UFYB 27: Busy Is a State of Mind

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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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.

Chickens, it is finally spring. Like, for real spring. Like, it's been above 50 degrees for a week spring. Even if just barely, like 51. So chickens obviously lay eggs in spring. This isn't actually an animal husbandry podcast now, I hope you guys don't mind.

No, so we're not going to lay eggs. But I'm definitely feeling those kinds of generative creative juices flowing because that's what spring does. And I've been taking advantage of the weather recently and I've been working at a café in my neighborhood that has outside tables. And yesterday I was sitting there and I was doing some planning for the month, like to plan out my work.

Those of you who work with me know I teach a very specific organizational system to get your workload under control, and I use it myself. So I'm doing my monthly planning and I heard these two women next to me engaging in the most competitive sport in New York City, which is the busy Olympics.

So you know what the busy Olympics are, right? It's a cutthroat competition in which each person tries to convince one or more other people, or just anyone within earshot that they themselves are truly the busiest person in the world. Or at least the busiest person in that conversation.

Now, even before I became a coach, I was like, pretty unenthused about the busy Olympics. I was really always more than happy to let other people win at being the busiest. My goal is never to be the busiest. But a lot of people do want to be the busiest. Feeling busy is one of the things that stresses out a lot of us, even as we continue to be invested in being busy

UFYB 27: Busy Is a State of Mind

or more importantly, in seeming busy to other people. And even to ourselves.

And it's something I hear from my clients all the time because so many of them believe that stress is inescapable if you are very busy. That stress is caused by being busy. So today I want to talk about what it really means to be busy and why we choose to inflict busyness on ourselves.

Now, I think there are really two forms of the I'm so busy thought. For one set of people, busyness is stressful and exhausting. And for another set, it's really a badge of pride. And sometimes those sets overlap. But I'm going to show you on this podcast that both ways of thinking about busyness are actually unhelpful, although for different reasons.

So first, let's define what busyness is. Busyness is just a state of mind. You can only be mentally busy. I'm going to say that again. Busyness is just a mental state. It's a thought. It's not an external circumstance. There is no such thing as your life being busy. There is only your mind being busy.

Busy is not an external circumstance. It's not a reality. It's not determined by how many things are on your calendar. It's completely relative and depending on your thoughts. Think about someone who has no job and never leaves the house. If they have two errands to run, that is a busy day for them. And then think about President Obama and how he feels if he runs two errands and that's all he has to do for the day, right?

When he was president, or even now. I'm sure he still does more than that, right? That would not count as busy. In fact, having like 10 meetings instead of 15 and going to bed by midnight might be not a busy day for the president. Busy is not a reality. It's not a circumstance. It's not determined by how many things you have on your calendar. You can only be mentally busy.

UFYB 27: Busy Is a State of Mind

Busyness is only experienced as a set of thoughts or feelings that are created by your thoughts. Busy means your mind is jumping to a million things. You can only ever be doing one thing at a time, physically. In which your mind is jumping all over the place. That's what busyness is.

So for one set of people, the thought, "I'm so busy," feels stressful, right? So you have the thought, "I'm so busy," and then you feel stressed or anxious or frazzled. But it's not the existence of the things you have on your to-do list. It's the thought, "I'm so busy," that creates the emotion of anxiety.

You can kind of test this. Like, think to yourself, "We're really busy at work." Now, if you're an entrepreneur, if you run your own business and that means more income for you, you probably love that thought, right? You're probably thrilled. If you're a lawyer on a bunch of deals or a doctor with too many patients and you wish there was less work, then when you think, "We're really busy at work," you feel stressed.

It's not the existence of the clients, for instance, in these two scenarios. It's what you make it mean. The existence of the clients or the deals isn't what causes the feeling. It's your thought. You have the thought that you're busy and then you feel stressed out. So if you're one of the people for whom thinking, "I'm busy," feels stressful, it's because of what you're making that mean.

