally which will lead to outward

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manifestations in the future. But that you won't know what those will be, you don't know what those are. And to say, "Okay, I'm going to spend money on my own insides." That's just so scary and feels really risky I think.

But it's so sad then when you see it coming out in all these other places, the money, I mean coming out in all these other places, that are maybe more performative. Or feel like it's, as a woman where you feel like you don't have the agency in your own family to kind of speak for what you really want and what you need. I think it's all internalized.

Kara: [Crosstalk] yourself.

Pooja: Yeah, it's the internalized stigma, yeah.

Kara: Yeah. If you feel convinced yourself that this is a good use of money, you'll speak up for it. But women have this sort of, I shouldn't have this problem. I should be able to do it myself. Other people can do it themselves. I mean I feel a lot of people especially seem to have this thought of therapy's great for other people, I do think everybody should get there, just not me. I need to solve my own problems, mine are shameful, but other people, totally.

Okay, so can you give us, I know we've talked about a couple of the pillars, can you just give us kind of an overview and then we can talk about how people can find your book and learn [crosstalk].

Pooja: Yeah. So there's four principles of real self-care. And I always like to caveat and say, these aren't anything revolutionary. These are things that everybody talks about. The reason that everybody talks about them is because they're really hard to do. And I don't necessarily think that there's any one expert that has some magic secret source about any of these

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things. Again, there's no magic cure. There's no easy shortcut. I think really it's about finding the community of folks that sort of speak to you.

And whoever the people are that you kind of like to listen to or read, that they're coming from sort of a space that resonates with you. But again, it's not anything magic in any of these principles.

Kara: Speak for yourself. I am magic.

Pooja: So the first principle is boundaries, boundaries and dealing with guilt because step one in decision making is you need to know where you start and the other person begins. So my take on boundaries is a little bit different. I think of boundaries as the pause. So boundaries are when you take that space and you actually stop and pause and then you decide. I can say yes. I can say no. I can negotiate. So a boundary isn't always a no.

And in the book I talk about how this came to me when I first joined the faculty at George Washington University. My mentor took me out for lunch and she was like, "Pooja, you don't need to answer your phone, you can let it go to voicemail and then you can listen to what they want. And then you can decide." And that was just this revolutionary moment for me where I was like, "I can decide. I can pause." So that's boundaries.

And then of course you have to learn to deal with the guilt because you're always going to feel guilty when you pause, whether you say no or whether you negotiate. So dealing with the guilt is a big piece. And my framework is that we can't get rid of the guilt because the guilt is the internalized toxicity from our external oppressive environment. So the guilt is always going to be there. It's just what you need to do is just have a volume dial and just know that it's background noise, it's not something that you need to have be your moral compass.

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Kara: I think even in the way that people listening to this podcast understand, I think you can change your relationship to the thought and feeling. And I think you can also change your thoughts to reduce that guilt. I mean I certainly feel a lot less guilty saying no to stuff than I used to. But I think that idea of, it's just there and you can do it anyway is you change your relationship to that feeling before you even worry about whether you can reduce it or not.

As opposed to being, oh my God, the feeling means I did the wrong thing, I'm bad. Now I've got to ruminate about this or go change my mind or take it back or whatever else.

Pooja: Right. You're creating space between the feeling or the thought and you're taking action or doing anything else. So it's what we call cognitive diffusion. You're creating that space. So the next step or the next principle is self-compassion, which is exactly what you just described, Kara.

Kara: [Crosstalk].

Pooja: Right, yeah. Just developing a new relationship with your thoughts and your feelings. It's not about mantras and affirmations. It's more about just understanding that you have the capacity to talk to yourself differently and *UnF*ck Your Brain*. The third principle is getting clear on your values and that is, I think, the hardest one because I don't know if you experience this with your clients. Whenever I ask somebody, "Well, what do you really want? What do you really value or care about?" People get so angry, they're just like, "Pooja, do you know how much stuff I have on my to-do list. How dare you?"

Kara: Yeah, I think people don't know. We actually do this, the last time I taught a challenge I did, a challenge about claiming your authority. And one of the things I taught was around decision making. That the reason that we

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second guess so much is that we don't have some metric to use for making decisions. We're just sort of crowd sourcing and going by our feelings. I mean I don't know, I feel bad, must be the wrong one. Sort of articulate your values, but most people have never done that.

