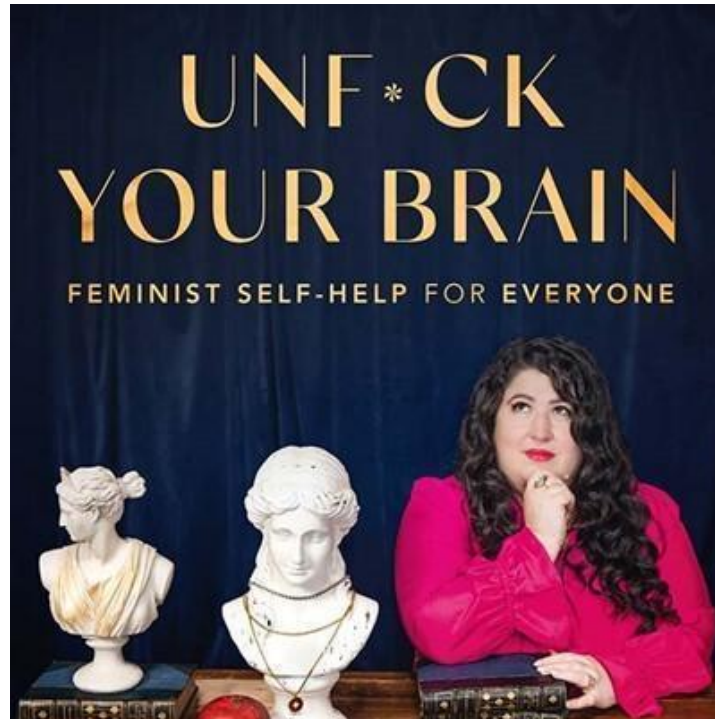


UFYB 303: Conscious Uncoupling: A Conversation with Ali Ryan



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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. I have one of your very own in some ways here today. I am here with Ali Ryan who I think found me as a *Clutch* member, is that where you first started, came into *The Clutch*? I'm always of mixed minds. I love when obviously people come into *The Clutch*, discover coaching, become coaches. There's such a stereotype that coaching is like a pyramid scheme kind of. So I always feel I need to be like, "Listen, 10,000 people have gone through *The Clutch*, 3% of them became life coaches", or whatever.

I don't know what the number is, but *The Clutch* is not only people who are coaches and not everybody who comes into coaching becomes a coach. But obviously some people do just like you go to your accountant and then maybe you decide you want to be an accountant. I'm thinking about accounting today because I was just doing so much math for my taxes, which was just to think that I used to think I don't like math. I'm not good at math and now it turns out when you run a business, there's a lot of fucking math.

So Ali's not here to talk about math. Ali is going to tell you about herself. But we are going to be talking about kind of conscious uncoupling, but in a way that doesn't make you want to throw up in your mouth a little bit. Really more about how thought work impacts or can impact our experience of breakup, divorce, separation and yeah, how we can use thought work to kind of navigate those differently. So Ali, tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to coaching and what you do now?

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Ali: Yeah. So my name is Ali Ryan. I did come into coaching through Kara and realized through that process that I was actually doing already a lot of coaching with families in active grief, and decided to pursue this amazing, crazy shift of career. I do coach parents primarily on how to get out of burnout and stop hating their kids. And I'm on here today to share about a personal experience and how coaching has actually totally transformed my relationship with grief.

Kara: Can you tell us a little bit about, you said that you've realized you actually were already kind of doing a lot of grief coaching, counseling, why was that? What were you doing before you became a coach?

Ali: Yeah. So my background is in nursing and I was primarily doing elder and hospice care. So a lot of the conversations that I was having with people were family members that did not know what to do with the situation that they suddenly had. Someone that they love, parent or aunt or whatever is sick, not doing well. And having these very honest and real conversations with them about how to best support this person from a place of love instead of what they want to happen.

And through that I realized the best days were when I came home and thought I helped people really see outside of their own brain of what they wanted and were able to see actually what was better for the situation and better for someone else and put their feelings to the side for a moment. And then when I discovered coaching, realized I'm already, I'm doing this in so many ways of helping them see just other perspectives. Yeah.

Kara: Yeah, that makes sense. So you talked about, you often focus on coaching parents and we're here to talk about breakups. But there is this connection there because I think so much of the struggle in both areas is impacted in part by the socialization that women get around what does it mean to be a good mom and not just women. I mean, I just had a

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conversation with my partner last night about what it means to be a good dad or a good parent. And the pressure to sort of pretend that it's not ever tiring or stressful or whatever else.

