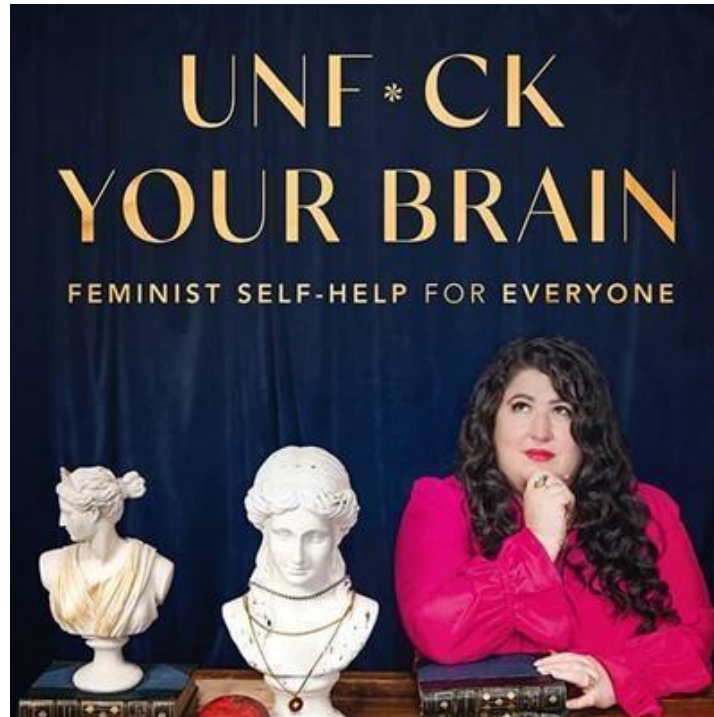


UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

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.

I'm so excited to share this episode with you, my chickens, and as you'll hear, this is an episode about sort of emotional labor slash the invisible workload of women, second shift stuff, but in the context of families of color and sort of fleshing out some of what was left out of the previous conversation I had with Susan Hyatt about this. I talk more about that in the intro to the episode. So excited to also have this episode with some of my Advanced Certification in Feminist Coaching students.

All right with that said, let's get into the episode.

Hello my chickens. I am really excited to have this conversation today. You all missed me, reminding myself that life is 50/50 even in Paris because one of my guests on the podcast lives in Paris. When we look at her on Zoom she has some amazing Parisian background. And so, I am constantly saying to myself whenever I see her, life is 50/50 even in Paris. That's not what we are talking about today although I'm sure that we could.

So here is the sort of lead into this episode, a few weeks ago, a few months ago at this point. Susan Hyatt and I had a conversation on this podcast about kind of, I don't love the term 'emotional labor' because I think it's kind of vague. But we had a conversation about the logistical labor that women do in families, the sort of emotional mental challenges, often women, not always but often women or whoever's the primary kind of caregiver and organizer in the family. And kind of what sort of socialization, and thought, and emotional drama happens around all of that stuff.

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

So, we had a great conversation. She got a lot of positive feedback with the episode that really resonated with people. And then I also heard from some of my students, they have a very valid critiques that we want to talk about today which is that one of the kind of solutions that Susan and I recommended was that women especially just need to get comfortable with things dropping sometimes.

That one of the things that happens is that often women, especially if they are in a position of privilege are not willing to let their kid go to school without their soccer stuff one day if that's what happens when their spouse is supposed to be in charge of it or let the kid show up without their lunch one day if the spouse is supposed to be in charge. They get stuck in this cycle and this catch 22 of I have to do it all because if I try to share responsibilities or even my partner's willing but I don't think they'll do it right.

And then I'll have bad thoughts about myself as a mom and then I'm not willing to do it blah, blah, blah. And so, we talked about the thought work that's required to let that happen. And one of the critiques that I got, that was completely well founded was that there was sort of a blind spot there because it is only kind of safe for some people to do that.

