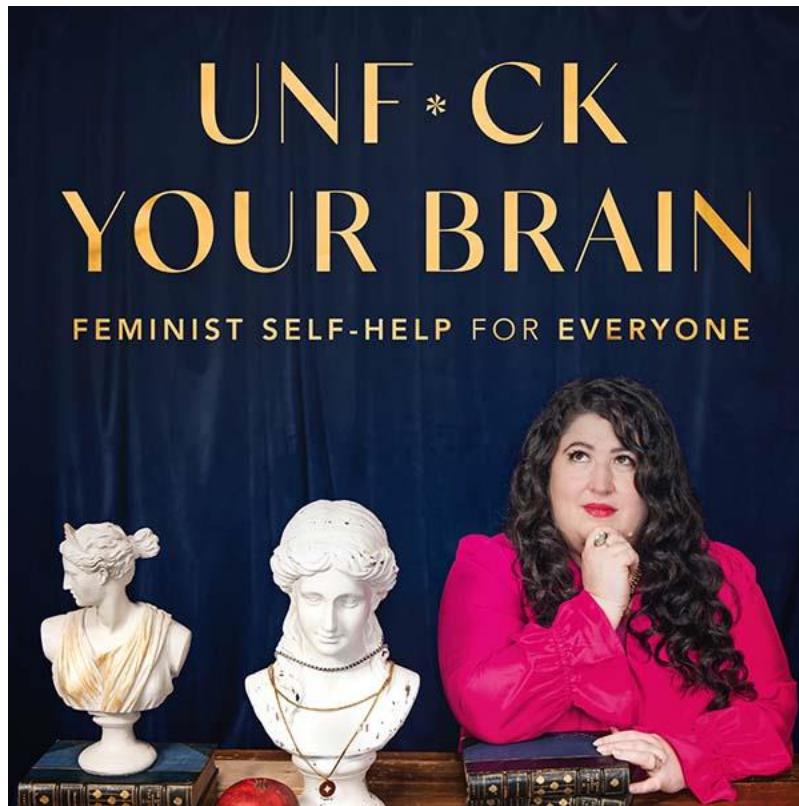


**UFYB 354: Greatest Hits With Mary's Cup of Tea:  
The Virgin/Mother/Whore Paradigm  
& How to Stop Giving a Shit**



**Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host**

**Kara Loewentheil**

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Good morning, y'all. I am just back from my honeymoon and being out of the office, and I am gearing up with some amazing new episodes for you. For this week, I wanna share an interview I had, a conversation I had with my friend Mary from the podcast *Mary's Cup of Tea* because I thought it was a really important conversation, and it definitely kicked up a lot of thoughts and feelings when she shared it on her social media, especially my thoughts about Botox. People had a lot of opinions, so I want to share it with you today.

This episode is all about the virgin mother whore kind of paradigm that we get from patriarchy and about how to stop giving a shit about social beauty norms, especially. So I think that you are gonna enjoy it, or, certainly, it's going to be thought provoking either way. And I'll be back next week with a new episode.

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.

Mary: Hi, Kara, welcome back to the show.

Kara: Thank you. I'm glad to be back. It's nice to revisit old friends on this podcast tour.

Mary: How fun is it to say welcome back after you've been podcasting or doing something for a while, right?

Kara: Yeah, it's like your old friends come back around.

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Mary: Yeah, I'm old miss. But you're an even older, it is in the best way possible, because I've been listening to you.

Kara: I am older than you, that's true.

Mary: And rightfully so, because I've been listening to your podcast for seven or eight years now. I remember where I was in life and how I found your show. And just really eating up everything that you'd say as I took long walks by the river while breaking up with my ex and it feels cool to have you here again.

Kara: I feel like I've accompanied a lot of women on break up walks. That feels probably a place my podcast has often been played.

Mary: Is that oddly satisfying? I would take that as a giant compliment.

Kara: I'm happy to be listened to in any context by anyone.

Mary: Okay, well this is not in your bio, but I would call you the queen of thought work. Consider adding it to your Instagram bio, take it.

Kara: Certainly, the queen of feminist thought work, yes.

Mary: Perfect, even better. So, what does that mean? Just for those who didn't listen to our first episode together or haven't listened to your show, what is thought work?

Kara: How dare they. Go back and listen immediately. So, I use thought work to mean basically the process of becoming aware of what we're thinking and then changing it if we want to. It's not about having all the right thoughts or the most healthy 'mindset'. There's no should involved, but

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most of us really aren't aware of most of what we're thinking. A lot of our thinking is subconscious or unconscious, it's below our conscious awareness.

