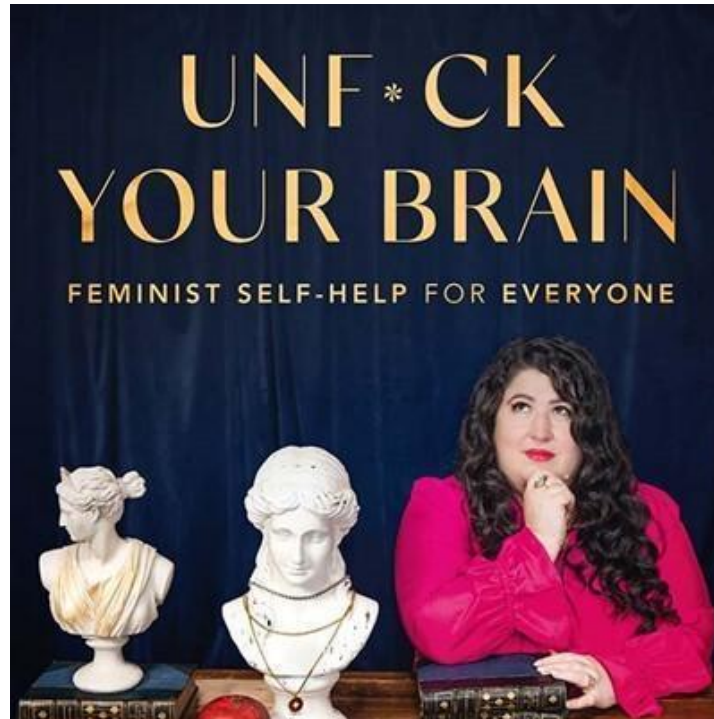


# UFYB 283: Wellness Perfectionism



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## UFYB 283: Wellness Perfectionism

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.

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Hello my chickens, I feel like it's been a while but that's just because so much has been happening to me. And it feels like every day is years long right now, not a bad way. But I think one of the most interesting ways you can observe your brain in daily life is noticing your perception of time and how long things are. When you're doing something novel it always feels like it takes longer than when you're doing something familiar.

Have you ever noticed that if you walk somewhere new the way there always seems longer than the way back? And that's because on the way back it's a little more familiar and predictable and your brain is not as focused on everything that's happening and how far away it is and exactly what every step looks like. And I think that's why when you travel it can seem like you've been gone for so long when it's only been a few days because you're experiencing so many new things.

I sometimes feel like if I'm traveling for more than a week, I sort of forget that I have another life. I'm just like, "This is my life now, I just live on the road. I don't have a home. Who knows who those people I remember as my family." Everything seems so far away. And for me in the last few weeks I have turned in the manuscript for my book, just the first draft but still a huge accomplishment, a huge project.

Then I moved houses. I went on an international trip to three different locations, came home to a totally new house. Did the last bits of unpacking and arranging. I got used to cohabitating with some full-time for the first

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time, gotten used to being a part-time parent who is much more involved in the sense of now I live with the kids half the time. So just so much new shit has happened that in my brain it feels like my previous life was years away even though it was only three weeks. So there's a lot of new things.

And while I was on my trip I also had some really intense mind body experiences that I think made everything feel even kind of slowed down. And I want to talk about them for two reasons. The first is that it's easy to forget when we're watching other people's lives on Instagram or, you know what, honestly just in the house across the street. Instagram gets a lot of shit and obviously social media has really changed the way that we view the world in some ways that are problematic.

And also compare and despair is not a new phenomenon that Instagram invented. If we didn't have Instagram we just looked at other people that we knew and compared and despaired with them. Instagram has just expanded the pool of people for us to compare and despair with. But it's easy to forget whether it's Instagram or just the people who live across the street from you or your older sibling or whatever that life is 50/50 for everyone.

So if you are following me on social media and some of you do, you would have seen glamorous travel. We stayed at luxury hotels. We took romantic selfies. We ate at amazing restaurants. All that's true. Those were the external circumstances I was in. And also I am still me with my brain everywhere I go. And listen, this continues to surprise and annoy me but it's true. Even I still today when I am fantasizing about a vacation, I imagine that I'm a totally different person on that vacation but of course I'm just me.

I'm still tired. I'm still cranky sometimes. Sometimes I am deeply in love and sometimes I'm deeply annoyed and I'm out of sorts and I'm irritable. I'm all the human things. So number one, just any time you are looking at someone else and imagining that you want their life, you just need to

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remember, imagine that circumstance but with your most irritable or whatever negative emotion you struggle with day. None of it is a magic bullet which is kind of the theme of today's podcast.

