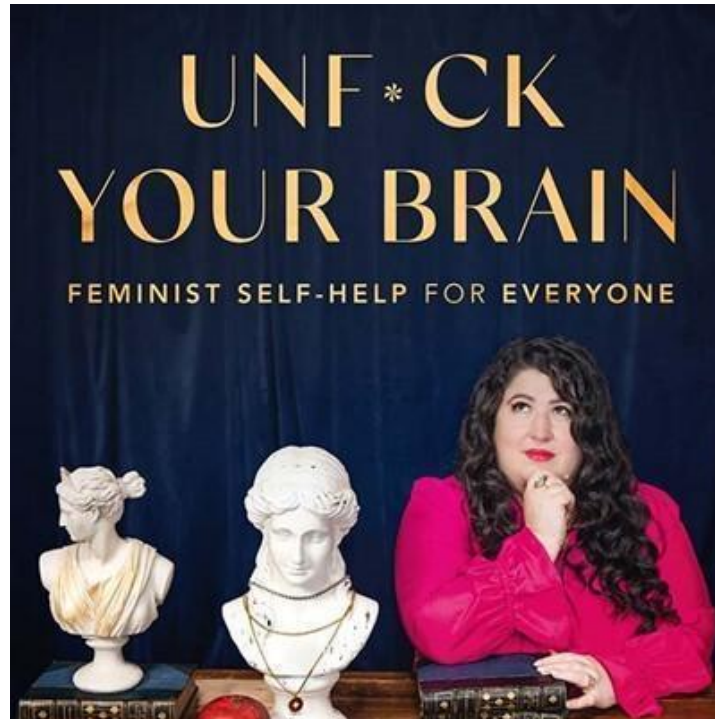


UFYB 120: Five Years of Thought Work Part 2: Family & Romantic Relationships



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? I have amazing news, which is that January is finally over. I think maybe January was like, seven months long. It's a little unclear. I may have blacked out partly through and woken up in another dimension. Maybe this is the multiverse. It's still January.

No, it's now February. We made it. It's light out a little longer, so that is awesome. And another thing that is awesome is that we just, this past Friday, opened registration for the next Clutch College in May in Brooklyn and it sold out in 48 hours, which is really crazy. It was like 90% sold out in 24 hours. And then the rest of it sold out the next day.

So that was super fun. We are obviously going to have to do more of these because I guess apparently you guys want to come and jam out about thought work in person and change your lives. Like, who knew? So we did that and then I also this week did a great interview with a neuroscientist and a neuroscience researcher all about kind of the science behind what I teach. That was really interesting.

I obviously - my work is informed by science but I'm not a neuroscientist myself. I more study myself and my clients and I read, but I'm not doing experiments. And she does empirical research, and so that was really cool. She talked a lot about how her research backs up what I teach and what she liked about my work and I thought it was really cool to hear from her, all about her work and how it intersects, so that was awesome.

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It's not out yet but I will share the link on my Instagram when the episode comes out. If you guys don't follow me on social media, you should because I do a ton of podcast interviews. I do at least one a week pretty much on other people's podcasts. So it's just like, so much bonus teaching.

And then I also share a little bonus teaching like my Instagram stories and stuff, so you should come follow me there if you don't. On Instagram you just search my name. My handle is @karaloewentheil. All one word. I share bitesized versions of the podcast teachings too. I share a lot of good stuff so you're missing out if you're not following me there.

Alright, so that was that, and this week now, I'm traveling, I'm going to Nashville for a workshop. I'm going to New Orleans to see some friends and see one of the early Mardi Gras parades that I always love going to. It's one of the smaller kind of funkier ones. That's going to be really fun.

But we have a podcast to do first before I go to the airport, and this week I'm continuing the series I started on the last podcast about where I am in my thinking and in my life five years out from kind of starting this form of thought work. Obviously I had therapy, I'd done other kinds of coaching things, I'd done yoga and meditation. It wasn't my first self-development ever, but since I discovered this form of thought work that I practice and teach now.

In the last episode I talked about body image and food and movement, and then I talked about work and money. And this week I'm really diving into what has changed in my relationships with other people and my own thoughts and feelings, particularly my family and romantic relationships.

I was also going to do friendships and socializing, but this episode got really long just with the first two, so I'm going to save kind of socializing,

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networking, friendships, whatever kind of next level intimate relationships for next week.

So let's start where it all begins, with family. In 2015, so that was five years ago when I think I actually had listened to my teacher's podcast maybe, but five years ago is when I really started doing this work kind of very intensely and I went to coach training. I still had a lot of mental drama about my family.

