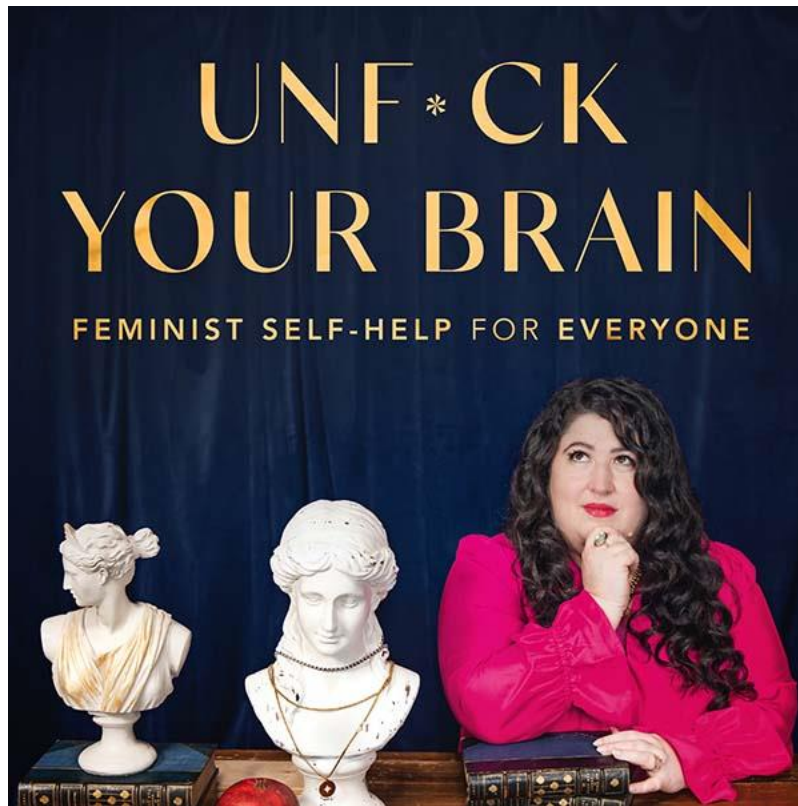


# UFYB 353: Is Anxiety Ever Useful?



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## UFYB 353: Is Anxiety Ever Useful?

Do you wish you could just get rid of your anxiety? When you feel it starting to gather force in your chest, do you feel desperate to get rid of it? Or do you think anxiety is useful because it motivates you to get things done? Maybe you think it motivates you to do a good job at work or maybe you think it motivates you to take political action. While summer may be feeling fine for some of us. For those of us living through really uncertain times, it's hard to ignore the world and I don't think we need to in order to still live happy, productive and useful lives.

In today's podcast, we're going to dive into whether anxiety is ever useful, and if so, how to let it be useful while keeping it from running amok. Let's go.

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.

So many women come to work with me because they feel anxious and they want to get rid of their anxiety, which is completely understandable because anxiety feels terrible. And in today's modern world, it's often running amok and we're feeling anxious about things like emails or not fitting into a certain size of pants, things that are not actually crucial to our survival. But that doesn't mean that all anxiety is useless.

So today I want to talk about how to know if your anxiety is serving you and how to change it if it's not. So, let's do a quick review of what anxiety is first. Anxiety is, I would call a version of fear. It is normally about something that is not actually happening at the moment. We might say that fear is about something that's happening, and anxiety is about something that is not happening, or rather it's not necessarily that the thing isn't happening,

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## UFYB 353: Is Anxiety Ever Useful?

but the sort of threat to you is not immediate. That's just one way of thinking about it.

Some people would say fear and anxiety are really the same thing. Some people might define it a little differently. I think what's important is that it's a variant of fear. So what matters is that it's caused by your brain thinking that it perceives a threat. That is what a fear response is. That is what an anxiety response is. It is your brain thinking, I see a threat to my physical safety and survival. And so, I am going to release stress hormones into this body so that it is ready to run away.

And so that is a place that anxiety or fear are helpful. If your life is in danger imminently, that jolt of adrenaline and cortisol will get you going. That's why your body evolved to have that response to something dangerous. So, we don't want to have no fear response, no ability to have that response.