So in Marrakesh particularly, we went to Morocco and we went to the desert first and then wakes up to the rain for three days straight but that was unusual apparently. And then went to Marrakesh and in Marrakesh I had this really intense nervous system reaction to something. I don't know if it was to the city. I have been to many Middle Eastern and Mediterranean old cities before. I have been to many Souk/Sook giant markets before. I have been to many loud, chaotic, dynamic, old cities before.

So I don't think that that in itself would have set this off. I don't really know what it was. It might have just been all of the travel beforehand. It might have been the life changes. It might have been something about Marrakesh in particular, who knows. But I had a really intense mental, emotional nervous system response to the city. I had a chronic pain flareup. I felt like I was constantly feeling basically in danger. And I don't mean that I was actually in danger. It is not that Marrakesh is actually dangerous. I was never in actual danger personally.

But my system was just activated as if it was in danger, which I mean that happens to me in New York and anywhere else. When my brain thinks that there might be a threat, then it makes my body feel like I'm in danger even if the danger is a feeling or a thought or whatever was going on. And so any time I tried to walk anywhere in the first 36 hours I felt like I was having a total body wide freak out. It was really intense. I have never experienced anything really like that. And I watched my brain react to this experience despite everything that I teach and know with so much catastrophizing and judgment and opinion.

So ideally what I want to do in that kind of situation is respond to myself the way I would respond to someone else. I want to have care and patience

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and a broad perspective. But I'm still a human with a human brain and I don't always take care of myself perfectly. And that's what I want to talk about today because as I was reflecting on it, I saw that there was some sneaky perfectionism happening. And I realize it's not just me, of course this is something I see in a lot of my students and my clients and the online coaching world or kind of online psychology world at large.

And so I would call wellness perfectionism. I think wellness perfectionism is when we try to use some kind of wellness or healing modality to get out of having the human experience. So for instance with thought work, that might look like always trying to change your thoughts so that you never have any negative emotions. So you take the concept of thoughts being optional and you take it to the extreme and you try to change every thought you have that causes any negative emotion.

And if you can't change a thought immediately or even with some trying you think that's a real problem that you need to solve and something has gone wrong and you're doing it wrong. Or with nervous system work it might look like trying to regulate your nervous system perfectly so that you never get dysregulated. And any time you get sort of hyper focused on your nervous system, you're always trying to maintain a perfectly regulated state. And any time you are dysregulated you think that you have to stop everything and fix it and get back to regulated.

And that it's a problem if you get dysregulated, it means you're not good at nervous system regulation, it means you aren't 'healed' enough. That you are kind of always thinking that you should have a perfectly regulated nervous system and you're always trying to get to that or maintain that. With somatic work it might mean using somatic tools to induce physiological states that you use as a form of buffering or trying to avoid that human experience.

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So any time you feel a negative emotion using breath work to induce a feeling of euphoria so you don't have to feel it. And again this is different than processing emotions and moving them through. It's when you are trying to use these tools to get away from them and make them be over as soon as possible. When you're processing an emotion really potentially using somatic or nervous system tools, or just the emotional processing tools I teach, these things all overlap.

You don't have an agenda. You're not like, "Okay, goal is get rid of it." That's not processing an emotion. When you're using these tools to try to get rid of an emotion that is having an agenda. That is that wellness perfectionism, this idea that I can be in a perfectly well state. I can have all good thoughts. I can avoid all negative somatic experience. I can have a perfectly regulated nervous system. That's what I want. That's the goal. That's what my life should be like. I'm going to use these tools to try to get out of any other kind of experience.

And like anything else that shifts our physiological and mental and emotional experience, I think healing and wellness modalities can be used in ways that enhance our experience or are trying to obliterate our experience. And in that way they're not any different than everything else we use for those purposes. Look at alcohol, having a glass of wine with a good friend, smelling it, tasting it, connecting over it, having it with food that it enhances. I don't personally like wine but that can clearly be beautiful medicine for some people.

And alcohol can also kill you if you drink too much of it, either slowly over time or all at once. Even exercise, you can exercise an amount that improves some of your health markers and makes you feel good. Or you can exercise an amount that stresses out your body and actually makes you sick. There isn't a thing in the world that you can use to get to a perfect state of wellness or to escape the human condition.

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But wellness perfectionism is the belief that these kinds of healing modalities like thought work, like nervous system work, like emotional work, therapy, like somatic work, coaching, whatever. Are tools that we can use to escape the human condition rather than experience it more deeply. So when we are having a negative emotion or a negative thought or nervous system dysregulation and we are kind of enmeshed in wellness perfectionism we respond to that experience as though something has gone wrong.

And we try to use these tools to make it go away. So we are rejecting part of our experience rather than use the tools to welcome the messy, dirty, angry, sad, self-pitying, tragic, grieving, whatever parts of our experience that we're having. And to greet them with compassion and acceptance. We try to use the tools to get rid of them. But if you've been listening to this podcast then you know that when we respond to our own experience as if it is wrong and bad we are actually activating ourselves even more.