And all those thoughts are busy working back there driving the way we feel and act and driving the outcomes that we create in our lives. So thought work is figuring out what you're thinking, becoming familiar with what you're thinking, and then changing what you're thinking if you want to. And the feminist version of thought work is just doing that with an eye towards how society has taught women to think about themselves.

And that manifests in terms of being aware of all of the messages you've absorbed as a woman, in terms of what you were raised to believe women are valuable for or worthwhile for, or just what women are like. What they're good at, what they're bad at, what they like, what they don't like. All these social messages about women. And being aware of the ways in which, a lot of self-coaching, self-development, even other thought work practices are sometimes used to help us conform better to social norms.

And kind of keeping an eye on that so that if you do decide you want to change how you think, how you feel, how you act, you're not just doing it to make yourself conform better to what society expects of you.

Mary: I'm really glad you mentioned that, because I've definitely noticed that in the, what do we call this industry, life coaching?

Kara: Self-development, self-help, yeah.

Mary: Yeah, self-development. I'm curious if you use the phrase, thought work interchangeably with self-talk, if so, why or why not?

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Kara: No, I would say self-talk is maybe a part of it. I guess self-talk I think of as being explicitly the thoughts you say to yourself in your mind. And thought work is certainly about that, but sort of feels more, I would say we're trying to change your self-talk. Your self-talk is the words you're saying to yourself. Thought work is a set of tools and practices.

It's doing thought downloads, using the coaching model that I teach that I learned at The Life Coach School to change your thoughts using the thought ladder. Which is a concept I teach in my book for how to change your thoughts bit by bit. Even some somatic nervous system regulation tools kind of could be part of thought work in the sense that sometimes you have to regulate your nervous system before you can change a thought. So, I think thought work is kind of an umbrella category of tools and practices. And self-talk is one of the things you might use thought work to change.

Mary: Could you give us an example of what it would look like to use some of these tools to conform better? Because I've definitely been part of a lot of workshops that are, rah, rah, do better, be more and greater. And they could have just said capitalism and saved themselves the breath.

Kara: Yeah. I mean, there's certainly that. I would say in terms of the gender version, I have a book coming out called *Take Back Your Brain: How Sexist Society Gets in Your Head and How to Get it Out*. And I give the example of, let's say you're afraid of needles and you decide you're going to use thought work to become not afraid of needles, so you can get Botox injections. Now, I'm not saying people should or shouldn't get Botox. It's up to people what they want to do.

But if you are getting Botox because you think it's not okay to look older, because society has taught you that women are only valuable when they

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look young. And you're using thought work to make yourself more comfortable with that process. That's fine, you can totally use it that way. I just want you to be aware that that's what you're doing.

Or you see it used a lot to market weight loss, which is not something that I teach. So, you see thought work and mindset work used to sort of help you lose weight to conform to social expectations. Or you'll see kind of change your mindset so you can get married. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be married. You're married, I'm engaged, that's fine. But when society has taught you to put your worth and value on these things, looking young, being thin, getting married, whatever.

And then the self-development industry sells you a version of empowerment that's just helping you hit those milestones to then finally feel good about yourself. That's not feminist self-development or feminist self-help to me. Feminist self-help would be, I'm going to learn to love how I look and I may decide to do whatever to my face or not. I don't personally use injectables. Lots of people do. I wear lipstick though. My eyelashes are curled right now. We're all complicit in different ways with these systems, but it's just being aware that that's what you're doing.

So, it's fine to want a relationship, and I absolutely credit thought work with helping me end up in the relationship I'm in. But a huge part of that work was learning to detach my kind of fixation on having the relationship and build up my own self-worth and value without the partner first. So just making sure that we are focusing on the right thing with our thought work and not just trying to, yeah, make ourselves conform better.

Mary: I'm going to call myself out to highlight how strongly you stand by these values. I slid in your DMs when you got engaged, and I'm like, "Oh my God, post this on the feed." And you said, "No, I don't really post stuff

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like this on the feed, that's not my message. That's not what my work is about." And mad respect, 100% because, well, we're all complicit in different ways. That was definitely a big event that I wanted to share because I wanted to share the joy.

And of course, I knew that it would get some kind of positive social reinforcement, everything from engaged to wedding to now marriage stuff, I think that's something people feel deeply about.

Kara: Yeah. And I think it's of course very normal. I mean my partner and I are having a wedding, you want your community to celebrate your milestones and life transitions. So, there's no judgment of anybody who does do that. I will say in general I don't put my personal life on my main feed in general also. But I definitely have noticed feeling like, I have a book coming out and I'm getting married at around the same time. And I noticed who congratulated me more excitedly about my wedding than about my book because getting married, not that hot.