And depending on your community and given the policing, especially in America of families of color when they interact with institutional systems like schools, especially public schools. It is not necessarily safe for a woman of color, especially a Black woman probably, and a brown woman to let their kid go to school without lunch or let kind of anything happen that might provoke some kind of interaction with school authorities, with the system. So, we're going to talk about all that in more depth.

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

But that's kind of what we're going to be talking about today is this is a sort of companion follow-up episode to talk about the complexities on the ground of trying to do this work from different marginalized identities. And also, that we've still got to figure out how we can deal with this and how we can use coaching tools to manage it. So, I'm going to have this conversation with two of my amazing, advanced certification and feminist coaching students, Shawna Samuel and Amelia Pleasant Kennedy and they are both wonderful coaches and women of color.

And so, Shawna is a coach for working moms who helps them deal with all the drama of working moms. I'm going to let her give you more details in a minute. And Amelia calls herself a clutter coach and an organizer. But as we all know that's – what's the word I'm thinking of? A little thing that opens up to infinity, so it's all the shit that is behind that around thoughts and feelings, not just about the stuff in your house, but the roles of the people in your house. And your time management, and your family life, and all of that. It's like a pin prick to infinity.

So, I'd love for you both to kind of say hello and tell the listeners just a little bit more about you, what issues you see come up with the women you work with, whether it's sort of related to today's topic or not. Do you want to start us off, Amelia?

—

Amelia: Happy to. I am, yes, a clutter coach which sort of reveals quite a bit as you mentioned, Kara. So, I work with women and their mental and emotional clutter that they believe is related to objects in their home. But often has to deal with the unseen, unacknowledged work that we do behind the scenes to keep our families running, to keep our households running, to

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

pursue our own personal passions alongside of managing others and anticipating the needs and expectations of those around us.

I coach on topics related to motherhood, moving and downsizing, inherited clutter which is clutter that our family members love to pass on to us. The nostalgic attachment that human beings have to objects and this myth of domestic perfection that if I achieve a certain level of order within my home, that that directly relates to my worth as a woman, as a human being.

Kara: That's so powerful. I have so many follow-up questions. Shawna, why don't you introduce yourself and then we can start to dig into all of this.

Shawna: So, I am a coach for working moms on work life balance. And in particular I tend to coach women in the corporate sector. And a lot of my clients are high achieving women. And what tends to happen is that they have been going at full throttle professionally and then they reach the point in life and career where they have children. And they bring the same expectations of themselves, of others to raising kids. And so, they're taking on a lot of the mental load and then it impacts how they show up, not only in their families but at work.

And so, what I do is I really coach at the intersection of life and leadership for my clientele. I call my business The Mental Offload with the idea that we have so much stuff that we need to offload in our thinking and way of showing up so that we can be both the leaders and the parents that we want to be.

Kara: I don't even have children and I was like, wait, I need some mental offload. What is that, do we have one of those for business owners because I would like to mental offload some of my stuff? And I do not even have to take care of children and my partner takes care of his children.

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

Awesome, okay, so I think I'd love to hear first from each of you kind of how you see this sort of – it's obviously a huge topic but this whole area come up in your work in terms of the sort of socialization that women have to be the person who wants to be the cruise director.

Run all the logistics to be in charge of, it's like a project manager of the household to make sure everything gets done, and sort of how you coach around that. How you see that come up in your kind of specific niches and if you see variations depending on kind of communities and identities that different clients may live in?

Amelia: So, the way it shows up for many of my clients is in the feeling of being frazzled and overworked which sounds straightforward and simple but it is the need to constantly perform. So, to get up, like you said, manage everything in the household, show up a 110% whether it is as a stay at home parent or out in the workforce. Come home, pick everyone up, have all their gear together, get them where they need to be, manage multiple schedules.