I was very invested in the idea that my family members just being who they are had damaged me and scarred me, they had ruined my life in various ways and a lot of drama. So much drama. I was very fully invested in the kind of therapy-ized narrative that your childhood and your parents determined your entire self and future, and that you have to be limited by whatever went on when you were young.

One of the problems with this theory is that it doesn't question your whole set of beliefs about your childhood. It's like when you go to therapy and talk about your childhood, some of what you're relaying are circumstances, real facts, but a lot of it is your thoughts and interpretations of what happened and what that all means.

So I totally agree that those thoughts do cause your current situation, your current problems. But that doesn't mean that your thoughts are what actually happened. It's just your thoughts about it. It's your interpretation. A lot of that is just optional thinking. It's not actual fact.

In 2015, I was still very committed to believing that I needed my family and everyone else in the world to behave certain ways for me to feel the way I wanted, and that I didn't have any control over my relationships with them. So it was kind of the perfect victim thinking trap.

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I believed I had to do whatever they wanted, I had to spend as much time with them as they wanted, I had to do exactly what they wanted, and I believed that they made me feel bad and miserable whenever I did that. So I'd given myself no way out, which I think is the clear sign of kind of victim thought pattern, when you've constructed a set of thoughts so that you can't find any solution.

That's when you know you're in victim thinking. So not surprisingly, I had a lot of emotional drama around family events and interactions. I often ended up crying at the drop of a hat during them. I dreaded them beforehand. It was a lot of drama in my brain.

In 2020, none of that is really the case. It's actually, I think quite shocking. In some ways, the work I did on my thoughts about my family maybe because it was one of the earliest areas I brought this work to, same with body image, it's now the work I almost forget I even did because now it's so natural to think about them the way that I learned to think about them on purpose.

And kind of same with the body, doing that episode last week. I sort of had to go back and be like, what did I use to think and feel? What was that like? Because I did that work so early and so deeply in this process for me that now it's so natural that it's hard to remember what it used to be like.

So I now understand and believe I'm an adult woman, I'm almost 40. I get to decide what kind of relationship to have with my family, or plural, relationships. Family is not monolithic. Different members. And when and how. I know that I don't have to attend events. If I go it's because I'm choosing to attend them, and sometimes I choose not to.

And I also did the work to create the emotions I want to have around my family so that when I do spend time with them, it's perfectly pleasant and

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nice and I actually can enjoy it. My family did not change. My mind changed. And I know that's true because there are things, complicated things in my family that have happened in the past five years that didn't even exist before. Circumstances that have changed, and yet I feel totally differently.

I want to be really clear because sometimes what people hear when I say this is well, my family is still terrible but I choose to like them. That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying my family is neither amazing nor terrible inherently, just like any other family or person or myself. It was just my own thoughts that made my past experience terrible.

And now it's my own thoughts that make my current experience enjoyable. Neither is more true than the other. One is just a lot more fun for me, so that's what I go with. One of the biggest shifts in this for me that I want to kind of go into in detail because I think it's so freeing was giving my parents permission to have whatever thoughts and feelings they were going to have.

Now, and I say permission, and I'm doing air quotes, which you can't see of course, because they were always allowed to think whatever they wanted to think. They're autonomous humans, just like I'm allowed to think whatever I want to think, and you're allowed to think whatever you want to think.

But I think we have this cultural idea that parents should unconditionally support their children and only want their children to be happy and never disagree with their children about what would be happy or good for them. I think that thought is so poisonous to us because very few humans have mentally and emotionally evolved to the point that they don't have expectations of other people and don't want other people to behave a certain way.

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All of us are working - those of us listening to this podcast and doing this work are a small minority of the people in the world, and it's still really challenging for us to do that. So why do we believe that just because our parents birthed us, all of a sudden they should be magically amazing at doing that?

If you have kids, are you magically amazing at doing that? Probably not. I think that that cultural belief just sets most of us up to feel betrayed and judged and abandoned by our parents, just because they are humans who have some human thoughts in their brains that don't agree with the thoughts in our brains.

And it lets us off the hook of doing our own work to accept and love ourselves and believe in our own choices, without needing someone else to validate them. So for instance, I'm someone who's chosen not to have children as a life choice, and that is a choice my parents for sure wished was different.

I mean, I know they would like me to have children. And I'm 100% okay with that. They are totally allowed to want grandchildren. They are totally allowed to believe that they would be happier if I had children. I know that circumstances don't cause feelings, but they're allowed to believe that. They are totally allowed to believe my life would be richer if I had children. Of course they believe that. They are people who wanted children and had them and love them.