If all you want is to get married, you can get married this week. It might not be the kind of person you really want to be married to. But that to me is not an accomplishment. It's a mix maybe of good fortune and good luck and decisions about how you want to spend your money and time. It can be a celebration without being an accomplishment. Now, I'm just taking myself on a little existential journey because I feel like my relationship is an accomplishment in that I had to do a lot of work on myself to get here.

But that's not what people meant when they were congratulating me on my wedding. And similar, people keep asking me if I'm stressed about wedding planning and I'm like, "I have a book coming out. I'm trying to make a bestseller list. I'm not thinking about that. I'm not up at night thinking about

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my color scheme.” Which there’s nothing wrong with even having a color scheme, but this is just all the way we’ve been socialized.

And women, I think one of the reasons women get so fixated on weddings is number one, of course, we’re socialized to think that’s the best day of your life. If people tell me it’s the best in my life I’m like, “I hope not.” The best day of my life is my wedding. What if I get invited on Oprah, that might be the best day of my life. So, we’re socialized to believe it’s the best day of our lives. We’re socialized to believe that being married is the ultimate validator of our value and status as a woman.

And I think it’s partly because women are so socialized to put themselves last in every other area that then your wedding becomes the day that you can have attention and not have to be self-effacing and be allowed to want people to look at you and to celebrate you. And I think that if women were allowed to take up equal space in the rest of our lives, then our wedding wouldn’t have to carry all the weight for our whole lives of the one day that we get to be the center of attention.

Mary: Yeah, couldn’t agree more. And this is the perfect segue into the title of this episode, which was oh, so enticing. And I have no idea where it’s going to go. So, it’s just as enticing to me as it is to whoever clicked on this. What is this virgin, mother, whore paradigm that you talk about?

Kara: Yeah, I even call it virgin, mother. There’s sort of a virgin, whore paradigm. And then there’s also a virgin mother, crone paradigm. These are just sort of different ways of talking about the roles and prefabricated boxes that society has for women. So, when you think about, there’s the virgin, whore dichotomy, we can talk about it and then it’s really maiden, mother, crone. I know I said that wrong.

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So, you've maiden, mother, crone. These are the three phases of women's lives that in the way society talks about women. It's first you're a young sexually appealing maiden which used to mean virgin. So, there's an overlap there. That's your unmarried state. Your first phase is defined basically by your virginity. Then your second phase is mother defined by your fertility and being a mother. And then society is like, "I don't know what's left, now you're a crone. Now you're just old and irrelevant or scary."

I was just writing a piece today actually, it'll be up, I guess, when this airs on Katie Couric Media about aging and what we're told about society. And it's our images of older women are either kind of soft and comforting and non-threatening, like grandmothers. Or if they're powerful, they're scary, they're like crones or witches. We don't have a stereotypical image of a powerful older woman. So, with all of the messages we get from society, a lot of them can be grouped into one of those three categories, ways of understanding a woman's progression through life that women internalize.

And so, we often have a lot of thoughts about trying to live up to whatever the expectations are in that phase. And the constriction of those being the only three things. What if you don't want to be a maiden? What if you want to slut it up? What if you don't want to have children, you don't want to be a mother? What if you don't feel like retiring to a hut in the woods, you actually want to be finding cute young boys at the bar who like an older woman or whatever it is you want to do.

So, it's the way that women are stereotyped into these roles in a way that really we don't have for men. It's just you're young and you're older, maybe you're married, maybe you're not, whatever you want to do. You just sort of get to be a human subject, charting your own way rather than these are the identities available for you.

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And then the virgin, whore dichotomy is that sort of just black and white thinking of either you are sort of chaste and only sexually available to your husband, the one person, or you are a whore and that's a bad thing. There's no right way for a woman to be sexual. And I think we see even in our culture, now you're allowed to be sexual, but don't be too sexual or don't be sexual in the wrong way or with the wrong people or at the wrong age. It's still kind of impossible to meet those shifting standards all the time.

Mary: Yeah. Some of those 'alternative routes' outside of virgin, mother, whore, maiden, crone. Even when women choose other paths, they're also labeled and put into their own boxes. Like you said, maybe you want to be the older person at the bar picking up young boys, that would be called a cougar or you're a spinster.

Kara: No, we don't have a name for older men who want to sleep with younger women, that's just called [crosstalk].

Mary: Daddy. I'm just kidding.