In other words, let's pretend busy was an external thing, just like I'm hungry or I have brown hair. Let's just say busy was a true thing. So what? Why is it a problem that you're busy? Likely, you're also telling yourself that you don't have time to get everything done. You're telling yourself that you have too much to do.

So, "I'm so busy," is a thought and when you think, "I'm so busy," if you feel stressed, that thought is not serving you and you're believing that busyness is a thing that exists in the world, it's not just your thoughts. But you can

UFYB 27: Busy Is a State of Mind

also play with that on a deeper level by giving busy to yourself as a fact. Being like, "Okay, I'm busy, so what?" And asking yourself so what. Why is being busy a problem? What are you thinking about it that is causing anxiety or stress?

The problem with the I'm so busy thought in this version, this group of people is that it's a way we relinquish control over our emotional life. We just throw up our hands. We blame everything that's happening on us being busy. So typically, a client will tell me that they're just really stressed that week. And I'll say, "Okay, so tell me what self-coaching you did since our last call about this. You have the tools, you have the exercise, what did you do to get yourself less stressed?"

And they'll say, "Well work was really busy so I couldn't. I didn't get to it." So number one, you're believing your brain that work being busy is what causes the stress, right? You're like, "Well, I'm stressed because work is really busy." "Okay, so what did you do to feel less stressed?" "Oh, I was too busy to do anything to feel less stressed."

So number one, you believe your brain that your stress is caused by the amount of things you're trying to do, and then number two, you use that as an excuse to not do your thought work to feel better. So if you're someone who uses being busy as a way to stress yourself out, I suggest you practice something like busy is just a thought. I can feel stressed out about this set of things I'm doing, or I can feel neutral, or I can feel positive.

But the things themselves don't mean I have to keep thinking and believing that I am too busy, right? If you're in this group of people who gets really stressed out by thinking about how busy you are, how busy work is, or how busy whatever is, I really want you to practice noticing that busy is just a state of mind. It's not an external thing.

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

UFYB 27: Busy Is a State of Mind

You can have the same number of things on your to-do list and there are moments that you're in the flow and getting stuff done and you feel fine, and then the moments when you're thinking the thought, "Oh my god, we're so busy, it's too much," is when you feel stressed out, right? And I want you to really notice that you can only ever physically be doing one thing at a time. You're only ever doing one piece of work at a time.

So any busyness is really just mental busyness. It's not physical busyness. You're mentally busy because your mind isn't clear because you're not managing it. So that is the deeper level of work about busyness in the mind if you're in this group who finds busyness stressful is that the only thing that can really be busy is your mind.

If you manage your mind, you never feel too busy again because your busyness, that sort of buzzing, that franticness is only experienced as a mental and emotional state. It does not come from whatever's on your calendar. So that's the first kind of group.

And then the second way that people use I'm so busy is actually as a way to feel important. So if you notice that you have the desire to tell everyone else how busy you are, it's interesting to ask yourself why that is. Generally, it's because you equate being busy with being important or valuable. If you don't know how to create your own validation, then you look to external conditions to validate you.

And you may believe that being busy signals to other people that you're important or valuable or loved or have a full life, or whatever it is that you don't totally believe to be true about yourself and you want other people to reflect back to you. So the problem with using busyness this way is that it incentivizes you to load up your calendar with things that occupy your time but aren't necessarily enjoyable or productive or strategic, right?

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

UFYB 27: Busy Is a State of Mind

If you're emotionally invested in being busy to prove your own worth or value to yourself and other people, you're going to have a hard time saying no to anything. So you aren't really using your time to your own best effect. And I see this with my clients sometimes when I help them go through everything they're doing and I help them start to set some limits and not for instance, respond to every client email immediately, and not jump in and solve everybody else's problem immediately.

It's actually hard for them because they want to believe that everybody else needs them to do that, right? And they think like, "Oh my god, but if I don't respond right away my clients will be so upset." Or, "If I don't take care of this my staff is going to be drowning without me." It can be this way that we make ourselves feel important to be super busy all the time.