So people of all genders get this, but can you talk a little bit about how you think women are socialized around romantic relationships in a way that can become detrimental when those relationships end?

Ali: Oh, my goodness, yes. So yes, I do coach mostly parents, but it quickly shifts into other things, perfectionism or work or boundaries or even relationships that they are in. And how they think about leaving or want to leave, but also immediately there's this guilt, there's the shame, even the thought of it just is so overwhelming for them because the way that we are socialized is this very binary, if it lasts then it worked, it was real. If it didn't last then it wasn't real.

And then there's all these other ways that our society kind of talks about breakups and even just the term, breakup, getting dumped. And then if you have kids, the children come from a broken family. And so even just the stigmatizing language of it is enough for people to stay in something that's really not working, unhealthy, making them feel smaller, just not making them happy in the ways that they want to be because of so much of the language that we have.

Kara: I feel like that whole thing of if it lasts, it was by definition good or real and if it doesn't, it wasn't. That is so strong and so unhelpful. Obviously you can be in a terrible relationship that lasts until you die or you can be in a great one and decide to leave it for whatever reason.

And this idea that, I used to coach around breakups all the time, was like, "Okay, but if you're breaking up or you're getting divorced and you feel all the shame. If one of you had been hit by a car one day before, and

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therefore your relationship had lasted until death, why should that make the difference in whether you are allowed to believe that you can have successful relationships?”

Ali: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, there's this great quote that I read in this book that I'll talk a little bit about, but basically it was, “Before you congratulate a couple on being married for 50 years, you should probably ask them what it did to their soul.” So, longevity doesn't actually equal legitimacy, but in our culture, western culture primarily, that is really what we make it mean and so if it ends, then what?

Kara: And but why do we think that is? As we're talking, I'm thinking well, women used to need a man to financially survive most of the time. So maybe that's partly where we get it from. Or maybe once that became not, you didn't used to have a whole mythology around this because people were just financially dependent and had to stick around. I wonder if this kind of theory has kind of grown or is more powerful now because women do have more economic options, could leave, could live on their own.

So there has to be some other ideological kind of or some other kind of socialization that keeps them feeling like, no, I should stay in this thing that isn't working for me or that is limiting me because if I leave then somehow that negates the whole relationship.

Ali: Yeah, I mean, it is really interesting. We're in this weird middle period where we don't, like you said, we don't have to stay in these relationships for certain financial reasons. But then we also have more economic power, or society puts a huge emphasis on autonomy and freedom of expression. And so I think we are in this kind of weird spot where also, we as a society love, love, it's predicted that 90% of people will get married in their lifetime, but also 50% of people get divorced. And it's 60% I think for second marriages.

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Again, it's fascinating and a lot of it is to me, I'm wondering, we view ourselves sometimes as failures if a relationship ends. And for a lot of overperforming, high achieving women that is probably the worst thing we could ever hear or think about ourselves.

Kara: Yeah. And so I'd love to hear your perspective on how breakups can actually be kind of a tool for transformation. I know that you've experienced this in your own life. How do you think we can sort of reframe what breakups are?

Ali: Yeah, I love that question. So yes, I did go through a breakup about actually exactly three months ago and it has been a really interesting experience of being willing to have a happy ending. This actually isn't the first time that I've done this. I actually kind of accidentally did it with my co-parent in 2017. But being willing to have a happy ending actually creates the situation where we can look at the relationship as a whole.

Both people can take responsibility for what did not go well and really clear this path towards well first before any paths, really this ability to turn inward and care for ourselves. So often, especially during a breakup, our brain views that as a life threatening experience. So we're often acting from the amygdala, the lizard brain where there's the shame, there's blame, there is just this horrific devastation that our brain wants to create.

And if we can manage our minds and allow ourselves to have all of the grief, allow there to be the loss, all of the messy emotions that come with it, but hold ourselves within that. We can come out of that such a stronger or more empowered person who actually has learned from these experiences and is ready to step into something that might be so much better for us.

Kara: I think there's also that social pressure to be over things in a certain amount of time. I've definitely coached people frequently who are not over,

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whatever that means, a breakup, which really just means you still have some emotion around it. I mean, I still occasionally have emotions about the breakup that happened before I met my partner and sometimes I have emotions about a breakup that happened in my 20s. That doesn't mean that I'm not over the person in the sense of pining after them or not fully invested in my current relationship or anything else.

It's just an emotion that happens when I think certain thoughts. But what do you think that kind of social pressure is about, why is there this sort of, or how does it manifest this, okay, well, as soon as it's over, it's time to get over them, they weren't good enough. They were bad. There's that kind of black and white thinking, I think we all fall into.

