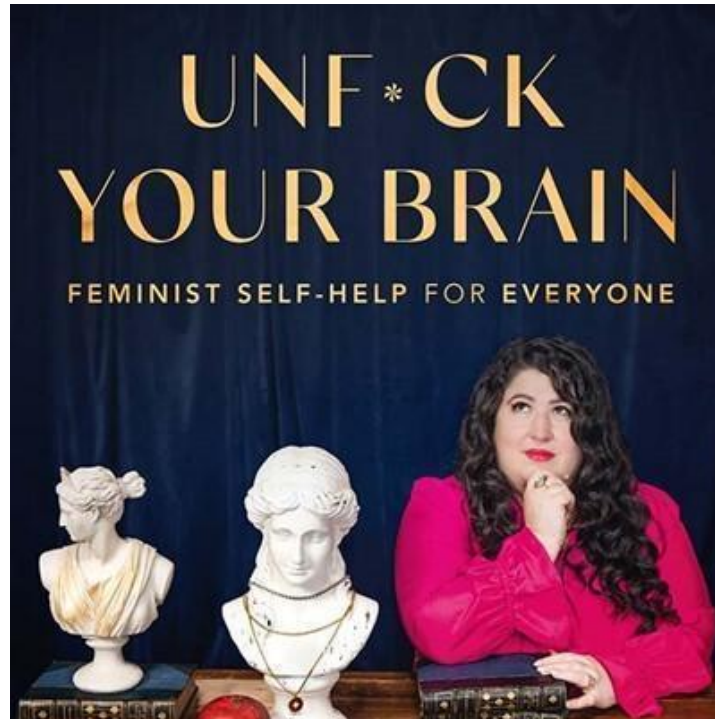


UFYB 325: Willpower Doesn't Exist – Why We Fall Off the Wagon



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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There's one very simple important thing that almost everyone misunderstands about new habits, goals and resolutions and keeping them. In this episode, I'm going to teach you what really causes you to fall off the wagon and why discipline and willpower are not the answer.

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.

If you want to jumpstart that process, you need to grab my totally free guide to feeling less anxious and more empowered by rewiring your brain. Just text your email to +1347 997 1784 and use code word, brain or go to unfuckyourbrain.com/brain. Now let's get to today's episode.

Hello my philosopher friends. This is our first episode with our new look, our new name. How are we feeling? I am feeling good. I'm wearing my lyre, I think, earrings. I've got my ancient Greek school vibe going. But I'm going to be honest, it also feels a little weird, which I think is really relevant to this podcast episode. Shifting your identity, a big change can feel a little strange, even if it's something you want and something you've worked a long time on. So that's part and parcel of setting and achieving new goals. And that's something that I'm living through right now.

So in December we talked a lot about resolutions and goals and then we took a little break to talk about my achieving of this goal, but I promised to talk about what happens after you create your goal when you're actually trying to execute it. So that's what we're going to be returning to today. And this is part one of a three-part series about falling off the wagon and really,

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how to get back on the wagon. And so in this episode, I'm going to talk about why we fall off the wagon.

In the second episode I'm going to talk about why falling off the wagon tends to snowball and kind of take down the whole endeavor. And in the third episode, I'm going to teach you a kind of new way to think about it when this happens. But do not just skip to that last episode. You have to understand why it happens in order to change how you react to it, because your current reaction to falling off the wagon is actually based on your misunderstanding of why it happens.

So let's define what we mean by falling off the wagon. I don't define it as meaning that you slip a little in a resolution or a goal. So for instance, if your resolution is to only drink once a week and then one week you drink twice or three times, but the next week you go back to once a week and you keep on with the once a week, that's not falling off the wagon.

Or if your goal is to get 10 new clients in your freelance graphic design business and you have a consult with somebody or you send out some proposals and you don't get a yes so far. That's not falling off the wagon, if you keep going, if you keep sending out proposals, you keep trying. It's completely normal and natural to not keep resolutions perfectly. So if you send out those three proposals, you get no's, you're feeling sorry for yourself, you skip a day of working on your business, but then you are back at it the next day. That's not falling off the wagon.