Sometimes as caregivers manage multiple households and it's constantly 24/7 the expectation that you need to be one step or 10 steps ahead of everyone in your household and in your work arena. And it's never ending and the thread keeps going through everyone's mind, the parent's mind, the mother's mind of what's next? What do I need? What have I forgotten? What have I skipped out on? And when the brain is constantly running it drains your physical energy, it drains your emotional energy.

And we set our own expectations but we don't realize that they are created and guided by the way that we are socialized in the communities and cultures that we come from as well. So, I think especially in the Black community, this notion of being a model minority and always trying to excel

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

through education, through parenting, through every single aspect of our homes and our day-to-day, the constant need to sort of keep up and reach this level so that we are accepted fully by society and truly seen for all the gifts and the talents that we have.

Kara: Yeah, it's such a beautiful example of kind of one of the things we work on so much in ACFC is that intersectional perspective where we can see the layers of socialization and oppression. So, if you're socialized as a woman that's layer one with all the meaning that's assigned to household and how things look and looking presentable and the kids looking a certain way and the house looking a certain way and all of that.

And then if you live in another marginalized identity like you're a person of color, you're a Black person in America and there's this whole other level of socialization and all of the kind of stereotypes that you feel like you need to be pushing back against. And sort of demonstrating aren't true. With the signaling of how your family looks, how your family runs, how your house looks, what people will think when they interact with your family or your house. And then if you live in another, in a third marginalized identity, there's probably a third version of it.

So, it's like however many identities you live in, there is these multiple layers of it. What about you, Shawna, how do you see it come up?

Shawna: So, I would echo everything that Amelia just said. I think from the feeling of being frazzled and that brain constantly running, that comes up so often for my clients. The other thing that I have noticed in model minority communities and I should preface this by saying that Asian American community is very broad term. And there are of course many subgroups within this who have very different experiences. But if I were to kind of lump

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

everything together I would say there's a sort of cultural narrative that second best is never good enough and the B+ not good enough.

It can lead to a really perfectionistic approach to how people show up at home and at work. And I think that cultural narrative just reinforces the belief that we don't have the right to rest and relax until everything is done and done at a very high standard. So, when I think about my clients and people in the model minority communities that I coach the other thing that comes up here because of that narrative is that there's a belief that your accomplishments are going to bring you belonging, acceptance, maybe even a measure of safety.

And so, the degrees that professional accomplishments, the financial security, these kind of become protective. And my clients feel like their ability to secure those same privileges for their kids is something that they are responsible for. So, I think the mental load becomes even heavier for folks who tie all of these things, the belonging, the security to these accomplishments. And so, in addition to feeling frazzled I hear a lot of pressure and even a sense of betrayal at times.

The thought that comes up quite frequently that I coach on is I thought I was doing everything right. What happened?

Kara: Yeah. I think that's so powerful. I mean two of the things you just said, I guess the first thing I want to say is when you're talking about that sort of family pressure. Is sort of occurring to me that my family was very much in this vane also of you come home with a 98, where is the other two points? And thinking about how that flows through families because of course to me I think I'm, these days I think being Jewish in America is pretty white passing. There's certainly antisemitism.

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

But it's not as publicly acceptable at least in the northeast liberal elite education system where I grew up. But my grandparents who are the ones who gave my parents these beliefs that came down to me, were operating in the 40s and the 50s when there were still Jewish quotas and it was still Jews were the model minority and there were those same pressures. So, there is that same sort of you got a 98, where is the other two points? An A- is not an A.

We're not just going to the ivy league, you've got to go to the top three in the ivy league. What, are you going to go to Dartmouth, what the fuck is that? That sort of model of pressure.

Amelia: A 100%.

Kara: As we're talking about it, my grandmother was a stickler for her house looking completely clean and spick and span. And I have really just always thought about that as just her personality type. But as we're talking about it I'm like, no, I mean this was probably influenced by all of this, by growing up in the 20s and the 30s in America when antisemitism was much more outright. And the pride she took and the house is always extremely clean. Anybody who comes over will never see a hair out of place. She was always very well dressed and well maintained, all of that kind of proper.

