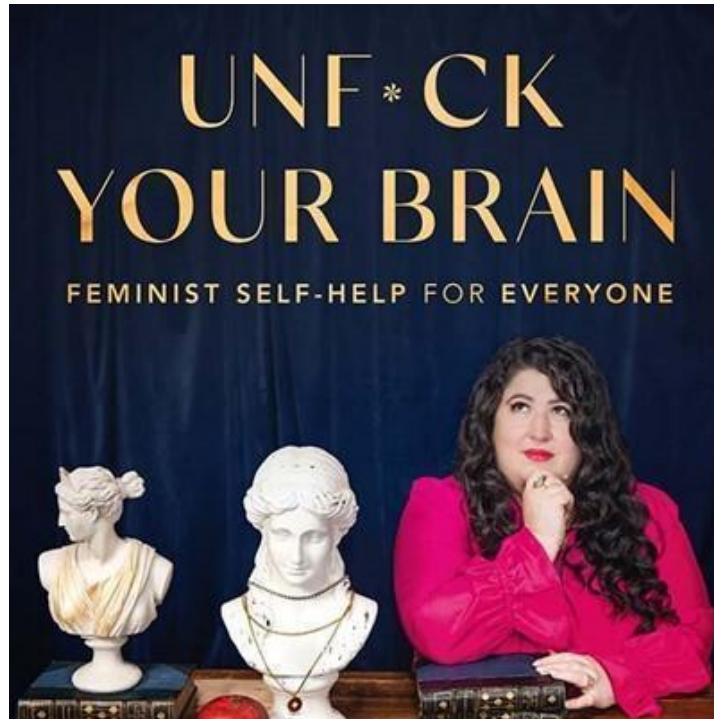


UFYB 86: Trauma



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? So I am having some kind of problem understanding that it is almost the summer solstice. You would not know it in New York. It's rainy today. But in general, I am confused that this longest day of the year is around the corner. I feel like it was just winter. I don't know if the rest of you feel like this too but I find it very confusing that June 21st is the longest day of the year because it feels like summer is just starting, and suddenly now it's already going to be getting darker going forward.

But I was thinking about it today when I was complaining in my brain about it, which is such a good use of my time, as you can imagine, and I decided to think like it's actually a good reminder that how we think about things makes such a big difference. Because we think about summer as being the time that we have the longest days, and then we actually miss that a lot of our longer days happen during the spring, before it's even nice out yet.

Because when you have an idea about how things are, you miss how things actually are. When you have an idea about how things are, you miss how they actually are. That's probably a better way to put the emphasis on that sentence. And that's why I think this work is really about being present with what is. It's not about 100% positive emotion.

It's about being willing to kind of be present with when it's sunny and when it's dark and not just because of contrast like I've talked before on the podcast about how if we didn't have negative emotions, we would not have positive ones. We wouldn't know they were positive. If it was always sunny,

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you wouldn't know that sun was amazing because you would just probably be wishing for a break from the sun.

But that sort of makes it sound like negative emotions are just a foil for positive ones and that's why they're valuable. But I also think that darkness or negative emotions are important because of the opportunities that they can give us for growth, and so that is actually what we're going to talk about on the podcast today. And it sounded like I set that whole intro up so perfectly but I actually did not know that's where I was going when I started thinking about it. My subconscious knew what it was doing.

So today we're going to talk about trauma and particularly, we're going to talk about the difference between post-traumatic stress disorder, which most of you have heard of, and post-traumatic growth, which probably far fewer of you have heard of. And I actually think it's such a good example in and of itself of the human bias towards the negative because the idea of trauma is very culturally resonant right now.

People talk a lot about trauma. A lot of people have been diagnosed with trauma, and there are a lot of people diagnosing themselves with trauma. It's just one of our cultural buzz words right now and we talk about it in a negative way. So even though there's actually quite a lot of psychological literature out there about post-traumatic growth, you wouldn't know it based on what's on the news and popular culture.

So that's kind of what I want to dig into today and I want to be clear that if you have symptoms of PTSD, if you ever had significant or severe trauma in your life and you have not yet gotten professional help to deal with it, that's a good thing for you to do. That's my optional thought, but that's what I would suggest.