And we actually can be kind of resistant to letting go of that even though it's really keeping us from creating the kind of work we want and really living out our purpose. And I think another reason that people struggle with this is because of something I've talked about on the podcast before, which is the way that capitalism and capitalist kind of ideology, which we've all grown up in, makes us believe that being productive is morally worthy.

So we think that if we're busy, we are virtuous. This is exacerbated by kind of puritan Christian influence in American culture. Just think about the saying, "Idle hands are the devil's work," right? You should be busy all the time. And when they said that, they weren't like, "So women, you should be writing deep scripture." No, they meant like, darning socks. And like, doing chores, right?

There's a whole other gender aspect to this too, I think, where women are kind of raised to think we should constantly be doing something productive and often historically, that was kind of menial and household tasks, and I'm not saying that household labor is sort of menial on its own, obviously,

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

UFYB 27: Busy Is a State of Mind

everybody's household needs labor to keep going and it's a productive, important part of the economy in any family.

But idle hands is the devil's work means like, don't sit around and think. Do household chores all the time, right? So busyness in all these different ways is glorified as being productive and being morally worthy. So I think that some of us think we want to be busy all the time because it makes us feel like we're okay.

If we're not busy all the time, we start to feel weird, and we start to wonder if there's something wrong with us or we should be doing something else. We start to feel guilt or shame about not being productive enough. So we want to stay really busy so that doesn't happen, so we never have to look at those thoughts.

The truth is that busyness and productivity are often actually at odds. When you're keeping yourself busy by rushing from one task to the next, you're overloading your schedule and your commitments, you actually can't do any deep work. So remember when I said earlier in the podcast that busyness can only exist as busyness of the mind.

And so in two different ways, being "busy" makes it difficult to do deep work. Because number one, you don't create any time for it, you don't have any time on your calendar where you can set aside some time to really work on something, and that might not be work, that could be a creative pursuit or even just spending time with your family. Whatever it is. But you don't set aside any sort of chunks of time to really get into something.

And you're mentally busy during the whole - even if you do set aside time, you can't get mentally into whatever you're working on. So when you're doing that, when you're creating both calendar and mental busyness, you can't ever get into your zone of genius. You never get the actual downtime you need to truly restore or to deeply work. Deep, profound work comes

UFYB 27: Busy Is a State of Mind

from periods of intense concentration followed by periods of total relaxation.

It never comes from frantic busyness. You don't imagine Einstein came up with the theory of relativity when he was like, scribbling on the napkins in the car between soccer practice and the grocery store while trying to answer work emails. He needed some time to think about that shit.

So if you really want to make progress on your most important projects and initiatives, whether it's personal or professional, you have to give up the myth of busyness. If you are stressing yourself out by telling yourself you're so busy, you need to work on that thought, and you need to cultivate thoughts that help you feel organized and empowered and believing that you have plenty of time to get it all done.

You all think that the amount of time you have and how busy you are sort of set by external conditions but they're not. You all have enough time to get what you need to get done, done. But you aren't able to focus because you're constantly distracting yourself with this anxiety which produces all of this procrastination, avoidance, and sort of multitasking attempts that just create busyness of the mind, which interferes with actually getting your work done.

And if you're attached to being busy as a moral or value proposition, you have to get real with yourself about what work you are relying on your busyness to do for you. Where are you not creating your own validation and self-worth? Where are you relying on overstuffing your calendar to make you feel good about yourself? Where are you performing your busyness to try to control what other people think about you? And what kind of depth of work and enjoyment of life are you sacrificing by doing so?

So those are the deep questions for this week. I encourage all of you chickens, do not lead busy lives. I encourage you all to aspire to be more

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

UFYB 27: Busy Is a State of Mind

like your namesake chickens and to let go of this myth of busyness, and to recognize that being busy can only happen in your head.

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