It was only my mother's generation that was able to be like, whatever, I'm going to be a hippy, I'm going to do this. As assimilation keeps happening, as proximity to whiteness changes, as Jews get more accepted into society. But I think the thing I want to come back to in terms of our conversation and moving forward is that idea of – and I think it's so human like, part of this is coming at all humans but we're going to talk about it in a specific context. I think is if I just perform all these things correctly I'll be safe.

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

And it's like we all have different versions of this and we are reacting to different levels of real or perceived danger and that's part of what we want to talk about in this episode. The thing that all the brains are doing is, okay, I've just got to do all these things right and then I'll be safe. And then I'll feel okay. But it takes on such a different meaning. It's one thing to have that just be more emotionally versus what happens if you are a person of color living in a system where there's disproportionate policing of people of color and their families.

And you are potentially running a much more serious risk of kind of institutional interference in your family or even physical danger if you are not able to present as the model minority. But then also as you're saying, there is that like the thought error is I can control this by being and presenting a certain way. So, I'd love to hear what you think about this Amelia, especially because I know you had a kind of recent experience along these lines.

Amelia: Yeah, a 100%. I just recently had that thought error, the bubble burst, if you can call it that. My husband and I 'done all of the right things', gone to the elite schools, created a beautiful family and really worked hard to show up as our complete and full selves and be contributing members of the society. And we have three children. And my son attends a private school that is targeted towards student athletes who are preparing for professional careers. And he loves it. It's self-motivated, self-driven, this passion of his.

And there was an experience recently where he was in middle school between classes, chatting with administration. And I'll say, there is simply the pressure to perform that comes from our family as well as internally from him, his own desire to succeed. And there was a moment where someone from administration just did a typical check-in, "How are you

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

managing your workload? How's soccer going?" And he broke down and he began to share because he doesn't know anything different about sharing emotions, sharing his experience.

And admitted to carrying a really heavy load at that point. In turn a few days later we received on our steps, on our doorsteps, a visit from Child Protective Services. So, we went from sharing emotions and being honest about experience to Child Protective Services showing up at our doorstep. And it is unfathomable for me and really ignited a bit of anger I think about not understanding how someone saw that our child was in imminent physical or emotional danger from this one interaction. And the very first step was to call Child Protective Services.

There was no in between step. And I recognized that there is a level of bias at play there.

Kara: Yeah. So just to clarify, I think just make sure what you said is clear. That somebody saw there was no imminent danger and yet the first thing they did was to call Child Protective Services?

Amelia: It is actually unclear to me. I would posit that the call to Child Protective Services was prompted by something they saw in the display of emotion from my son that concerned them great enough to call Child Protective Services. There was nothing physically appearing on my son that indicated such. We know that he is safe. We know that he is protected. But someone inferred that he was unwell or unsafe.

Kara: So, can you talk a little bit about kind of how you used thought work to navigate that experience? This is an experience where you're not looking to change your thought about there being bias involved. It seems clear to you that there was. And so, I think so often people think that thought work

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

is about questioning that reality, or that you would be using thought work to believe it was no big deal that this happened. But that's not what it's for. Can you talk a little bit about how you kind of used it to move through that?

Because I talked to you earlier when it happened and then now, and you've gone through a journey and you're kind of thinking about it?

Amelia: Yeah. First I would say plainly that we, both my husband and I identify this as a small trauma. This experience triggered in us immediate feelings of anger. And I wouldn't say shame because we didn't feel that anything had gone wrong. We didn't feel responsible. We knew that there was clearly a misunderstanding or a misperception by the other individual. So, as I did, we followed through, we went through the process with Child Protective Services. We understood that they were doing their job. We cooperated in all of the normal ways that one would in a difficult situation.