In fact, there are children who are born with different fear or pain responses that are kind of the standard. And sometimes it's very dangerous and they die young because they don't have that thing that makes them afraid of something physically dangerous when they're little. So that's a place that we want to have a working fear response. If I notice a car driving towards me and I'm in the middle of the street, I want to have a shot of panic that gets me moving fast.

So, your brain may be thinking thoughts that produce anxiety or fear because it notices a real danger. And that's why it's always useful to actually look at your anxiety and see where it's coming from and what you're thinking rather than just trying to get rid of it immediately. And I think that's especially important because women are socialized not to trust ourselves and to always assume that if we feel like something's off, we're being too sensitive or we're being irrational.

## UFYB 353: Is Anxiety Ever Useful?

And so, I think sometimes our brains are actually noticing that someone maybe is a physical threat to us and we will dismiss it and ignore our thoughts rather than examining them and really evaluating them. So that kind of animal instinct for actual imminent physical danger is important. But of course, in the modern world, our anxiety and our fear responses go well beyond things that are actually physically dangerous.

And a lot of us don't even realize that we are subconsciously attached to our anxiety for reasons that go far beyond actual matters of life and death. Because even though we hate feeling it and we think we want to get rid of it, we also rely on it and that makes sense evolutionarily. Anxiety and fear evolved to keep us alive. So, it makes sense that subconsciously we believe that our anxiety is important and is telling us something important.

The problem is that today a lot of anxiety is not coming from immediate threats to our survival. It's coming from things that maybe used to be survival threats or that never were. But our circumstances now where that threat response is being triggered because of the stressors of modern day life that really aren't physically dangerous in the same way as when these systems evolved when we had much less complicated lives.

And a lot of us have lived with anxiety for so long that we associate anxiety with ironically, positive outcomes in our life. And we can mistakenly come to believe that anxiety is what has motivated us to accomplish or change things, and that it's the only thing that could motivate us. And this can come up in our personal lives or in our responses to the larger world.

So, in our personal lives this can look like believing that our anxiety is what motivates us, believing that if we're not terrified of failure, we won't do a good job at work. Or that if we are not terrified of being alone or hating ourselves for being single, that we won't make the effort to get out there and date. Or that if we're not anxious about gaining weight or hating our

## UFYB 353: Is Anxiety Ever Useful?

body, we won't work out. Or if we're not anxious about other people being upset with us, we won't be nice to them and we'll just turn into sociopaths.

And I don't think these forms of anxiety are helpful for a few reasons. First, it sort of has this assumption baked in that you're someone who does not have an intrinsic desire to do a good job, take care of yourself or be in positive relationships with other people. So, when we assume that we need anxiety, we have to make ourselves feel afraid in order to motivate us to do a good job or to move our body or to be nice to other people.

That's a really harsh assessment of human nature to level on yourself and it can't help but make you feel bad about yourself big picture because it means that your self-conception is as someone who can't be trusted to actually be happy and still be a worthwhile member of society. I also don't believe that anxiety actually motivates you very well when we're talking about long term and complex undertakings. It motivates you very well to run away from something that's going to eat you.

But when we're talking about things like a career or a long term relationship, when you're putting your system into fight or flight, you're increasing stress hormones in your body. And those stress hormones when they become chronic, can create chronic inflammation because they're never the stress response, the stress cycle isn't being completed. It's just more and more stress hormones are being dumped into the body over a long time period. And people are not their most creative or skillful or generous when they're under chronic stress.

So again, just like fear in general, stress hormones aren't always a bad thing. They have a time and place to be helpful. And we know actually from some of the evidence that how you think about stress impacts how stress impacts you, because the brain body connection is so wild. But when you're manufacturing anxiety with your thoughts and then telling yourself

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## UFYB 353: Is Anxiety Ever Useful?

that you shouldn't be anxious or don't want to be anxious, you're creating this real catch 22 for yourself.

So, this happens all the time, people come to coaching for their anxiety. And then when we start to try to deconstruct the anxiety, they suddenly feel really resistant. They feel really attached to the anxiety. And it turns out that they believe the anxiety is helping them and motivating them and keeping them on the right path. And so, they subconsciously don't want to let go of it at all, and they're subconsciously giving themselves an incentive to manufacture more and more anxiety.