Kara: That's the fun, consensual one. But we don't have a word from the outside. Although, we have the word cougar because we think that somehow upsets the normal way of things which is supposed to be the other way around. Bachelor is kind of the only word we have for men about their status in any way, and even that it's not pejorative. It's not an insult compared to spinster, which totally is.

Mary: Yeah, for sure. So, I'm assuming you would use thought work to break out of some of these preset roles that society has for women. You know what I think bothers me the most? I mean, obviously it boils my blood when I hear something on TV that is just so sexist but people think it's funny and appropriate and true. That's fine. That sucks.

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What I hate even more than that is when I myself am thinking about me in that way. Whether it's adhering to the male gaze or being very happily married, but still wondering if that person I walked past thinks I'm hot or some of these kind of things that I probably shouldn't admit publicly on a podcast, but I'm sure there are other people that have it.

Kara: Because people think this way and this is really what my work is about is it's so internalized, there's so much. I come from a feminist kind of activism background. I used to be a reproductive rights litigator, and I was an academic. I ran a think tank. I come from the law and policy world before I became a coach about eight years ago. And all of those structural solutions are really important and changing culture is really important.

But we actually have to change our own brains before we can change anything else, because all change comes from our thoughts. It comes from us thinking, I want things to be different, how can I make that happen? How do I persuade other people? How do I communicate? How do I come up with an idea that will change things? It all comes from our own brains. And if women are constantly undercutting themselves and doubting themselves and second guessing themselves, you're just not going to be as effective at social change as you would be otherwise.

So, all of my work is focused on exactly that internalized thought process. Because if you looked in the mirror and what you heard was a male announcer voice criticizing your thighs, you would kind of recognize, this isn't my thought. This is from outside. But that's not what happens. What happens is you hear your own voice saying, "You really don't look good in shorts. Everybody can see your cellulite. You should wear a skirt instead." And we don't even recognize that that's internalized socialization or it's self-policing.

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So, to answer your question about how we change it. You have to change your thinking and that means working on believing something new. We all want to stop thinking a certain way, but there's really not a mechanism to stop having a thought in terms of you can't just tell your brain to stop thinking something. Your brain has set neural pathways that exist in your brain, that your brain is used to using, they're already there. And your brain likes to be energy efficient. It uses the highways it has. If you come to a kind of forest and there's a path, or you'd have to hack your way through the underbrush, you just take the path, it's natural.

So, it's not about, now I know that this is internalized socialization, so I will stop having bad thoughts about myself in shorts. There's no way to do that. You have to start practicing a slightly better thought about yourself in shorts and building up on that. The good news is that over time, as you start to change individual thought patterns, that all adds up to a bigger whole. Because the more that you are working on practicing, even slightly better thoughts, even slightly kinder thoughts to yourself, even slightly less critical thoughts, your brain is absorbing and adapting to that.

You were taught to think the way you think now, and you can teach yourself to think a different way.

Mary: If I was your client, for example, is this where you would tell me about the thought ladder?

Kara: I would have talked about the thought ladder in the first 10 seconds. Yes, this is where we can use the thought leader. So, can you curse on this podcast?

Mary: Yes, fuck, yes.

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Kara: Okay. Sometimes you never know. I go on and people are like, “She’s from the *Un-eff Your Brain Podcast*. Or people asking me on my podcast and I’m like, “Well, the title’s *UnF\*ck Your Brain* so, yeah, you can curse.” We haven’t exposed that rating since day one.

Mary: Curse away. One thing I will say, I really appreciate an intentionally placed curse word. I, of course, do not resonate with certain people very popular on the internet who say, “You’ve just got to fucking, fucking work fucking hard fucking.

Kara: I don’t even know who that is, but I would hate them, I’m sure. So, I call this the 10% less shitty thought because often if you’ve been in self-development or self-help spaces, you’ve heard a lot about manifestations and vibrations and good vibes only and positive thinking. And that’s not how I roll. There’s at least one study showing that if you don’t believe the thought you’re trying to think, positive thinking and affirmations can actually backfire because they make you feel worse, because you sort of become so aware of the gap between where you are and what you want to believe.

If you’re listening to this and you just love manifestation and it’s working for you, great. I’m not here to take away anybody’s toy. But I would just say, a lot of people, it doesn’t work for, positive thinking doesn’t work. So, what we’ve got to do is that 10% less shitty thought because we have to think something that you can believe now that creates an emotional payoff in your body of a little bit of relief or a little bit of motivation or a little bit of self-compassion. If there’s a payoff, then your brain is more likely and willing to want to keep doing it, and you can actually start to build that belief.