Ali: Yeah, I mean, we're social creatures. So I think that might be part of it is that we don't want to be alone. That's also why I think sometimes we can hold on to relationships and not get over them because sometimes it can even be why separations are really long and drawn out because it's almost like the brain views it as bad attention is better than no attention from this person. I'm holding on to a piece of it.

Kara: Your brain thinks that somehow you're still in relationship with them if you are prolonging the breakup. If you're not willing to let go sort of continually trying to interact with them or process the breakup, it's sort of a way of still being, we're still in some kind of relationship, it isn't over yet.

Ali: Yes, exactly. And this is why experiencing the grief and really it's called nervous system reorienting. Your brain is going to forget that you're no longer in this and then you're going to have that shock and that wave of really deep sadness. And allowing yourself, for me the best thing that I could tell myself was that was then, this is now. Reminding myself, yes, that memory was very real. That relationship did happen. It's no longer something that is a part of my life and this is now.

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And just reminding my brain in this really gentle way of this is where we are at and nothing has gone wrong. But I agree with you, it can turn into complicated grief because we're unwilling to move forward, which is why it is so important to be present, feel your feelings, allow that grief to be, just to be there without the end, the end goal. Because any time that we're creating an expectation for a relationship to get over it, we're just really setting ourselves up for disappointment because things usually never go how we think they're going to go.

Kara: Yeah, I think it's an important distinction between when you are engaged and sort of hyper analyzing or trying to get the other person to continually process with you or doing the blow by blow with your friends and everything, whatever. All of that stuff is not actually emotional processing. I think that's an attempt to kind of feel like you're still in it with somebody or it's not over or to stay connected. But you're not actually making progress there because nobody else can cause your feelings.

No matter how many times you process, I mean obviously if it's something you truly don't understand and a person's willing to explain it, fine, that can be helpful. But I think part of what you're sort of servicing that's so important is the important emotional work in a breakup situation happens with yourself. When you're in a relationship with someone that is interactive work, I mean, it's still within yourself.

But a lot of us get into relationships because we're unwilling to be alone with ourselves and our thoughts. And then when a breakup happens, you're like, "Well, here I am again alone with myself and my thoughts. This is what I was trying to get away from." And so we don't have that relationship with ourselves to slow down and be in it and let it take as long as it takes.

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Ali: Exactly. Well, and there is a part of this grief process where you are going to ruminate. That's just normal because our brain so badly wants to understand what happened. And I think the biggest thing is making amends to yourself, instead of sitting in this rumination and spinning and wondering what happened and what went wrong and how often women say, "I didn't do enough or what could I have done better?" Instead, Let's shift that to the attention to ourselves and look at ways that we can make amends to ourselves.

In what ways did I give away my power? That is such a more powerful question than what did I do wrong or how did I not keep this person? I have skipped over my own knowledge or avoided telling the truth. In what ways did I not want to have challenging conversations? And that leads to, again, that amends that we can do and turning to ourselves really then does open that path to how we can move forward by asking ourselves these really powerful questions with curiosity. That's always the thing, you have to be curious.

Kara: Always curious, yeah. I mean, I think of course rumination is normal. I think that the mistake we make is thinking if I just understand somehow I will feel better and that is not generally true.

Ali: If I worry enough then I will feel better. No, we don't.

Kara: Even if I understand, but often when we're like, "If I understand", I'm just thinking myself in some of my past breakups. I understood in the sense that the person told me what they thought and felt. So I had all the information I was going to get.

Ali: But it didn't feel good.

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Kara: Right. I don't understand, what that really meant was I don't like this set of thoughts and feelings and actions you have. And I would like you to take different ones or I just don't like the fact of truth of life that sometimes people's thoughts and feelings and actions change. I don't like that change. That uncertainty is frightening to me. So I'm going to keep talking about it to myself as if it's inexplicable. There's something inexplicable because it worked and then it didn't, or the person was happy then they weren't or they wanted to be in a relationship and then they didn't.

I mean in this scenario we're talking more about when you are not the initiating party. But I think that's more often where people get stuck in ruminating and sort of trying to understand it. I think when I think back now it's not that I didn't understand, I was uncomfortable with the uncertain reality that someone you love can always change and can decide to not be with you. And we don't want to deal with that so we keep obsessively thinking and analyzing and trying to get more information.