Having me and my siblings, having children was a big part of their life, so of course they believe that that's an important, wonderful thing that people will benefit from doing. Or when I quit my job in law to become a life coach, I could have held them to an impossible standard of total support, but that would be so crazy. Of course this sounded bananas to them.

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It was kind of bananas to do this. And I wasn't 100% sure about my choice, so why would I expect someone else to be? We want other people to be like, more sure about how right we are than we are. And why would I expect someone else to be more sure about my choice than I am? Especially someone else who's invested a lot of time and care and financial support on my previous career and is concerned about my financial stability and all the other things parents worry about.

Just giving them permission to be human beings who are as human as I am, and believe their own thoughts just like I do, and also without the coaching tools I have has been so freeing. And that is what required me to grow the fuck up and stop wanting my parents to manage their minds better than I was managing my mind.

When you are mad that your parent wants you to be different, you know what you're doing? You're doing the exact same thing. You are wanting them to be different. When you get your eyes back in your own lane and manage your own mind, that's when you will feel free. I coached somebody live on the Poptarts Podcast taping I did who said like, I've used thought work to manage my mind, it's so amazing, and now I need to know how to get my parents to manage their minds so they won't be disappointed in me.

And I was like, that is exactly the wrong question. You're not managing your mind. When you want them to change their thoughts about you, you need to change your thoughts about them. And this is work I've also done on my siblings in terms of allowing them to be who they are and breaking those nuclear family patterns of interaction.

I think that you could do this work on anybody in your family. It's so powerful. So that's what has changed in an immense way in the last five years. And then some things are still the same. I'm still working on

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uncovering and examining the thoughts that I learned early on about families and how you're supposed to relate to them.

I think there's always more work to do there. I come from a family - I come from a Jewish family, half Italian, half Italian Jews I mean, so everyone is very involved in everyone else's life and has a lot of opinions about everyone else's choices. And that is an expression of love in my family. That is how people express their love.

It's not how I choose to think about my relationships anymore. As a coach, I have decided on purpose and as a human to disengage from being very invested in the choices other people make and trying to control those. And I don't begrudge the members of my family who don't feel that way. We're allowed to believe different things, but I'm still working on how to navigate that difference skillfully, while still holding love for everyone involved.

I don't know that my way is better. There's no such things. It's just what feels good to me and what I've chosen to do. Other people choose to approach their relationships different and my job is just how can I love all of us while staying true to how I want to show up.

I'm also seeing new layers in my romantic relationships with my family patterns, of the ways I unconsciously learned to relate to a romantic partner or to kind of family as a child and becoming more conscious about whether I want to keep those patterns with my chosen family or partner or friends, or whether I want to change them.

There's always more work to do there I think for all of us. Always like, what are my defaults, how did I learn these, do I want to keep them, do I like them? Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

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So speaking of romantic partners, let's talk about that next because that is an area where I have done a lot of painstaking thought work and seeing tremendous growth and change in myself and also a place where I'm still doing very deep work and growing a lot.

So in 2015, I was dating my last long-term partner. We were in a kind of on again, off again relationship for five or six years. And he was and is a wonderful person. There was a lot of love between us, there still is, but there were also some long-term incompatibilities, which we would both totally say.

And I don't regret that relationship at all, but I do think that all of my romantic choices until kind of recently, were informed by some scarcity thinking about whether I could really find the relationship that I wanted. That doesn't mean that they weren't actually great relationships where I learned a lot and loved some amazing people, but like, that scarcity thinking was still part of my thought process.

It wasn't the only thing in my thought process. I was also looking for certain types of people and compatibilities that I found and really enjoyed. It's not either or. It's not like, oh, they were terrible people I shouldn't have dated, if only I hadn't had that thought. It was both. I had these thoughts that I don't think were that helpful, but they're also good reasons that I was involved with them, the people I've been involved with.

One of the things that has become very clear to me as I go deeper into thought work is that we can really learn to see over time how cognitive bias operates to always confirm our deep-seated beliefs. So for a long time until very recently, and I'm still working on it, I had the fundamental belief that my love life was not going to work out the way I wanted. That I wasn't normal and I wouldn't have some kind of normal relationship, which I couldn't even define of course. It was just a thought.

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We can spend a long time talking about why I had that belief and where I got it, but I don't think that's super worthwhile. But what has been worthwhile is watching what my brain has done with my belief over time, and I'm going to kind of really go into this because I see so many of my clients have the same belief and I have come out the other side in a way that a lot of people haven't been able to yet.

So in my 20s, I think I believed that there was just something mysteriously wrong or different about me. It's hard to even remember what my thoughts were. They were so bizarre. But I think that I believed that there was some mysterious entrancing thing about certain women, which we're taught by society, and that I didn't have that, so that was a real problem.