So, the thought ladder is the technique that I teach in the book to help you come up with that 10% less shitty thought. So, an example I often use, and I know body image has been in the past a big focus of your work. I did not

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start my body image journey by going from, I think my body is disgusting and no one will ever love me because of it, to, I am a beautiful goddess right away. I practiced the thought, this is a human stomach. I still use that thought sometimes because it is factual, it is neutral. I really can't disagree with that.

It distracts my brain from thinking the worst thought and it doesn't feel as bad and then I'm able to build up from there. Now I do actually have positive thoughts about my body, but I started with that baseline. There's really no overnight quick fix for thoughts. People are attracted to things like good vibes only. It's easier to just say a positive thought that someone told you even though you don't believe it, it feels like less work. But if you build your way up bit by bit, it is more work, but it will actually literally rewire the way your brain works.

Mary: Well, it probably feels like less work because you're dissociated from it.

Kara: Yeah, you're just repeating a thing and then you're like, "I'm sure the magic will happen anytime now." But that's sort of what we're culturally and socially conditioned to is wanting that overnight quick fix.

Mary: I also look at it even with eating disorder recovery. For example, people would always be like, "How long? How long until this is over? How long until I stop binge eating?" And I'm like, "Well, how long were you in diet culture?" Probably an equal and opposite reaction would be necessary, and I hope that it'll take less time.

Kara: Yeah, I think that's the magic, is it actually takes less time. You may have been thinking this way for 20, 30, 40, 60 years. I have women in their

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70s and 80s in my program. It doesn't take as long to change it, which is great, but yeah, it's going to take more than five minutes.

Mary: I want to give away another universal thought that you teach that I think is just so, so good. And you kind of mentioned it with this is a human stomach, but branching out on that, I really like when you say, "How human of me."

Kara: Yeah, that's a beautiful thought that I cannot take credit for inventing. I've seen it attributed various places. One place is a yoga teacher named Judith Hanson Lasater, but I've seen it in a bunch of places. Because it really is a distillation of a Buddhist practice of kind of self-compassion so, I think different people have come up with it. But what I really love about that is that shame is really about alienation and difference. Shame is, I did something wrong. I'm different. I'm bad.

And how human of me is such a reminder that whatever we're experiencing, other humans have experienced. And it is the human condition to experience making mistakes, messing up, feeling bad about yourself, whatever it is. Almost anything feels better when you have connection and how human of me is really a way of creating connection with yourself and with kind of the imaginary other that you sort of imagine and assume is judging you.

How human of me more connects you. So, I yelled at my kid, how human of me, which reminds you, so many humans have yelled at their kids. I beat myself up. How human of me. I made a mistake at work. How human of me. It just reconnects you to your own humanity, which is what's missing when you're sort of policing and criticizing yourself.

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Mary: And scientifically, Dr. Kristin Neff, who researches self-compassion, she identified it as one of the three pillars of self-compassion. And she calls it common humanity, the common humanity aspect. So, it's not just inward and outward. It's also the connective tissue of be nicer to yourself.

Kara: Yeah, I love that.

Mary: I personally go through phases where I'm really gung ho about self-development and I'm really ready to take responsibility and change my life. And then other times I don't want anything to do with it and I'm just happy existing as I am being mean to myself. Currently I'm actually going back to where I felt like I was a few years back, which is just really self-analyzing, doing that kind of inquiry that makes me feel more empowered than not.

And something I think about often and you write about it in your book, how not only do we internalize sexist socializations onto ourselves, but we also project those onto other people. And I think that's really important to recognize. And you have so many good examples in your book. I wrote down seven, but we're not going to get to all seven of them in this podcast, and there's even more in your book so I highly recommend people get it.

But one example that I just wanted to read, this is on page 141. My thought is that my mother should want to spend more time with her grandchildren. So, it's going back to those roles. That thought creates the emotion of anger. When I feel angry because of this thought my behavior is that I don't call my mother. I don't invite her to things. I wait for her to suggest getting together to prove that she wants to, the returns I get from this.

So, I want to ask you about what does that mean, returns. The returns I get from this behavior are that we see my mother less. She has fewer opportunities to interact with her grandkids. And then I want to spend less

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time with my mother. So, it's kind of this cycle where our thoughts, I hate using a little New Age quote, but create our reality. Our thoughts create our reality. So, what is a thought return? And how can we use thought returns to examine how we think about ourselves and others?

Kara: Yeah. I think I would say returns are the more logical evidence based version of thoughts create your reality. So, returns are in some ways a tweak on or an evolution of the coaching model I learned when I became a coach, which is that your thought create your results. I like to talk about your thoughts creating your returns because I think it helps to just imagine that every thought you have, you are investing energy. And there's literally chemical and electrical signals in your brain.