It's perfectly normal and natural to not keep resolutions perfectly. We're going to talk a lot about that in this series. If you learn from it, recover, recommit, not a problem, but most of us do not know how to do that. And that's why I want to teach you how to do that throughout this series.

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And in fact I'm going to be teaching an entire new challenge called The Get Back on the Wagon Challenge. And if you want all of the information about that, you can text your email to +1347 997 1784 and the code word is wagon. Or you can go to unfuckyourbrain.com/wagon and that's going to be a real deep dive into how to change the way you approach your goals so you get back on the wagon.

So when I say falling off the wagon, what I mean is that you stop keeping your resolution or you stop working on your goal pretty much altogether. So that could be set in, you slip once and then just give up or it could be gradual, you slip up once and then you half-heartedly decide to keep trying, but you already feel like you ruined it, so you start making more and more excuses to yourself, and you're trying less and less.

And it goes from stretching when you wake up every day to doing it twice a week, to once a week, to once in a while when you remember to never. And then six months later you're like, "Yeah, I just stopped doing that, I guess." So why do we fall off the wagon? I think our most common explanation is, there's something wrong with me. I don't have enough willpower or discipline or I'm lazy. But that isn't why, because willpower and discipline don't really exist. I'm going to say that again, because I stand by it. Willpower and discipline don't really exist.

What makes us fall off the wagon is something else entirely. What makes us fall off the wagon is the inability to cope with the challenging emotions and brain resistance that come up when we try to change our default ways of being. Willpower and discipline are just terms we use for the ability to do things that are boring, uncomfortable, or sometimes actively, emotionally distressing because of our thoughts about them.

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We think of willpower and discipline as kind of active traits that we're supposed to have, but I don't think that's what they are. I think those words are actually misnomers for the ability to tolerate the negative emotions of boredom, frustration, discomfort, self-doubt, shame, etc. Sometimes we fall off the wagon with a goal because we never really wanted the goal in the first place. We chose it to try to feel better about ourselves or to make someone else happy or do what we think we should do. So in that case there may not have even really been motivation to truly do it in the first place.

But if we chose it well, if you followed what I taught about connecting it to your values, we're assuming that you did want to do it. So think about it, if you want to do something, truly want to, without any subconscious conflict. Does it make sense to think that you need a lot of discipline and willpower to do it? Think about things that you want to do that are fun or feel good. They don't really require discipline usually.

There are of course specific categories, some neurodivergent people experience something called demand avoidance. But apart from that, if something is fun and you like and want to do it, you don't need a lot of willpower to do it. The difference is that our resolutions may be something we want, but they may not be fun or enjoyable. And what gets in our way is our inability to tolerate the emotions that come up around the process of the goal that make it not fun or not enjoyable all the time.

You could argue that willpower is just the ability to do things you don't want to do consistently, but I don't think it's a very helpful way to talk about it because using that term, willpower, doesn't really tell you what you need to work on or develop. It just assumes that it's a magical skill that you have or don't have. And it can sort of make it look like goals that are easy for one person are due to their willpower or discipline, when in fact they may just be easy for one person to execute and not for someone else.

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So somebody might be, let's say, sitting down to write every day working on their novel. And it might seem like, wow, they just have amazing willpower. But really, it's that the goal of writing or the habit of writing isn't stressful for them. It's not emotionally or physically challenging. It doesn't activate their brain or their nervous system. So it's not really willpower, it's that they don't really need to overcome any discomfort.

Whereas someone else might be sitting down maybe once a week to write, but it's much harder for them and it's actually a much bigger emotional accomplishment. But because we just look at the external thing and not the internal thing, we think the first person is more worthy of praise and that they must have this good characteristic.