They have not sat down and been like, "These are my values, I can use these to guide decisions." And I think that's partly why women aren't taught to figure out what your values are, you can trust those. Women are taught, you don't even know how to eat or dress or walk or wash your face. You need experts to tell you all of that. And you certainly can't be making a big decision by yourself. I mean you don't even know what colors look good on you without someone telling you.

Pooja: Right. You don't even know what you want for dinner.

Kara: Right, exactly.

Pooja: Right. And so in the book I have different thought exercises to help kind of come to values from an indirect standpoint. So one of them is imagining that you're throwing a dinner party for yourself. And it's pretty easy to know that every single person on the planet is going to throw a completely different dinner party. And there's no one right dinner party. And so getting clear, finding those values. Because a value is always an adjective or an adverb. Your values can't be, I value my family. That's a noun. We all value our family, great, awesome. Not helpful.

So that then is how, once you get clear on some of those words, the real self-care work then is trying to thread those values, again, into your big life decisions. And then principle four is that this is actually power, that unfucking your brain is about power. It's about understanding that yes, there's so much that's out of your control, but there is a lot that is in your

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control. And being willing to take the risk to start to make small changes in the parts that are in your control.

And I think one of the last things I want to say is also that because of my personal journey, I always like to remind folks that the right answers are going to take time. And there are going to be thousands and thousands of right answers. And it's right answers because it's thousands and thousands of small decisions to get you out of that hole. It's usually not one dramatic decision.

Kara: One of my favorite memes is that it's a painting of, I think it's an Arthurian legend woman with a sword. But anyway, the text is, 'Would you like small repeatable steps that produce change?' And the other one is, 'No, I just wanted one active dramatic fantasy'. I'm not doing it justice but it's basically like that. It's no, I just want one big fantasy change as opposed to small daily actions, that will actually change your life.

Pooja: Right. Small daily actions that are so boring.

Kara: So boring.

Pooja: So boring and mundane.

Kara: That's one of my keys for knowing if you have the right thought is if you set a goal and you set your minimum baseline. If your brain is like, "That's too small and dumb, it doesn't matter." I'm like, "Great, that's good."

Pooja: That's the one.

Kara: That's where to pitch it, yeah.

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Pooja: Right. I love that. Exactly. It's really boring, it's not dramatic. But that's how change actually happens. And I mean I find that, some people might say, "That's really depressing." I actually find that to be hopeful because that means that you don't need to constantly put this pressure on yourself, you have to be doing something huge and dramatic and pick the right huge, big thing.

Kara: You don't have to quit your job and move to San Francisco.

Pooja: No. You don't need to. And that's usually the wrong answer. The right answer usually isn't to quit your job right this second. Maybe you quit your job in a year once you've done all that other stuff. So yeah, and so that's why it comes back to power because so many of the exercises too are about looking at your relationships. And whether that's your relationship with your nuclear family, with your parents, with your friends, in your workplace. And figuring out how to ask for what you want and what you need and let yourself have that, so yeah.

Kara: And [crosstalk] people don't give it to you. I mean I think we also, we're afraid to ask because of that helplessness. It's like, well, if I ask and I hear no, then I just have to live with the situation as opposed to, well, then I'll figure out what to do then.

Pooja: Right. Then you have plan B and then you have plan C and then you have plan D. And the work is to stay engaged, which is why I like communities, whatever community it is. I know, Kara, you have a great community here and that's something that it is helpful to be with other people who are trying to kind of do some of this process as well because otherwise it can be really lonely I think.

Kara: Yeah, so good. Right, can you tell us where people can find the book and read and learn more about this?

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Pooja: Yes. So the book is called *Real Self-Care*. It is available in audiobook that I narrate, so it's on audible. It's also everywhere that you can buy books, so Amazon, bookshop.org, all the places. And if you enjoy listening to your books, it was really fun narrating it. I had never narrated a book before so that was a nice little project. So you can get it anywhere that books are sold. And I am also on Instagram @poojalakhsmin. And then my company, Gemma, G-E-M-M-A, we're at gemmawomen.com.

Kara: We will put all that in the show notes too.

Pooja: Awesome.

Kara: Thank you so much for coming on.

Pooja: This was such a pleasure. Thank you so much for having me, Kara, thank you.

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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