You are investing energy in each of those thoughts. It's producing an emotion, that's producing a behavior. And that behavior is going to produce some kind of return. So, every investment produces a return. If I spend all my time thinking about how I can't succeed and nobody would want to hire me as a coach, and I don't know what I'm talking about. The return I get on investing all that time and energy into those thoughts is probably going to be no coaching business, very hard to have one with those thoughts.

Those investments are unconscious because our unconscious brain is running the show. If we decide to take control of our investment strategy and start to invest our thinking, invest our mental and emotional energy into thoughts more consciously. We can then produce different returns on that investment. We don't create everything with our thinking, but we do create our experience with our thinking. And so, the return kind of concept is just a way of understanding that and being able to plot it out.

When I think this way I'm going to feel this way, I'm going to act this way. That's a core kind of framework from cognitive behavioral therapy. The next

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part though is, okay, and then what are those outcomes? What are those returns? How does the way I show up because of that, interact with other people in the world? And usually, we end up sort of then using our own behavior as evidence for why our thought was true in the first place.

So, in that scenario that you were reading from the book, at the end of that cycle your brain is like, "See, she doesn't want to hang out with us." We're pulling a lot of the strings and then just telling ourselves things are just happening, but actually, we're acting out our beliefs and making them come true.

Mary: So how would you proceed to coach this person from releasing resentment toward their mother?

Kara: It totally depends on where the person is coming from. Even with the same thought, people just have very different responses to different ideas or words or thoughts. But we've got to start with that thought. Currently their thought is my mother should want to blah, blah, blah. I would say a good rule for living is that if your thought is someone else should be different than they are, you are creating suffering for yourself. Other people, unfortunately have autonomy just like we do, and they often don't conform to our expectations, no matter how much we're sure that we're right.

That is where I would start is, we would just have to look at that thought. For me, feminist coaching is a big sort of principle of it. This isn't even in the book because it's really more about how I perform my profession, kind of. I could write a different book about this, but is that feminist coaching is very collaborative and non-hierarchical. So, I am constantly saying if you watch me coach, you can totally keep that thought. I'm not telling you, you shouldn't have that thought or that's a bad thought or anything.

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My job as a coach is just to show you, this is what's happening. And then you get to decide, is that what you want? So, to some extent, a lot of the coaching and a lot of self-coaching is just honest awareness. I can keep this thought about my mother. My mother's going to be listening to this and be like, "Are you talking about me?" And I'm going to be like, "I don't have children, so no, I'm not talking about you." But I have stepchildren. Anyway, you get to decide, kind of on some level, is it more important to you to keep believing this or to have a better relationship with your mother and feel differently?

If you're willing to change it, then we start using things like the thought ladder, that 10% less shitty thought to look at, well, what is a thought we could believe here? Could we believe something, even if I think it could be more, my mother does show she wants to spend time with the grandkids. I would see if the person believed that. If they're like, "No, that's still too far." Maybe we'd have to back it up. If they're like, "Yeah, that's obvious." Then maybe we could do something a little more ambitious.

But it really is, I can't sort of give this is the thought that person should think, it depends on them. And what I'm trying to teach you to do in the book is to be able to do that without my help at all. To be able to coach yourself and change your own thinking.

Mary: Yeah, your approach and the way you write about it in the book is essentially neutralizing every thought and experience from that thought, without any kind of value judgments. And then from there you can decide if that's helpful to you or not. But really coming to that neutral place, that's kind of what the thought ladder does first and foremost, getting to a place of awareness and neutrality and feeling okay about it before trying to change or improve the situation in some way you think you should.

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And really, taking all of those sexist socializations off of ourselves and off of the people, especially the women we interact with.

Kara: Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't frame it as, it's recognizing that things outside of us are inherently neutral in the sense that our human mind is what makes meaning. Our human mind is what creates interpretation. It's not everything's neutral in the sense that, so you shouldn't be upset about anything or who cares about war and starvation. It's not so much everything is neutral, meaning you shouldn't have moral beliefs about things, or you shouldn't have preferences or whatever.

I was just teaching a beginner boot camp actually yesterday, which I haven't done in a while, but I was talking about the idea of, we're not trying to get rid of all thoughts or stories. Human brains are story making machines. But what's so powerful about mindset work to me is that it does involve, if you're doing it, I think, well, a sort of constant reassessment of the ways in which something happens, a thing exists or words, sound waves happen or bodies move in space and your brain tells a whole story.

