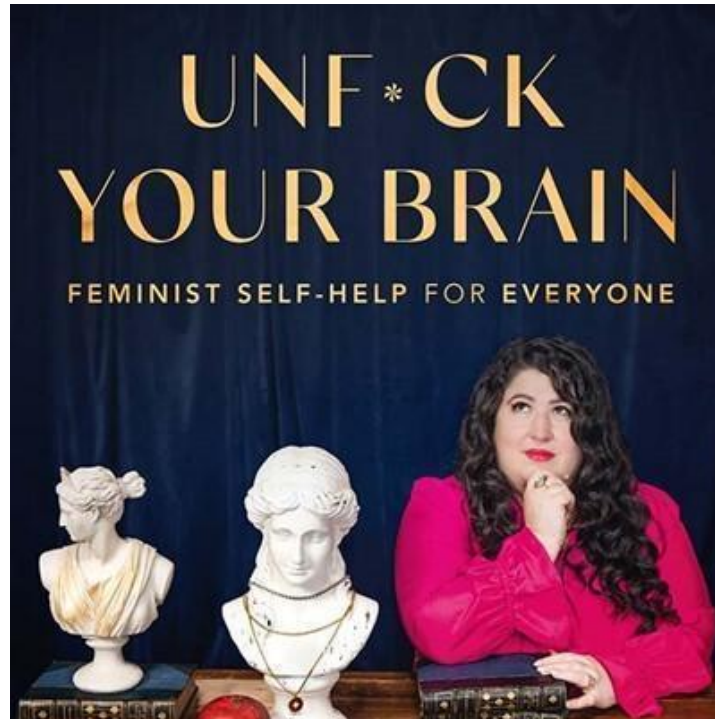


**UFYB 326: F*ck It Brain —
Why Resolution or Goal Failure Snowballs**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Have you ever wondered why once you skip a commitment it becomes so much more tempting to keep skipping it? It's like suddenly the momentum has turned and you're swimming upstream. And it's very hard to get back on the wagon to mix my liquid and concrete metaphors. In today's episode, I'm going to teach you exactly why this happens and how to keep a slip up from throwing you off your tracks.

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.

Alright, my deep thinkers, on the last episode we talked about why resolutions or goals in general, fail. That it does not have to do with willpower or discipline. Instead, it's the inability to tolerate discomfort or negative emotion and the inability to redirect negative thinking. And I talked about how these are not inborn traits that you can't change the way that willpower or discipline seem to be, since they're not real.

The ability to tolerate discomfort and negative emotion, the ability to redirect negative thinking are just skills that you haven't learned yet. Because for some reason no one teaches us these things, not in my education at least. But one bad day or one skip does not a resolution or a goal derail. So there's other factors at play here that cause us to completely abandon our goals or resolutions either bit by bit or all at once when we hit a snag.

And the biggest cause of goal abandonment, we might call it, is the, I ruined it thought pattern or what I also call the fuck it mentality. And the fuck it mentality creates a snowball effect of throwing in the towel and making it

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all worse or just giving up altogether. I obviously don't teach dieting, but the classic place you see this is when people try to diet and then they 'have one bad day or even just a bad meal or bad food'. That's all in quotes, obviously. I don't believe that meals or foods are good or bad. And then they say, "Fuck it," and binge.

Now, with dieting and restriction, sometimes bingeing is a biological physiological reaction to restriction. But there's also a thought pattern at play. Drinking is another classic example. You decide you're not going to drink on weeknights. You have one drink at happy hour and then you think, fuck it. So you have five more drinks. Then you drink the next day, you tell yourself you're going to start fresh the next week and either you never do or you start fresh for another two days and then we go back into the cycle and eventually just stop trying.

So the fuck it mentality is driven by our old friend, perfectionism. Just to recap, perfectionism is not actually being someone who does everything perfectly. That's what most perfectionists think it is. So they think they're not perfectionists. Perfectionism is believing that you should do things perfectly. You may think you don't believe that, but just ask yourself this. When is it okay for me personally to fail or make a mistake? Think about it concretely. What is a work mistake that it was totally fine that you made?

What is the time that you snapped at your partner that you don't feel guilty about at all and you think it's totally fine and you're still lovable? If you can't think of a concrete example of being totally fine with fucking up or 'behaving badly' or being your not best self or making a mistake. Then you are a perfectionist, surprise. So when you are a perfectionist, you do not want to do anything less than perfectly.

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In fact, you'd rather not do something at all than do it badly or imperfectly, which is why you don't want to try new things you might be bad at. Or feel awkward if you are not good at something or feel embarrassed about people seeing you do something that you're not good at. You may agree that logically that doesn't make sense because it makes it impossible to learn anything new. And you may be able to see why that's irrational for other people, but for yourself, it's too shame or anxiety-producing to do anything halfway, poorly or with mistakes and failures along the way.

So how does this relate to resolutions? I think there are three factors at play that contribute to the fuck it, fall all the way off the wagon outcome when it comes to resolutions or goals. The first is the brain's tendency towards inertia. This is, I actually think the least strong of a factor, but it's also the one we can't change, we just have to learn how to work with it. So this is not about force of will. Go listen to the last episode where I talked about how willpower isn't real. It just means understanding this challenge and preparing for it. Your brain likes to expend as little energy as possible.

And your established habits and your established neural networks, your thought patterns are comfortable for your brain. Doing something new takes effort and involves the unknown, uncertainty and risk from your brain's perspective. Even if your prefrontal cortex, the most recent part of your brain, evolutionarily speaking, knows that trying to eat a vegetable at every meal is not risky and is actually good for you. Your primitive brain is not doing a macronutrient analysis.