And that means the person who's doing it once a week but is really overcoming a lot of mental and emotional drag on themselves, doesn't get to feel proud of themselves. Which, by the way, would actually help them do it more. Instead, they're beating themselves up for not having willpower. So I don't think that what gets in our way is a lack of willpower or discipline. I think it's an absence of the ability to tolerate negative emotion. And it's the inability to have negative emotion come up without attaching a self-critical, self-defeating story to it.

So let's walk through an example. Let's say you decide you want to work out consistently. You did the exercise that I taught about connecting your resolution to your values and you want to have more energy. You want to give your body more resilience, and that connects to your value of, let's say, being family oriented because you want to be able to play tag with your kids and not get winded. This is obviously just one hypothetical example.

People might have a lot of different values that lead to exercise, or they might have family values that lead to totally different resolutions, like having

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dinner around the table as a family twice a week, whatever. This is just one hypothetical example. So you've decided you want to work out consistently. It's connected to a value you really care about. Let's say you've made your goal specific and reasonable. You're going to start doing 20 minutes on the elliptical at the gym three times a week. You've planned it, you've protected the time, you've got the sneakers, the childcare is lined up, you're good to go.

So now what happens? So many things happen that can create discomfort that leads you to fall off the wagon. You get to the gym and you feel uncomfortable. You feel like people are looking at you and judging you. You feel shame because you're projecting your own thoughts about being out of shape onto other people. You are torturing yourself by comparing your body to other people in the gym. So of course you don't want to go back because you're associating shame with the experience.

Let's say you get through that first part, you start working out, now it's physically uncomfortable, you're out of breath, you're sweaty. Your brain starts telling you that you're uncomfortable and out of breath because you're lazy and out of shape as opposed to literally, that's how the human body responds to exertion, no matter how fit it is, that's the point of exercise. But your brain makes it a personal moral failing.

Or let's say you get through that, you go three times, for a week or two weeks. Then you try to play tag with your kids on the weekend and you don't notice a difference yet. So your brain starts telling you it's hopeless. This is going to take too long. It's not working. You'll never be in shape. Maybe something unexpected comes up on your schedule. You truly can't make it one day or one week.

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Now you start thinking you've already fucked up. It's too late. You need to start perfectly again next week. You need to tear out the pages of your tracker and start fresh, etc. We're going to be talking about this particular challenge next week on the podcast. So once you're associating discomfort and negative emotion with a behavior, you'll look for any reason to not do it. So suddenly you just find that you just get so busy, you just really don't want to go. Your circumstances seem to prevent it. Your 'motivation has gone'. You don't have any quote 'willpower'. There's always a reason not to do it.

And before you know it, it's six months later and you haven't been to the gym in months. You did not fall off the wagon because you don't have willpower. You fell off the wagon because you don't have the skills to tolerate negative emotion or to change your self-talk to stop creating that negative emotion. And then inertia takes over. The whole reason you weren't doing this resolution in the first place is that you didn't have those skills of tolerating negative emotion and changing your self-talk around it.

The lack of those skills was creating your previous reality of not doing the thing. And since you didn't change the skills, you just end up right back in that pattern. The good news is that, unlike a mysterious character trait of willpower or discipline. These are just skills that you can learn and practice and develop. The skill of tolerating discomfort, emotional or physical, when you are doing something new, of tolerating boredom or anxiety or shame or whatever else. And the skill of changing your thinking to stop producing so many negative emotions around the habit change.

Those are both just skills you can learn. This resolution series I did in December has been so popular with you all and I really want to make sure that you keep going and learn how to actually execute. And tune back in next week, we're going to be talking about why it snowballs when we do fall

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off the wagon and what the three perfectionistic thought patterns have to do with that. See you then.

If you're loving what you're learning on the podcast, you have got to come check out *The Feminist Self-Help Society*. It's our newly revamped community and classroom where you get individual help to better apply these concepts to your life along with a library of next level blow your mind coaching tools and concepts that I just can't fit in a podcast episode. It's also where you can hang out, get coached and nerd out about all things thought work and feminist mindset with other podcast listeners just like you and me.

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