So I wasn't going to be able to entrance a man, which I totally thought was the goal. My current partner is not entranced by me. That is a very good thing. So that's what I thought in my 20s. It caused me a lot of pain. Then in my early 30s, I kind of worked through that belief, became aware of it, started working on it, but then I just decided to start believing that I was intimidating or too much.

And then in my mid-30s I worked through that and then I started believing - I always had beliefs about my body, that my body was a problem until I did the work on it, but that's what kind of came to the fore as the main reason in my 30s. That I stopped dieting and I gave up hating my body and I gained weight and I - first I believed nobody would be attracted to me in the new body, and then when that turned out to not be true, then I believed okay, people will be attracted to me but not want to date me.

And that turned out to not be true, and then it was like okay, but not the kind of people I want to date. It was the same underlying belief kept coming up with different "reasons" for it, as I worked through each one. And that is just a really kind of special sign to you that your brain is being a very biased

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witness, if you keep coming up with different reasons to keep your same negative limiting belief.

So I came up with like, 10 different reasons to believe, one after the other, to support my fundamental belief that I wasn't going to be able to have the kind of partner or relationship I wanted, or I wasn't normal in some way or good enough in some way.

And also notice, it didn't matter that I was in relationships. This is the other thing. I had been in multiple long-term relationships and then some shorter ones and dating. It didn't matter that I was in relationship with someone great for a lot of this time, or dating interesting people. I was always looking for reasons to disqualify my relationships from counting.

Because being in the relationship was incompatible with my belief about how I couldn't be in a normal relationship. So I was just constantly looking for ways to see the relationship as not normal or not good enough. And so in 2015, a couple of years before and after that, when I wasn't with that long-term partner that I was dating, then I was dating around and I was totally insane about dating.

I had just enormous anxiety about dates and communication, every aspect of it. It was really excruciating. Took up a huge portion of my brain and mental energy. And I put so much of my self-esteem and value and body image on how kind of random men I barely knew acted, and I took everything so personally.

I just had extremely anxious attachment patterns and I was suffering so much anxiety. And I could blame it on modern dating or texting, but the truth is I think if I were sending letters by footmen to the house down the square, I would probably just have sat at the window staring up the street all day waiting for the footmen to appear again.

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We like to blame things on technology, but humans have been crazy about sex and love for a very long time. I could seriously do like, 10 podcasts about how I was around dating and how it messed with my brain and my relationships. I'm definitely going to cover this in a future Clutch College course. It's such important work.

But just for the purposes of this podcast, since we can't spend six hours together because I have to pack and go to the airport, suffice to say, I was super anxious, I was catastrophizing all the time, and so I was constantly vacillating between feeling kind of raw and overly vulnerable and having no boundaries - and when I say no boundaries, it's really interesting.

I don't mean like, oh, I let people take advantage of me. I mean like, I didn't have a sense of healthy boundaries in terms of how much to be thinking about or communicating or seeing someone, or like, how much of my life to sort of prioritize above or over or less than someone else. I didn't have good boundaries around what role should a romantic relationship play in my life.

And then the other half the time, I just felt really shut off and dismissive, and it was interesting because as I started to do thought work on this stuff, the first thing I dealt with was all of the anxiety around somebody not liking me or breaking up with me or whatever. And I got really good at that, not being anxious about that, but it sort of meant that I skipped over learning how to be in a relationship with someone, especially someone new, and not be just constantly in my mind going from well, I feel anxious but okay, if we break up it's fine, I know how to do the thought work on that.

Like, how to be like, no, I'm going to stay in this place where I'm anxious but stay vulnerable and present in this relationship. And that really brings me to 2020 and where I am now because on some levels, a lot has changed, and some levels, I'm still really working on.

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So I think that I have really finally fully changed my belief about having the partner and relationship I want. I no longer take the nonsense of early dating personally. I kind of got to the place where my rule was if it's not a hell yes then it's a no, and that clarified a lot for me about the people I was dating and my priorities.

And actually, when I came to that rule, it required breaking up with a couple of different people I was seeing. And I actually took a break from dating after that because all of those people were not a hell yes. And I realized that I was very comfortable being single and dating, but it felt very uncomfortable to think about being single and not dating.

The idea of not dating on purpose made me feel very anxious. And so I was like, well that's obviously what I need to do. Move towards discomfort. That's what I did. And that was so helpful because I was constantly thinking about my dating and relationship life as this problem that I had to solve and taking that off the table, like we're not going to try to solve that right now, we're just going to not even engage in it, like consciously choosing to be single and not date, be like, oh no, by choice, I'm just single, I'm not dating, I'm not trying to find a partner, I'm just single, that really reset my brain to see that that was a valid choice.