Your primitive brain just thinks, listen, we've been doing things one way. It's kept you alive. And I don't know anything about this new way. Maybe it's going to kill us. I don't know. Could happen. Any change could be dangerous. So when you slip back to old habits, that's very comfortable for your brain. So there's a little bit of built-in default preference for the old

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ways of doing things that your brain just naturally has, everyone's brain has it, but obviously people change their lives all the time.

I tend to think of that inertia as the thumb on the scale. It can totally be overcome by changing your thoughts and your relationship to your emotions because people change their lives all time, but in the absence of doing that work, the thumb on the scale will push you back towards inertia. So that's one of three. There's the inertia. We cannot change the brain's tendency, but we can, of course, change how we relate to it, understand that that's what's going on, work on thoughts that address it. We can work around it, work through it. We can try to hack it.

But our brains have this tendency, and if we don't do the work on the second and third influences that I'm about to share with. Then that thumb on the scale of inertia will make the difference. But if we do the work on the next two influences that I'm going to share with you, they absolutely will overcome that inertia. So that's one of three.

Number two of three is what I would call not knowing your actual goal, not really understanding what your goal was. The best way to understand this is to think about your goal as not being the thing you chose in and of itself. But really, a secret goal of doing the thing you chose perfectly or not at all. So for instance, if you told yourself that your goal was to take a 20 minute walk every day, that's what you think your goal is. You think, my goal is taking a 20 minute walk every day.

But your unconscious formulation of the goal, which you're not even aware of, it's unconscious, is to take a 20 minute walk every single day and do so perfectly. Or you may think your goal is to work on your music for an hour every weekend. But your secret goal that you're not even aware of is to

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work on your music for an hour every weekend, no matter what, and do it perfectly.

So the minute that you miss one walk or you don't work on your music one weekend, in your subconscious mind you've already failed and that's why it becomes so much harder to get going again. Because in your subconscious mind, there's no point in getting going again, because subconsciously the goal was to do it every day without ever missing one. And so if you've already missed one, what's the point? So factor one is your brain tendency towards inertia.

Factor two is having your subconscious goal actually be doing whatever it was perfectly. You can even just think of it as adding the word perfectly to whatever you told yourself the goal was. And that means that if the minute you have kind of ruined your perfect record, your brain thinks there's no point anymore. That leads us to factor three, which is the one that really connects to our deepest motivations.

The third factor in the fuck it mentality resolution failure snowball effect is an even deeper level of perfectionism. And that is the goal we haven't articulated to ourselves at all in setting resolutions or goals. If you did the exercise where you chose your goal based on your values that I talked about on the podcast in December and that we were teaching in the Feminist Self-Help Society, you took the first step in trying to undo this conditioning.

But we're so deeply socialized to equate our moral worth with our actions and our behavior, and in particular with whether we can perform willpower and discipline around certain kinds of consistent behavior. So often our goal is not about the goal at all. It's not about going for the walk or practicing our music or whatever else. It's about performing goodness. That

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might be goodness, because of the specific topic, performing a certain way, of eating a certain way, of moving, a certain morning routine, whatever.

Or it can be about performing the goodness of discipline and willpower in general, applied to any topic in your life, like playing music every weekend. So if your subconscious goal is performing your worth then as soon as you fail, you've proved to yourself that you must not be worthy. If your brain wants the goal to prove you're worthy, then the prediction your brain made was that if you did the goal perfectly, you'd feel better about yourself. That's why you want to prove your worth.

So what happens when you stumble? You beat yourself up. So your brain's subconscious goal was, I want to prove my worthiness. I want to perform goodness so that I feel good about myself. Then the minute you stumble, you're beating yourself up and you feel like shit. So then your brain thinks, fuck this. It already takes energy and effort to change, which I didn't want to do in the first place, says your brain. And I was doing it because I thought that we would feel better if we did it but now I feel bad again already so why bother keep going?

If you are trying to achieve a goal to feel good about yourself, it is very hard to stick with it because along the way you feel bad about yourself. Changing things is hard. It involves failure and boredom and frustration and all these negative emotions. And if we don't know how to deal with negative emotions, then we start out trying to achieve the goal and the minute it gets hard, what's the point of doing this to feel better? It's not working and I don't feel better. So then your brain wants to give up.

What makes this really confusing is it can be things that we actually enjoy and do want to cultivate, like playing music in that example. So it's confusing because we actually genuinely do want to play more music and

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that may align with our values. And yet, if we miss a weekend or skip it, we have so much trouble getting back to it and we don't understand why. But this episode explains why, that is what I've just taught you.

It's because, number one, you have inertia. So you've already got to overcome that. And then number two, you have this unconscious formulation of your goal as being to do it perfectly. And so as soon as you miss, why bother? I now can't achieve the goal. And three, you have this unconscious motivation of proving your value and worth to yourself and feeling better. And those are both sabotaged when you fail because you beat yourself up, tell yourself you're not worthy and feel terrible. And so then your brain is like, why would I bother doing this?

So in order to actually be able to get back on the wagon, we have to change all of that. We can't 100% change the brain's tendency towards efficiency and inertia, but we can change how we think about it, how we relate to it, how we navigate it. And we can absolutely change our formulation of the goal and we can change our relationship to the goal to not use it as a vehicle of proving our worth and value. These are all steps that are crucial to any goal in life because almost nothing worth doing works perfectly right away.

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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It's my favorite place on Earth and it will change your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at www.unfuckyourbrain.com/society. I can't wait to see you there.