When we do that we are increasing our own distress, fear and dysregulation because the threat detection system in your brain doesn't really distinguish between external and internal threats. If something outside of you seems scary, then your brain responds with activation to get away from it and your brain fixates on the problem until it seems like you're safe again. If something inside you seems scary, your brain will respond the same way.

So if you have an emotion or any other experience, a thought, whatever it is and then you react to that thing like it's bad and you have to get rid of it and it's a threat. You're actually just going to increase your own distress. When you make it a problem that you aren't perfectly regulated you're actually increasing your dysregulation. When you make it a problem that you're having a negative emotion you are actually just stressing yourself out more. And please note, this applies beyond feelings. It's also true even

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if we're talking about a negative action we're taking or even a return on that action, we're getting a result we're creating.

And I think that's a lot harder for us especially if we've been doing this work for a while. We may be willing to accept the idea that it's normal to have negative emotion and not a big problem that we need to get rid of. But then we'll still be very attached to the idea that there are bad actions we're taking that we need to change or that we need to judge and resist the negative returns that we're getting from our actions.

Especially if it's around behaviors that we have identified as aspects of this wellness perfectionism like eating a certain way, exercising a certain amount, meditating, going to bed on time, having a daily gratitude practice, whatever, charging our crystals, coffee, animals. Whatever sensible or nonsensical thing that we've identified as the right way to do and be and the right thing to do, the right way to be, the right thing to do.

When we have these behaviors we may be like, "Okay, I'm willing to feel sad without rejecting that feeling. But if I'm not following my eating and movement and meditation protocol, that's obviously bad and a problem and I have to use my wellness tools to solve it and make myself good and perfect." And I'm not saying that you can't use these tools to shift your behavior. Obviously that is a big part of what we do. But doing things wrong or imperfectly or not at all is also part of being a human.

So I really want to invite you to resist wellness perfectionism. Don't buy into the idea that if you just heal yourself enough you'll never have to be sad or lonely or afraid or activated or feel shitty about yourself. It's just like diet culture and physical wellness perfectionism with this idea that if we just can balance our hormones perfectly we'll never age or feel any negative effects of aging. Or if we can just eat perfectly and balance our blood sugar perfectly, we'll never have dips in energy. None of this is true. Nothing about human life is naturally a straight line that never changes.

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Your emotions are not a straight line that never changes. Your energy is not a straight line that never changes. Your health is not a straight line that never changes. Variations, dips, peaks, cycles, those are all how the natural world works. So this idea that we can smooth out all those bumps, that if we just use the tools enough or the right way we can make something into that straight line, We can make our emotions into the straight line. We can't make our nervous system into the straight line. We can make our actions so consistent that it's just a straight line.

This is all this perfectionist fantasy. This is all this wellness perfectionism. Of course we can reduce some of our negative emotions with this work. That's part of why I teach this work and I think we especially can reduce the ones that we're causing with our own negative self-talk and our own attempts to control the uncontrollable. Those are two places that we really create a lot of our suffering that we can change. But again, it's not going to be a straight line.

Freedom doesn't ever come from pursuing perfection. I'm going to say that again because I really want you to think about what that means. Freedom never comes from pursuing perfection. So often we think if I just can do this perfectly I will finally feel free. Free of my anxiety, free of my insecurity, free of the terror of vulnerability, free of whatever I'm trying to get away from. But freedom never comes from pursuing perfection. Freedom always comes from accepting imperfection. Of course we can still work on evolving and growing and changing things in our lives. That's what a lot of this work is about.

But wellness perfectionism is actually the antithesis of growth. It's the opposite of growth. Growth is messy and imperfect and inefficient. And perfectionism, perfection is imaginary and therefore sterile. There's no escape from the human experience. You can't take enough drugs. You can't go enough places. You can't have sex with enough people and you can't heal yourself well enough to escape the human experience.

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That's a good thing because your constant inability to escape the human experience is showing you the one thing you need to make peace with. Because if you make peace with the human experience, if you make peace with it being essentially an uncontrollable thing to have the human experience, many parts of our lives we can control it, of course. I have so many episodes about how you can create and control results in your life that you didn't think you could.

But the essential sort of chaotic nature of existence in being a human, the fact that things happen that we can't control, that we can't predict, that our lives change in ways that we don't see coming, that part can't be controlled. And making peace with that, making peace with uncontrollability, making peace with your own imperfection, your own inability to make a consistent straight line out of your feelings, your nervous system, your brain. Making peace with that messy humanity is the only thing that will set you free.

Have a beautiful week my chickens and I hope that it is as imperfect as hell. I'll see you all next week.

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