And spending a lot of time in that gap, so I was telling these boot campers, "For this first week all I want you to do is just spend time noticing, here's the literal factual thing that happened as factually neutrally as I can say it. And here's my whole story about it." And it's not because we're not going to have any stories or we're going to get rid of all of our thoughts or we shouldn't have moral judgments or any of that. But if you can't see that space, then you're actually not choosing on purpose what to think. You're just thinking whatever your subconscious brain told you.

And the power of it is seeing that space, and then you can decide what you want to think about it. Are you going to keep your thought, are you going to change it? But I think a lot of people don't explain this well, so there's a

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misconception around thought work, I think, or mindset work that it is inherently kind of ignoring the realities of life or something. And to me, it's actually just a radical subjectivity.

Which, if you look at the world, it's pretty hard to argue that it's not radically subjective given the people you know who believe very different things from you. It's about recognizing your own subjectivity so you can be in charge of it. It's not about trying to not have subjectivity, it's about trying to choose it on purpose.

Mary: Okay, so radical subjectivity is what thought work is about?

Kara: To me, that's the most kind of radical part.

Mary: Succinct explanation.

Kara: Yeah. I mean, that is the core of all of it. And fundamentally, if you don't believe the concept that thoughts are optional, the brain is what creates meaning and we can decide what meaning to make. Then the rest of it won't really work. For instance, if you believe that your mother inherently should want to see the kids more, and that is an objective fact, it's going to be very hard to change your thought about it because your brain is like, "No, that's objective fact. I'm not going to change my thought about it."

So that space between the thing and your interpretation of it, your opinion of it, your evaluation of it, is the crucial foundation. And people want to skip that a lot. They just want to feel better so they want to change their thought right away. It actually feels worse at first to recognize that all these things are subjective and that maybe all of your very righteously indignant

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thoughts aren't true. That can be a little bit of a painful reckoning, but you've kind of got to go through that to come out the other side.

Mary: It might be confronting but it can't be any more painful than just living very victim to your circumstances and other people's opinions of what you should do.

Kara: Yeah, life is so much better on the other side, but brains do not like to be wrong. The book pretty early on, I get into the resistance you may experience. And definitely my editor was sort of like, "Do we need this right upfront?" And I was like, "Yes, because otherwise people start reading the book and they're going to have some feelings and be like, this book must be wrong and bad." No, this is normal to feel resistant to what you're hearing, just keep going. Then you can decide at the end if you believe it.

Mary: Let's go into two more examples to help people see how to stop managing other people's opinions. The first example is from your book and the second one is personal and selfishly motivated because I really want you to coach me. Let me just say it like it is. So first before we go into Mary's bullshit, going into what other people 'should do'. One example you have is about a child throwing a tantrum in public and the mom feeling very flustered, trying to hush her child, calm them down. Feeling overwhelmed by the experience and what other people may or may not be thinking.

Can you illustrate that situation for us and how you would approach thinking about it differently?

Kara: So, the thing that's going to be the common theme in all of these is, it's not about stopping caring what other people think. It's about starting to care more about what you think. So, we can't, again, tell ourselves, just don't care what other people think. Obviously that doesn't work. The reason

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that we care what other people think is that we are worried that it might be true. I don't care at all that there are people out there who think feminism is wrong and stupid.

I literally do not spend a moment thinking about that because I don't give a shit because I believe so strongly that what I'm teaching is valuable and that feminism is important and that sexism is real. So even though I know for a fact there are people who disapprove of this and judge this about me, it does not bother me at all. On the other hand, there are things in my life that I'm not as sure on where I do care more about what other people think.

So, if you look at your own mind and you sort of broaden the scope to include the things that you don't care if other people think about you. Then you start to see things I feel secure about. I don't care what other people think. The places I care about are the places that I don't feel totally secure. And given that, I have two options. I can try to control everybody else so nobody else ever thinks this about me. Or I can work on increasing my own security with this issue so that it becomes one of those things where I have my own back so strongly that I don't care what somebody else thinks.

And so, in the kind of tantrum example, it's about that parent working on changing their thoughts about what they make it mean. Because the problem is that we start thinking, oh my God, everybody watching me thinks I'm a bad parent. What's wrong with my kid? And I'm not obviously raising them well, if this is what's happening. Those are all her thoughts that she has, that she's projecting onto other people. For all we know, somebody is staring at her and is thinking, man, that was hard. I'm so glad I'm out of that phase. I feel so bad for her. We have no idea.

The example I often use is, when people used to look at me, when I was in a smaller body and had more negative judgments of it, I'd assume they're

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looking at me and thinking that I was fat and unattractive and they were judging my body. And now that I like my body, I assume that people looking at me are like, "What a cute outfit or she's hot", or whatever. I honestly have no idea. It was probably some of both, both times. But my life is so much better thinking this way and feeling this way.