I'm going to get more into kind of the definition of trauma and how I teach about it but the sort of bottom line is that it's a response that your brain has

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when it's overwhelmed and can't cope with what's happening, and so often there's a shut down effect and professional help can help you get through that part of it. And so I just want to encourage if you are listening to this and you have symptoms of PTSD that are interfering with your ability to function, these tools aren't going to hurt you. You can totally use them but I would also seek appropriate professional mental healthcare.

Okay, so let's actually talk about what trauma is and define it because like I said, it's a word that gets bandied about a lot and I think often pretty inexpertly, or inexactly. It's often not clearly defined and it's used to refer to a whole range of mental experiences or emotional experiences or physical experiences or ideas or opinions about what happened to us or other people, not all of which are actually trauma.

So trauma is an emotional or physical response to an event. So like any emotion, trauma is caused by a thought that happens in your brain. Your brain regards or sees or experiences a circumstance and your brain basically just shuts down in a way. It can't make sense of what's happening. It finds what's happening too overwhelming to deal with and so it just can't process it appropriately.

But it's really important to understand that there are not like, specific events that are traumatic. In the sense that the event itself never causes the trauma. Just like any circumstance causes our thought or feeling. We know this is true because what is traumatic for one person may or may not be traumatic for another person, depending on how the different people's brains interpret it.

And actually interestingly, one of the thought patterns that's associated with protection from trauma and PTSD is emotional resiliency, which is what I believe all thought work is really about. And I have for sure seen in my own coaching practice that there are people who come to me and they tell me

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about things that if you had asked me to make an educated guess, I would have said were traumatic and they really have no trauma about it.

And then I have people come to me and tell me about something that my educated guess would have like, probably not a big deal, and their experience is super traumatic. And that's not to say that either of those people is right or wrong. There's no right or wrong. It's not moral. It's just how your brain reacts to something that happens. But it is really important to understand that it is a individual's brain's interpretation and response to what's happening.

Because when we believe that trauma is somehow different from other thoughts and feelings in the sense that certain things have to be traumatic, it's actually really disempowering for us. It takes away all of our ability to figure out how we want to think about and deal with it. And it's important to know this because a lot of people judge their own reactions, either if they do feel like they experienced trauma, they question whether they should have, was it bad enough, maybe they think they're weak or not strong enough, or they should have done something differently.

And then on the flipside, people who didn't experience trauma from a circumstance that other people think should be traumatic sometimes actually have a lot of negative thoughts about that and they think like oh, there's something wrong with me or I must be broken, or maybe I'm a sociopath or I'm too robotic or I don't have normal human feelings. So having this idea that certain things must be traumatic and other certain things aren't is not helpful because it's so individual.

So the second thing that's important to understand is that not all trauma becomes PTSD. So, some people experience a trauma, meaning they experience a circumstance that their brain does not know how to process that creates some kind of overwhelming response in their brain and body,

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but then they're able to process it appropriately, if not right that minute then soon after, and it doesn't turn into post-traumatic stress disorder.

PTSD does not happen overnight. And I think we have a lot of conflation kind of in our layperson armchair psychology world about it and we use the term PTSD to describe general trauma or we use the term trauma to describe just things in our past that we're unhappy about or that we have negative thoughts or feelings about.

And I'm not saying - there's no blood test for trauma obviously. It's a spectrum and we're just trying to make some generalizations, but it is good to have some idea about what the basic categories are. So what happens when you develop PTSD is that essentially, your brain gets stuck in a repetitive loop. So it's similar to any chronic thought-based problem.

Your brain is constantly going over and over what happened and recreating that same overwhelmed, can't process, can't cope, freaked out response. And so those neural pathways get super efficient because your brain's constantly replaying it and then you get kind of chronic symptoms of it. And those symptoms can really vary, but they may be anything from intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, mood swings, anxiety, fear, guilt, self-blame, numbness, disconnection, any and all of those, and there are other symptoms that people have too.