But I was able to get to a place where I could feel angry and feel hurt, and allow that within myself. I could see it as an excessive choice involving bias by another person and not take on the responsibility for that choice myself. I don't have to make the experience okay. And I can unequivocally believe I have built a strong marriage, a safe home, a relationship where we as parents deeply love our children, that there was a misunderstanding. And I can love myself as I process the shock of this experience, this trauma.

And coaching is what has allowed me to get to that place of not being okay with it but feeling settled and sure in my own thoughts and feelings around the topic.

Kara: And I think what's one of the things that's so both disturbing and powerful about this story is that on the one hand one of the things we're trying to express in this episode is that the stakes are different for different

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

communities in terms of having any kind of lapse or looking like things aren't perfectly put together. But also, even not doing that is not protection. I mean that's part of the lie of it, is that if you just hold it all together perfectly you can protect yourself from bias, or from racism, or from sexism, or from whatever other ism.

And so, I think that both those things are true. It's like how do we both acknowledge that the stakes are different for different people? But also, are we serving people when we are sort of not also acknowledging that to some extent no amount of trying to control everything is going to protect you from any of that happening.

Amelia: Correct, because the structure that we have created as a family is wonderful and loving in many ways. And I'm so proud of my son for speaking up, for showing his emotion to this individual. And loving that he is able to be in touch with that. So, identifying that he is not at fault but no matter how much we hold it together there can always be circumstances or situations outside of our control that jumps straight to judgment of what may be happening behind closed doors or the assumption that something must be terribly wrong if a child is experiencing distress, emotional distress.

Kara: Yeah. Have you thoughts about this, Shawna, that you wanted to add to this part of the conversation?

Shawna: I think the main thing that I would add because this is such a poignant example. As a parent one of the things that I think it's really hard for us and any community to do is relinquish that sense of control and release the idea that if we do keep it all perfectly together that we'll be able to protect ourselves, protect our kids.

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

I think for many folks, I'm Indian American, biracial, for many of my brown friends this started to happen around 9/11 where all of a sudden they went from feeling like they were protected, and our parents felt like they were protected because they had gone to the right schools, they had the right degrees and all this stuff. And then they were getting stopped for every single search at the airport. And the feeling that none of that actually gave them the protection that they were seeking.

Kara: Yeah. I mean that's one of the kind of lies of white supremacy is that you can perform whiteness, or your proximity to whiteness. And when I say that what we mean is however in a current society whiteness is sort of understood or the signals of it to be kind of reaching the accomplishments or having the characteristics or whatever it is. Sort of performing a social role that seems to be similar to those things that are flagged as white. This is a little bit of an in depth explanation for the podcast. But that's the lie, that will keep you safe.

Just do what we say and do it this way and do it the way that the 'good white people' do it and then you'll be safe, you'll be close enough. But of course, that's never true because all it takes is one moment of bias or an event that sort of changes perceptions and the gulf becomes so much wider there. All it takes is being in a group of people where you have blonde hair so nobody knows your Jewish. And they tell all the antisemitic jokes that they usually don't tell if they think that you are Jewish. It's that sort of behind the mirror moment. What were you going to say, Amelia?

Amelia: I was just going to offer, in any other relationship I imagine that there were a series of steps, conversations that could have taken place between coaches, other teachers, parents. That other white families may have been afforded before jumping directly to Child Protective Services as

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

the 'solution' that they would see to a child just admitting that he was feeling stressed.

Kara: Right. What I'd love for us to talk a little bit as we're sort of rounding the corner on this podcast is how do you coach? How do we hold all of this? Yes, the stakes are higher for people in marginalized identities, for communities of color to let any crack in the façade show, let anything slip. Even just have a kid who's stressed out, much less than the kid without lunch or missing their soccer uniform or whatever. And then also knowing at the same time that you can't control and protect yourself from everything through your own actions.