So I think if you're in that trap, the thing to understand is assuming you have the basic information, obviously, if you're married to someone for 10 years and they go out for soda and they never come home. Then you maybe want to go get some information, are they alive? What happened? But if somebody basically says to you, "Listen, my feelings have changed or I don't want to be in this relationship anymore" or whatever, more information will not make you feel better and will not make you feel free.

And what you are looking for is what's on the other side of processing grief, which you're not going to get from more intellectual understanding.

Ali: Exactly. And what this reminds me of is how when a breakup happens it is so uncomfortable because when we're in the middle of that process, we're no longer who we used to be and we're not yet who we're going to be after we process the grief. And so it is, it's uncomfortable liminal space of

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this uncertainty, which is a really hard place to be, no matter how many years you've been coaching yourself.

Kara: So how do you think your experience with grief in breakups has sort of changed you? What's the personal transformation that you've seen?

Ali: Well, the combination of the thought work and the coaching that I've done for years did not necessarily make grief any better, it didn't make it funner. I was still extremely heartbroken. I was still extremely sad. But I was so committed to loving myself throughout this process and having my own back that it made it okay. I was able to hold myself and hold the pain and be sad and be heartbroken and let myself have all of those messy emotions but not make it mean anything about me.

So there was this really deep commitment towards self-love and knowing that I was going to be okay. I was okay before, I was okay in the relationship and I'm going to be okay outside of it, even though this feels so horrible and this is not what I wanted and it was not what I expected to happen. And yeah, that's the first thing that comes to mind. And I am yeah, I feel a little emotional talking about it, but also partially because that level of love is not something that I have felt in past breakups before.

This was such a beautiful experience to show myself how deeply I do have my back and that even though those questions and those doubts came up of what could I have done, like they always do. I still right away came back to what matters to me? What is true for me? And what do I need to give myself that no one else can give me? And it was that support and unconditional love.

There's this piece too, of grief has the power to transform us and crack open our heart in ways that we never realized was possible or has the power to destroy us. It really is that powerful. And we get to choose, I

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mean, I chose for it to be a transformative experience. I chose for it to show me areas of healing. I chose for it to show me where I needed to focus my attention and where I needed to put my own self-coaching. I chose to let friends hold me for the first time because I felt I loved myself enough that I also was willing to let show that pain to other people and be supported.

And so it was such a beautiful experience of just almost feeling more connected to myself than I ever had because I felt the clean pain so purely. It sounds almost crazy to talk about, but it was.

Kara: No, I mean I think that the way you're talking about it just makes me think about how often. I was trying to think of is there a universal example where we all can imagine what it would be like to grieve without blaming ourselves for something? And I don't think there is one because we're so socialized to do that and because we'd kind of rather feel like we have some control. I mean that's what I think so much of the self-blame comes down to, because I was like, well, what about if a pet dies? No people blame themselves for that.

What if somebody you love dies? Well, people may criticize themselves for whatever the last thing they said was, and I love you. People can criticize themselves about everything. But I think when we do that, that's the conscious mind just looking for some way to feel control of what is essentially an uncontrollable fact of human life, which is that grief and loss are part of it.

But we'd rather think, well, I should have done X Y Z differently to avoid it happening. So I think that's another, if you are caught in this process to understand that part of the reason your brain keeps doing that is that it just feels scary to recognize that there is no such thing as ultimate security. People can always change their mind or leave you or be hit by a bus or anything else.

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So obviously the term conscious uncoupling has some Gwyneth Paltrow baggage. But what do you think that means for you or what do you think is a more sort of, you know, we've been about like your relationship with yourself? But I'm curious how you think this sort of approach and sort of willingness to feel emotions and the having your own, you know, refusing to engage in sort of self-criticism over it. How do you think that changes how people show up with the other person potentially or their kids who might be affected or whatever it is in the breakup process?

Ali: Yeah, absolutely. So yes, there is the baggage of Gwyneth Paltrow. And actually there is a book called *Conscious Uncoupling* by Katherine Woodward Thomas and so this book, it was great, so the way that it kind of takes you through it is there's five sections. And the first three sections are all about how to tend to yourself. So the first one is really finding emotional freedom.

And this is where you really do not let your emotions control you. This is again where thought work and this goes so well together because you are allowing yourself to feel it all, shock, the pain, the disappointment, guilt, poor, all of it. And face those emotions instead of letting those be the ones that are in control. So instead we are feeling them, we're allowing them and we're not acting again from our lizard brain, which creates, just it can be very destructive. So all of those emotions that we have. They all make sense.