And particularly if somebody has what's called complex PTSD, which it means PTSD from severe repetitive trauma, they may also experience kind of extreme emotional reactions to what seem like insignificant events. That's what people are talking about when they talk about traumatic triggers.

And I could do a whole other podcast about the way we talk about triggering these days because I think it's a real misunderstanding of the concept that really isn't helpful because one of the things that is challenging

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if you truly have PTSD and especially if you have complex PTSD is that you don't always know what's going to trigger your reaction. You don't always know, in other words, what circumstance your brain because it's hyper-vigilant and on high alert is going to misinterpret as a threat that sets off that same thought cycle.

And that's what makes them challenging, whereas in kind of popular cultural discourse, the way we talk about triggering, it's always very like, I know exactly what triggers me and I want to try to protect myself by controlling what other people can say or do. It's trying to control circumstances to control our thoughts and feelings, and it just isn't kind of accurate about how triggering generally works with real trauma and PTSD, and it's just not helpful because you can't change your thoughts and feelings by controlling your circumstances.

So the only way we can really heal trauma is to work on it from the inside out. It's originating in the mind, and it's manifesting in the body through your emotions. So we're not going to be able to fix it from the outside. And you can't fix it by avoiding triggers because if you actually have PTSD, you often can't predict what those triggers are going to be. When the brain is hyper-vigilant, the brain is hyper-vigilant.

Now, I'm not saying you never can, but you more can just predict that something may trigger you, but not necessarily what it is. So I'm going to teach you a couple of tools you can use and then I want to talk to you about post-traumatic growth, which I think is an amazing and empowering concept that more people should know about.

So in terms of dealing with kind of current thoughts and feelings that you experience from your trauma or symptoms if you have PTSD, again assuming that if you do have a diagnosis of PTSD that you've got your mental help, like appropriate clinical mental healthcare going too, I think it's

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actually a lot like the way we have to approach any set of thought or feelings that we are resisting or don't want to be there.

So first, we have to practice accepting that right now, our experience is what it is. Your symptoms are what they are. Just like any other physical illness or any other thought pattern or emotional pattern, acceptance of the current reality and releasing the resistance to it always has to come first. If you resist PTSD symptoms or you believe they shouldn't be there or you're very upset that they might happen and you're not willing to have them happen, you create all this resistance, which makes it so much worse.

You have to accept that they're here now and decide how to deal with them for now. And so with PTSD in particular, I think because it can create an overwhelming emotional response, one of the tools that's found to be helpful is to have basically a kind of little system for what you're going to do when you experience a symptom or a trigger.

So just as a simple action or series of actions or thoughts to help ground you back in your body or remind you that you are safe. It is not in some ways that different from the emotional processing tool that I teach all of you to use when you're having an emotion, especially an overwhelming emotion to process the emotion physically. And with PTSD or trauma in particular, grounding yourself back in your body can be very helpful since one of the symptoms kind of tends to be disassociating from yourself.

So getting yourself back in your body and connecting back to your physical experience in which you are physically safe can be very helpful. So let's just pick an example. Let's say you tend to have flashbacks when you hear a certain song, and this is kind of - I'm using it as an example like a more predictable trigger. But this works even if the trigger's not predictable.

It's really not helpful to just go about your life, especially let's say you live in a city where people play music in stores and on the bus and whatever, just

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desperately hoping no one plays that song. You're just going to be so anxious, worrying that's going to happen. So you can see how this is like resisting any negative feeling. I talk about this all the time.

If you are going through your day going I hope nothing happens that makes me anxious, you're going to create so much anxiety just about how you might have anxiety. So with normal anxiety, I might say the solution is you have to practice being willing to have the feeling, and the same is true with trauma or PTSD. You can do that. You can do that mental practice of being willing to experience whatever might happen in your mind and your body and you can also have your little system that you decided ahead of time about what you're going to do.

I should really come up with a name for this but it can be anything that calms or grounds you. And there probably I'm sure is a real name for this but I don't know what it is because I'm not great with names. So if I hear the song, I will put my hand on my chest, I will take three deep breaths, and I will repeat to myself these are just musical notes and I am safe.