And anxiety and stress, of course, are not just about our personal lives. Our brains have thoughts about politics and global warming and war and famine and all sorts of external circumstances that can also cause that fear and anxiety response. Your anxiety is your brain trying to predict what danger might happen to you so you can be alert to run away from it. If it's not in imminent danger, then it's your brain thinking about things that maybe could be dangerous and trying to alert you to keep track of that danger. And again, that's good when the threat to survival is imminent and real.

But because of how the human brain works, number one, sometimes we make up threats to our survival that aren't real. We've just made it up, but it will feel real in our bodies. And number two, we can worry about things that could maybe possibly happen or that are possible but very far in the future or that may never happen. So, in other words, we create the same response in our bodies to an actual threat that is actually right about to eat us and to things that are maybe someday maybe going to eat us, maybe will never eat us, maybe don't even exist.

Our brain produces the same response to those things and it feels the same in our bodies. And that produces that endless chronic stress response. Now, I obviously don't think that the answer is to put your head in the sand and ignore the world. First of all, all your anxiety that comes

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## UFYB 353: Is Anxiety Ever Useful?

from your thoughts about your personal life won't be resolved. And I don't think that that makes us sort of good citizens of the world to try to ignore everything so that we just don't get triggered with anxiety.

Instead, we have to figure out how can we deal with our brains. How can we manage our minds so that we can be aware and be present and be in the world without having that stress system just constantly triggered and triggered and triggered in a way that isn't serving us because it's not saving us from an imminent threat. When our brain thinks something dangerous will happen to us and it creates that anxiety, if there isn't actually anything to do in the moment, then it doesn't come to a natural release.

If an animal has a stress response triggered because something is going to eat it and it runs away then when it gets to safety it resets. But that doesn't happen with us, especially when we are thinking about things that aren't imminent threats because it's worrying about what might happen. And you don't ever get a kind of reset from that because you never finish it. It just keeps being out there for you to worry about. And then a lot of us respond to that with numbing out, which isn't helping anything either.

So, we're either chronically stressed or we are in denial and numbing out and kind of dissociating. And neither of those helps us, nor does it help the rest of the world. So, I really believe that if we can learn to calm down, I think that we have more to offer each other and ourselves and the body, politics and the earth. But if we want to come down, we have to figure out how do we disarm that threat response. Because remember, when you're feeling anxiety about things happening that aren't immediately impacting you, there's not a natural end to it.

We have to change the way that our brain is creating that threat response. Because when your brain thinks it sees a threat, it's not going to stop thinking about it until your brain feels reassured that it's over and gone. And that isn't going to happen if it's in the future, if it's made up, or even if it is

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## UFYB 353: Is Anxiety Ever Useful?

something where you know for sure a thing's going to happen and you're trying to plan for it. The anxiety is stemming from the uncertainty of the future. Our brains just want to think that we know what will happen and feel safe and so your brain will just never quite be satisfied.

So even if you play it all the way out and come up with a plan, your brain is just still going to be like, "Yeah, but what if this? What about that? What if that plan doesn't work?" We just can't out-think this. So, we have to come at it a different way and that's what I'm going to share right after this. The deeper safety that we need to create comes from believing in our own capacity to cope and to carry on.

The only thing I have found that allows my brain to rest is cultivating and building my belief that I will figure it out and that I have my own back. That I don't need to know exactly what's going to happen because I trust that I will figure it out. Cultivating my belief that I am resourceful, that I am resilient, that I will rise to a challenge if and when it is required of me or that other people will be able to do that.

And understanding that ultimately there are some cataclysmic global or personal happenings that I can't control. And if those things happen, I may not be able to do anything about it. And I can live with that because I know that what gives my life meaning, what kind of confers grace and dignity upon my life, is how I show up for myself and others in the face of hardship. I think that our feeling of powerlessness and fear comes from believing that we have to control these big things we cannot control in order to feel okay or to feel or be safe.