And the solace and the comfort of the relationship is no longer there. Of course, we're going to feel terrified. Of course, we're going to feel scared. Like I said, there's five steps and I could quickly go over them. But really what it's about is deciding on purpose to have a peaceful ending and hold your emotions. So I think a lot of times, again, we're such black and white thinkers, a lot of times I'm willing to have a happy ending but not feel my emotions, almost like that toxic positivity.

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Or I'm willing to feel all my emotions and key someone's car, but instead it's holding yourself, holding the relationship that was, allowing the other person to also be a human and have their pains. And not succumb to the destructive and devastation that a breakup can be. It's so different than what our society gives us because we have so many examples of how breakups are so terrible. Again, the stigmatizing language of the getting dumped or the breakup and someone's a home wrecker and then children coming from broken homes.

And instead, conscious uncoupling, I invite people to think of it as just the softer term that is an opportunity for growth and moving forward. It's not something that's going to keep us stuck. It's not something that you're going to stay in forever. It just is this experience of intentionally unwinding your hearts from one another. I mean, our brains and our hearts, they do become connected in some ways and we have to untangle those literally and in all other ways because especially if you live together. There's just all these things that go with it, again, just not just the belongings that are around.

But the ways in which our bodies are connected to each other and when a breakup happens, that automatic separation can be such a shock. And so this is more of a, again, just this softer way of untangling those connections. You also ask about other people involved. Yeah, I mean, for me, the person that I was with, we did not have kids together, but my kids and I lived with him. And what that looked like was allowing everybody to have grief and being committed to nobody being wrong, really staying out of that blame or shame.

Because we so often want to do, who did it? Whose fault is it? Who messed up? And instead, we decided that this didn't work for us in the ways that we want to live our lives, and it's okay to grieve. And nobody is the bad person here, which is again so often what we talk about or see in

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our society of how someone is almost the villain of the breakup. And what if we just step away from that altogether?

Kara: Yeah. I think I love the idea of bringing it full circle and closing that, that thing you said earlier of be willing to have a happy ending. It's great if your partner will collaborate with you on that, but you don't need them to.

Ali: You can absolutely do this alone, yes.

Kara: Yeah, they can be trying to have the most unhappy ending ever where you're the bad guy or they're the wounded, whatever. Being willing to have a happy ending, meaning whatever the ending is, you decide to make it happy, and again not in a toxic positivity way, but in this was an important part of my journey and it's okay that this happened and what is going to come next.

It's such an interesting phrase, being willing to have a happy ending because we all think that we want a happy ending. But then we're thinking in ways that make endings not happy at all and that keep us stuck and blaming the other person or shaming ourselves.

Ali: Yeah. In a breakup, a good ending is not easy, but it is well worth it. It is so much better because here's the thing, your next love affair will not begin when you meet your next lover. It starts with how you end this current relationship. So the baggage that you decide to leave behind or the heart that you choose not to heal, that stuff just doesn't go away. It just will lie around and it will wait and it will reawaken when you meet your next partner.

Kara: Yeah, 100%. And a happy ending isn't even necessarily feeling happy right then, but it's seeing this breakup as part of your overall story.

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Ali: Yes, it's zooming out.

Kara: That's where that saying of it will be okay at the end, so if it's not okay, it's not the end, wherever that came from. It's a little bit of a [inaudible], but I think that's such an interesting kind of be willing to have a happy ending, be willing to see any ending as part of your eventual happy ending story. That is a step on the way, it's not wasted time, something that went wrong, a disaster.

Ali: And not a failure. That's again, the thing is when we're always telling ourselves if it didn't last then it was a failure. Of course, we're going to make it mean so much about us or about the relationship. But instead, relationships don't always last. Actually a lot of them do not. And so what if, as a society we can start shifting the rhetoric.

Kara: Well, nothing can last forever. I always say, "Either you break up or one person dies, that's how relationships end."

Ali: Exactly. So what if we can look at this instead of it being a failure instead, like you said, this was an experience, this was a chapter in my life. I take the patterns that I need to look at, I take the memories, I shift what I want to. I see where I had maybe had some toxic patterns and have some, toxic is an interesting word.

Kara: Yeah, whatever it is, unhelpful patterns.

Ali: Yeah. See where you were showing up in ways that maybe weren't super helpful. Decide to address them if you want and moving on in this really clean way. That's to me what more of a happy ending means.

Kara: Yeah, I love it. Alright, where can people find you if they want to talk about this more?

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Ali: People can find me on Instagram at @ali_ryan_coaching and also at aliryancoaching.com.

Kara: Alright, chickens, go check her out. Thanks for coming on, Ali.

Ali: Thank you so much, Kara.

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