Whatever it is. You can come up with your own. But you just assume that you may experience a trigger, whether it's predictable or not. So maybe musical notes is specific, but hand on chest, three deep breaths, repeating I am physically safe right now would work for anything. So the point is to be kind of prepared to not live your life out of fear that you may experience a trigger and have that emotion and have that physical experience, but to be prepared that it might happen and know what you're going to do, and have it be something very simple that you can remember.

And again, it's not so different from how we handle any other negative emotion, and you can use this tool for negative emotion that isn't trauma related as well. So just like processing any feeling, being willing to have the experience and process the emotions as physical sensations grounded in your body is going to make it easier to get through the experience.

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So that's one technique, and that kind of loosely corresponds to processing an emotion for non-PTSD situations. And the second one is changing the thoughts because here's the thing about trauma or memories of trauma or PTSD; the past is over. What's continuing to happen right now is thoughts in your brain. Just thoughts.

I'm not saying just like they don't matter or it's not intense. Obviously thoughts are very powerful but at the same time, they're totally harmless in the sense that they can't hurt you. They're just sentences in your mind. So your story about the trauma matters a lot and there's really two levels of this. There's the story that your brain is constantly replaying about the actual event or series of events that created the trauma, or that your brain created the trauma from experiencing. And then there's your current story about yourself and your trauma, or your PTSD and how it impacts your life.

The trauma only continues to exist in your mind as you replay it. The past is over. Replaying it is just thinking about it. So you're just thinking about it over and over. But just because something was traumatic doesn't mean that you don't have any ability to change how you think about it. That's why I spent so much time in the beginning stressing this idea that trauma doesn't necessarily come from some category of events that are just so super bad that you can't do any thought work about them.

There's no event that's like, well if this event happens, everyone has trauma from it. That's really true. Even the things that we culturally think are the worst right now, like childhood sexual abuse, there are people who had sexual experiences as children with adults, which is how - and that's how they will tell you about it, and they did not experience them as traumatic.

And then there are some who absolutely did and my point is not - it's not about whether sexual abuse is bad. But the point is that different people have different reactions to different circumstances, and that is everything because it means that if it's conceivably possible for someone to not

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necessarily be traumatized by whatever thing happened to you, then that doesn't mean that you're weak or you did it wrong for being traumatized.

Plenty of people are or would be traumatized by what happened to you by their thoughts about it, but it means that there's some wiggle room for you. There's some way of thinking about or processing your experience that doesn't have to keep you trapped in those repetitive thoughts and those repetitive symptoms.

That's why it's important to think about the idea that trauma does come from the brain deciding what to categorize as overwhelming. Not from the actual event itself. There's no list of events that have to cause trauma and events that never do. That's not how humans work. The traumatic response is created by how your brain interprets the event.

And that means that you can change your story about it if you want to. You can literally retell the story to yourself. And often when we're dealing with something that caused trauma, it's not just the thoughts about the thing that happened. But it's all the rest of the thoughts of what you make it mean. Like why it was so terrible, why it was dangerous, what that - was it something another person did? How they had so much power over you or what they did wrong, what you did wrong, what you should have done differently. All those thoughts.

And then all the other thoughts you have on top of that about being someone who experienced trauma or who has PTSD symptoms, and a lot of people have conscious or unconscious thoughts that they're doing something wrong or they're weak or they should get over it or it's holding them back or their life will always be like this or they can't be happy because of it.

So there's just so much space in there to clean up your thoughts and literally rewrite the story of what happened to you in a way that is more

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empowering for you. Because the past is over. Nothing we do now will change it. So if you keep thinking the thoughts now that you thought at the time, which is really what's happening when you replay trauma like that, it's usually before you even knew thoughts were optional of course, especially if it happened when you were a child.

If you keep thinking those thoughts, you're going to keep getting the same results, or you can change the thoughts and you can start to process your experience in a new way. And it's really up to you how far you want to take that. So some people want to go back to the actual event and retell that story.

They want to not necessarily - if they're really concrete facts, not necessarily change those but even just tell a different story to themselves about how much danger they were in or whether anything went wrong or what went wrong or what the other person was thinking or doing or whatever it is.