Of course I intellectually thought it was a valid choice, but emotionally, that that was a valid choice, that my life was just as good and that there were actually benefits to it, there were ways in which I had a lot more space and mental energy and time in my life and that was a positive thing, getting through the discomfort of being like - because part of what was going on was I was like, hustling to use coaching or use thought work or get better at dating or improve my own self-image or whatever I thought I needed to do, change my beliefs, so that I could find a partner so I could feel like I had fixed it.

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And so it felt so important to me to be dating, to be like, working on that. And when I took that off the table and I was like, no, we're not going to hustle for that, it was so scary for the first maybe week, and then it was actually amazing and really kind of peaceful and expansive. Sometimes I miss that.

But so I spent a few months not dating, and then I sort of decided I was ready, and I felt like I had really - my taking a break had actually allowed my belief about what was possible for me to solidify and for me to really see it as a choice, not like, I have to hustle to fix this to be good enough, it was really like, oh no, I could go the rest of my life without dating. If I'm going to decide to date, it has to be a hell yes or it's a no because I deserve the hell yes and I can find what I want.

And then when I felt ready to start dating again, I set up my dates with a much different intention. Really coming from that like if it's not a hell yes, then it's a no. And the connections that I have made and the people that I have dated since then, and been partnered with since then have been just at a really different level for me.

Now that's not because - I don't think I magically manifested it. I think that it's that in the past I wasn't able to even recognize good kind of candidates or just people who are in a place for the kind of relationship I wanted, because I wasn't really equipped to recognize and relate to someone before who was, kind of emotionally stable and had good boundaries for themselves and knew how to take care of themselves and hold space for someone else.

I want to be able to tolerate that when it was all about my own ego, because I would have made everything means something about me or the relationship or their interest or their commitment.

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So that's really the difference, right? It's not, I manifested anything I don't believe, it's that what you are attracted to has a lot to do. It's like the action has a lot to do with what is driving you. And when you're being driven by insecurity and anxiety and scarcity thinking, you don't even see what is available to you and you are hyper focused on people who are going to prove your own thoughts true about yourself.

All that being said, here is the bad news y'all. You can find the persona or relationship that's exactly what you thought you wanted, once you believe you can have it and it will not change anything about your brain. I teach this all the time. The circumstance does not change the thought or the feeling. But it even still surprises me the ways in which my brain is just continuing some of its old patterns, even when I'm able to level up in terms of how I relate to people that I'm dating in my romantic life.

What changing the circumstance sometimes does is just allow you to see your own brain with more clarity. And now it's so clear to me that just like in your business, it's not like you're ever done with the work or any area of your life, right? You do the work, you're able to create a new result, and it's not just then you coast forever. It's like, oh, then you just see the next level of work to do.

And that is what I have experienced in my romantic relationships since kind of up leveling to the next level in the past, whatever it is, six, eight months is that, yes I'm able to create a new and different kind of result that is more of what I wanted, but I also just now can see so much more work for me to do. And that's not a bad thing, right? It's like you climb a mountain and then there's a clearing in the clouds, and you see like, "Oh, there's another mountain." And of course we always get to decide whether we're going to climb the mountains or not.

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But for me, every time I am able to up level in my life, I then see, oh, here's another opportunity to take my own work deeper. Here's another way I see these patterns play out for me. Less dramatic, less intrusive, like there's a lot more space and capacity for connection, and love and less anxiety and less fear and less ego. But it doesn't mean that that work is perfected and finished. I'm a human.

And when you change the circumstance, you still have to work on your thoughts and feelings. Or when you get a new result, which then becomes a new circumstance for you. If you're able to do the work to create a new kind of relationship, now that new relationship is your circumstance that you're in, but now you've gotten more work and more thoughts to deal with there. It's really no different than learning to love your jobs. You can love any job you ever have, right? That's an investment in yourself and your happiness, not in any specific job.

And so there's work I do on my patterns that are investments in specific romantic relationships - always have been right over the years. There's of course between two people, often things where there's friction or things where you work to adapt to a particular person. But most of the work is work I'm doing on myself because I recognize, it would come up in any relationship because it's all my own thoughts and experience, right? And I'm doing that work for me, and that's why it really doesn't even matter what happens with any particular person.

It's about me and my ability to learn how to feel secure and safe with myself, no matter who I'm dating and how to learn, how to generate love and capacity to be present with someone else, no matter who they are.

So that's where I am. This is already so long. I'm going to save friendships and social relationships for the next episode and I will talk to y'all chickens next week.

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