So, for instance, if we're thinking about something scary outside of us, in politics, in the climate and something else. Our brain thinks that the only way to feel safe would be to somehow believe that that thing wasn't going to happen or that it wouldn't affect the circumstances of our lives. And we can't control that and we can't guarantee that. Generally, we don't always

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)



## UFYB 353: Is Anxiety Ever Useful?

get to choose what we are going to experience in those big picture circumstances. We don't even get to choose and we can't even know if we will survive or what that will be like.

I mean, we all are going to die someday, but the anxiety I think partly comes from this belief that the only way to feel calm or at peace with the world is to know that you will somehow not be affected or not be impacted. And as so often in thought work, it's actually the opposite. It's dropping that resistance or that desire for control of these outside things, or the belief that you cannot have any say in how you experience the world because of what happens outside of you.

I think humans are capable of incredible bravery and resilience when they know that they are allowed to choose that emotional state for themselves. And this is what Viktor Frankl wrote about in *Man's Search for Meaning*. That in the most horrific experience imaginable, the Nazi death camps, he still found a way to persevere and to believe in life and to choose who he wanted to be.

When our mind is fixating on outside things beyond our control, on threats to our physical body or our safety or our economic security or whatever it is. We feel really powerless and scared and then our brain thinks that the way to feel safe is to somehow build a fortress against those external circumstances. So, we're trying to figure out what we'll do. We're trying to think about plans, or our brain just fixates on the danger. And none of that really resolves it because no belief system that depends on you being able to control things you can't control, will help you feel safe or will help turn down that stress response.

Any time we're fixated on something outside of us, determining our ability to have worth, have value, survive, or even just manage the way that we think and feel, we're going to feel out of control. In some ways it's no different than when we're obsessing about someone else's opinion of us,

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## UFYB 353: Is Anxiety Ever Useful?

and we feel really out of control and powerless because we're all up in that person's business. And when we obsess about circumstances outside of us, it's sort of like we're all up in this uncontrollable universe's business in a way that we can't control.

But when we shift the focus to who we want to be in this challenge, during this hard time, for whatever time we have, which we don't get to always decide or control, everything comes back to center. I can feel that in my body. I want to encourage you to try to feel that too. Everything comes back to ground. We connect to a stronger internal power.

It's a power that doesn't come from believing that everything will be okay in the sense of, we'll always have the circumstances we want. And we'll always have the kind of health we want. And we'll always have the kind of economic resources we want. And we'll always have the political situation we want and we'll always whatever, doesn't come from that. It comes from this really deep grounding with yourself that you will always have the ability to choose who you want to be, even in the most challenging of circumstances. And to have self-compassion for yourself when you aren't able to live up to that person sometimes.

And I think that's the place from which we can take effective action as well. It's the place from which we can show up differently in our personal lives. And it's the place from which we can take effective political action as well. Because so often the reason that we get paralyzed or overwhelmed or give up in hard circumstances or even just when we're worrying about potential hard circumstances in the future is that we feel hopeless. Because we can't convince ourselves that we'll be able to control or change these things that are so much bigger than us. But I don't think that that's the only way to try to motivate ourselves.

I think if we define success as showing up as the person we want to be and how we want to live during this time. Then the actions that we need to take

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## UFYB 353: Is Anxiety Ever Useful?

are part of that, but our willingness and motivation and purpose doesn't depend on those actions being effective. It depends on who we are as we show up to take them. And that is something that we get to decide.

And every time I come back to that, every time that my brain is spinning on what if this happens, what if these terrible things happen outside of me, in my personal life, in my political life, in the global world. And I am just spinning out and doing nothing useful, what always brings me back is thinking okay, if these terrible circumstances, of course, that's an optional subjective thought, but that's what I'm using in this instance.

If these circumstances happen, if I am living in a world where these things happen, who do I want to be for myself, for my loved ones, for my community? How am I going to show up? And that always feels so much more powerful because that is something I can control.

And if you don't feel like you can control that, if you don't know how to be the person you want to be, and you don't know how to show up the way you want to show up. It's not a character failing, and it doesn't mean you're not capable of it. You just don't know how to think on purpose. And that skill is what will allow you to be that person you want to be, no matter what happens and that is something you can choose for yourself.

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

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## **UFYB 353: Is Anxiety Ever Useful?**

guarantee it. Come join us at [www.unfuckyourbrain.com/society](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/society). I can't wait to see you there.