And some people don't want to go that far, but they want to take the trauma as a closed book and then decide now what they want to make it mean. And that's where post-traumatic growth comes in. And post-traumatic growth is what it sounds like. So as opposed to post-trauma now we have a stress disorder syndrome, it's post-trauma now we have growth.

So the literature basically shows that while a lot of people experience negative symptoms after trauma, some people are able to use traumatic experiences to create meaning and emotional growth in their lives. And in fact, some of them believe that their lives are better after the trauma than they were before because they find meaning and purpose or growth or evolution in that experience.

And that wouldn't be possible if traumatic events cause your thoughts and feelings inescapably and there's nothing to be done about that. The truth is

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you get to decide what to do with your thoughts about the trauma, and again, you get to decide how far to take that. You get to decide whether you want to retell the story of the actual event in a way that is less upsetting, or you get to decide that you're going to leave your beliefs about the event the way they are but you're going to change what you make it mean for yourself now, or anywhere in between or any combination.

You get to decide to think about it the way you want. You can decide to look for ways that you are powerful rather than powerless. You can decide to look for ways that make your life better instead of worse. It's all about your resiliency. Your ability to adapt and survive and grow.

And I think sometimes we get attached to the story of trauma for the same reasons we get attached to any victim story, which is we think the only alternative is to feel terrible about ourselves. So we think that trauma is an explanation for how we feel or why we're not able to do certain things or whatever else, and we think we need that explanation because if we didn't have it, then the answer would be that there's something wrong with us.

That we did something wrong or we're not good enough or we're not strong enough or we are too sensitive or whatever else. And so you just want to like anything else, you want to look at your own thoughts and see, does thinking of this as traumatic serve me? Do I want to do that? It's always up to you.

But it's just so important to know that you do have that choice, that trauma is not necessarily an event that has to set off a negative response that you have to have for the rest of your life. It can be something that sets off a powerful and life-affirming response. Again, if you have PTSD, for sure once you've done that original work to be able to process the core of the experience so that you can function.

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And if that was not your response to trauma, if you had a negative response to trauma, this whole concept does not mean that you did trauma wrong. Obviously that's 100% okay and a lot of people have a negative response to trauma, probably most people because human brains have a bias for the negative and because we're not taught these tools.

But the good news is that it's never too late to kind of alchemize your trauma or your experiences into growth if you want to. It's always optional. You're not obligated to. But it is just important to know that how you are telling yourself your story now is all that is perpetuating the experience for you. The event itself no longer exists. It is your thoughts about it now that are continuing to replicate that experience for you.

And it doesn't have to be that way, and I just think that it's so much unnecessary suffering, especially the stories that we then tell about our trauma and what it means about us and the world and what we're capable of and what kind of life we can have. So I think the most important thing really is just knowing that post-traumatic growth is a thing.

Knowing that that's an option. It can happen. It can be done. Because we're always only talking about trauma like it's a death sentence and it's not. We get to decide what's terrible, we get to decide now whether to keep creating or experiencing trauma. We get to decide what to make it mean. It doesn't mean you have to be thrilled that you experienced trauma. It doesn't mean you have to be happy about it.

But you do get to decide what to make it mean. And I think this idea of post-traumatic growth, it goes along with something I've been thinking about a lot lately that my trainer taught me actually, which is that in order to change physical patterns that are creating a lot of stress and harm for your body, you have to actually put your body under stress so that your brain is forced to change.

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It's like your body has to experience stress that your brain actually pays attention to what's going on and can learn something new. Because otherwise, it's just autopilot and it just keeps doing the same thing. So I just think what if all those things in our lives that we don't want to experience, the suffering, the trauma, the negative emotions, what if we just knew that it was an option to use them as fuel for evolution and growth if we wanted to?

What if we knew that trauma doesn't have to be a prison and that we don't have to keep re-experiencing it all the time if we learned to rewire our brains. And for some of us, that might be a quick process and for some of us it might be a really slow process, but what's for sure is that if we don't do it, there's no process and things won't change.

We don't have to do it, but we can if we want and having that option is everything.

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