And then we still have this problem we were originally trying to solve of how do women move through the logistical load and the mental drama that comes around changing that. So, I'm curious, kind of how do you coach around that? Is the answer, well, you need to be strategic about what things you will let drop? Is the answer we need to not think that we really have control over it anyway? I'd be curious to hear how you guys coach your clients around this when the stakes are higher for them maybe in certain ways?

Shawna: So, when I coach on these topics with my clients I think the work that we're doing in advanced certification in feminist coaching is so, so powerful. I also find that it can be challenging for my clients to fully identify the beliefs that they're operating from right at the start. So, when I start to coach on these issues some of the early routes in are maybe a little bit of a side door I would say. So, I often find that I have to start coaching them about their thinking about time.

And the feelings they have around not having enough time, being overwhelmed, being stressed and how they're managing their time, given

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

that most of them have very full-time jobs. And then come home to the second shift. So, they can often access the idea that they should have an equality of time with their partner, equality of leisure time you might say, or more time for themselves as a desire. So, I sometimes start there. And that can open the door to talking about how bias and biased expectations are impacting the way that they're spending their time.

The other thing that I tend to bring into my coaching is around household negotiation because I find that some of the standards that we hold ourselves to as wives and mothers can be quite impacted by the cultural messages that we have gotten. And what I hear from a lot of clients are things like, "Well, I just care more about how things are done at home, or my standards are higher."

And so, one thing that I would say is that if you look at same sex couples and families, it's not like there is a ton of research on this. But I think what's really interesting is that the research that has been done suggests there is a much more equal division of labor in the household in these families. And some folks have said to me, "Well, if you put two women together in a household you have two people who are much more invested in how things are done." The research is quite interesting because it suggests that's not actually the case.

It's not just a gender issue. It seems to come down to them not having the social roles to fall back on and has to do a lot more communication and negotiation about how to split things in a household. Whereas in heterosexual couples many times it's like we kind of go in with these prechecked lists of who's supposed to do what. And what the acceptable standards should be for each of the tasks around the household. And it can feel easier and maybe quicker for my clients to be like, "Well, we'll just take the default option on those prechecked lists."

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

And so, one of the things that I think it's important to coach around is that thought error because oftentimes what's happening is that it's easier or quicker in the short term and ends up being a much less strategic choice in the long term. So, we tend to look at what's good for current self versus future self and work on issues of household negotiation.

Kara: That makes sense. What do you think, Amelia, how do you kind of approach this?

Amelia: I a 100% agree with Shawna in terms of approaching it from a time aspect. It is something that's very tangible that people can sort of grasp onto. And I spend a lot of time in the feelings that we are experiencing as we move throughout the day. Because when we talk about this emotional and mental load moving throughout our communities it is often how much you can tolerate, how much you can let go of what you are telling yourself is necessary.

But it is really getting to a comfort level of what feels secure, what feels safe, what feels acceptable when choosing not to subscribe to some of these standards and expectations that we both put on ourselves and see that are necessary or needed set by society. So, I think really identifying for the client what level of comfort they have and starting there to build the emotional resilience to then begin to let more things, put down more things.

Let them off their list or off of their plate because you have to be willing to tolerate any experience or backlash if there's a better word from the unknown or the experiences that may result from the choices that you make as a parent or a woman.

Kara: Yeah. I think that's such a kind of beautiful place to bring this all together because I think that's what this kind of coaching and feminist

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

coaching is all about. Is not sort of, and so the world is perfect and you just do whatever you want. And it's not that there is an objective right answer. It's like what are the things that matter to you? What is your risk tolerance? How can we sort through both what may truly be a risk or an issue and what may be inherited trauma or things you were taught that may not be as relevant anymore?

And also, if you accept that you can't fully control what happens, now how important do these things feel to you? It's like being willing to be in the kind of discomfort of that dialectic of things are not completely controllable and I have control over some of these things. But also, I'm using that control to try to feel safe, so how do I create emotional safety? And then how do I decide? It's not black and white, there isn't a clear answer. It's not as easy as being like, okay, if you are a member of an overpoliced community then we recommend that these three things you could let go in the house.

It's not about that. So, it's both about acknowledging the different kind of challenges that different communities and people face. But also, our job as coaches is to always say even when there are real risks or challenges what we want to teach our clients is that our conscious choice about that also means grappling with the fact that your behavior can't guarantee or control safety anyway. Looking at the ways that we are using control to try to feel psychologically safe. And then how do we balance that with what are real safety issues in the world.

And then how do we make decisions from there and every single person and family's decision is going to be different.

Shawna: Yeah, absolutely. I think the emotional resilience piece of things is absolutely brilliant and spot on and super important for all of our clients. The other thing I've noticed is that clients often have a story about a terrible

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

worst case scenario that is going to occur if they start to let things go. And so, I like for them to be in that sort of duality of no, we can never have complete control of how everything turns out and yet in 90% of the cases the ceiling is typically not going to fall in when we let something go.

And I think for them to have that experience of dropping even one tiny piece of the perfectionistic standards and seeing the ceiling has not caved in can be super liberating.

Kara: And I think when you let go of the fantasy, because sometimes the ceiling will drop in when you are supposedly doing everything right. It sort of reminds me of the way people are around food, and health, and movement, that's sort of like people have really rigid diets because they're terrified that if they change anything they're going to get cancer and be mean to themselves if they caused it to themselves. And you can try to help the people let go and see nothing bad happens.

But also, part of it is like you can do all the 'right' things and still get sick because your health is not completely under your control, just like your interactions with systemic bias aren't completely under your control. But if we can release that illusion I think then people are in a better place to make empowered decisions. Okay, I'm not going to let go of the pieces involved sending my kid to school looking a certain way because I know this principal is trigger happy on calling Child Protective Services.

And that happened to this friend of mine and I'm not going to mess with that. But nobody sees the inside of the bathroom and I'm just not going to clean that as often or whatever it is. It's like you can make a truly informed decision when you're not operating from this magical thinking of I have to do it all perfectly and that will protect me, and that will sort of

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

psychologically and physically protect me. Do you want to close this out Amelia?

Amelia: Yeah. I think it's acknowledging the anxiety, it's dancing with it and saying, what would the future look like if I decide that this is no longer something that I can take on, that this is something I can let go. And helping clients both acknowledge the way that they are feeling now and putting that on a level playing field with how they may feel in the future if they make that powerful decision to let one or two things fall from their list, or from their plate.

And helping them really decide which feeling, which arrangement really serves them best because holding it all together requires a certain level of energy and mental load, and letting things go is equally the same and really determining which feels best.

Kara: And having your own back throughout the whole process. I mean that's the way that I think the oppression gets the most sneaky, so you do let something go and there is a consequence. Or you didn't let anything go and something happens. And then you are doubting yourself and then you are beating yourself up. And then you are, and removing that part from the equation I think is always what we end up coming back to.

Amelia: Yeah, teaching and supporting the whole life.

Kara: Yeah, so good. Thank you two for coming on. Where can people find you and more about your work?

Amelia: I am A Pleasant Solution and you can find me at my website, apleasantsolution.com or on socials @apleasanttosolution.

UFYB 238: The Invisible Labor Load for Women & Families of Color: A Conversation with Amelia Pleasant Kennedy & Shawna Samuel

Kara: Always fun when your last name lines up well with your niche. That's not my experience but I always love when somebody's does. What about you, Shawna?

Shawna: So, I can be found at my website, The Mental Offload is www.thementaloffload.com. And on Instagram I am @mental_offload.

Kara: Alright, perfect. Thank you two for coming on and sharing your stories and your thoughts and I'll see you all on our ACFC call in nine minutes. Bye everybody. I'll talk to you next week.

Shawna: Thanks, Kara.

Amelia: Bye.

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