So whatever example we're about to do from Mary's life, the answer is going to probably be similar, that it's something where you don't have your own back fully in it. And that's why you're worried about what other people think but let's do it.

Mary: Yeah, okay. Well, I didn't even plan this, to be honest. I just saw the opportunity, I'm going for it. And I don't want to complain, so how do I?

Kara: Hold on, this is such a good, important example. First of all, women always think they're complaining, they shouldn't complain. They shouldn't be, they should be grateful, they shouldn't. So, there's sexist socialization happening right now. And any coaching, self-coaching, coaching with someone else. It's just like therapy. If you're judging yourself, you can't get anywhere. You're allowed to be ungrateful, it's just thoughts in your head. I mean if you don't want to do it live on the podcast, we don't have to do that.

But even if you decide to just work on it yourself, it's just electrical signals in a bowl of Jello.

Mary: Electrical signals in a bowl of Jello.

Kara: They don't mean anything about our soul.

Mary: Yeah. So, I don't have to preface this by saying I am so grateful?

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Kara: No, no disclaimers.

Mary: Okay. Well, let me just paint a picture. I feel so lost about what to do with my career, how to make money in a way that doesn't suck my soul. I also am coming up with thoughts of, you're irrelevant and you've lost 70,000 followers over the past two years and you're not growing and nobody wants to work with you or listen to you or come to your stuff. And all my numerical metrics are significantly lower than they ever have been since I started *Mary's Cup of Tea*. So where am I going with that? I don't know where I'm going with that.

Kara: Why do you think it's a problem to feel lost?

Mary: I ask myself that quite often, and sometimes I have moments of being lost is the first step to finding yourself and you're just ugly.

Kara: That sounds like a cute, positive thought you don't believe.

Mary: Yeah, ugly caterpillar, [crosstalk] into a beautiful butterfly.

Kara: I can tell from your tone that you don't believe that. So, let's not try to work that thought, but we've got to figure out what it is you do think is the problem with it. What is the problem with being lost? If you weren't lost, you would be what? What would be better?

Mary: Let me tell you my problem with being lost. I know that I'm capable of so much more. I see my potential. I know if I could just get my shit together, get clarity, fucking focus and not distract myself. I could probably create massive results for myself, my family and the community that I care so much about. And I just tell myself this lie that I just need to find that thing.

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Kara: That's a lot of pressure, though. How do you feel when you tell yourself that if you just got your shit together, you could do this great thing?

Mary: It makes me feel, this is a weird word, but poor, not enriched. Do you know what I mean?

Kara: Yeah, because you're telling yourself, I'm already doing it wrong. And also, I need to fix myself so I can accomplish huge things. Yeah, that's not going to feel good. So, if we think about the kind of returns, when you tell yourself I'm not living up to my potential. We think that's going to motivate us somehow, but actually you feel shitty. And then you can't do anything because you've put so much pressure on it. So, you're like, "How can I pick a thing to do? Of course I'm going to get on Instagram."

And then your return is you keep, yeah, I mean people can't see me. I'm doing a little vortex motion. You just keep swimming around that pool. So, I think we've got to take the stakes way down, So this is if somebody said to me, "I just can't sit down to write. I know that if I could, I could write the great American novel and become a bestseller." But okay, that sounds great except that's a huge amount of pressure. And then, of course, your brain is scared of that so every time you try to sit down to write, your brain is like, "No."

Mary: So, tell me real quick. I love where this is going and I love the analogy of the great American novel because I've written two books. I know that resistance, and I know that it feels similarly psychosomatically. And what about the magic of thinking big and believing your big goals and dreams?

Kara: It's only magical if you believe it, and if you don't have your worth based on it.

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Mary: Okay, yeah, so it's too enmeshed.

Kara: You're telling yourself, I have to get my shit together. That's not a nice thing that we say to ourselves when we are grounded in our own worth. If you really pay attention to how you talk to yourself, all of you listening, we are so self-critical in ways we don't even realize. My friend Rachel Hart who does the *Take a Break from Drinking* podcast has this great exercise, which I'm sure she learned from someone, but she's who I learned it from, of imagining yourself saying it to your three year old self, or even having a picture of you.

We think it's fine to say to us when we're like, I'm not being self-critical, it's true. But do you yell at a three year old, "Get your shit together, you could really be great if you just got your shit together."

Mary: Some of us were yelled at like that when we were three.

Kara: Some of us were and that's how we learned it, but you wouldn't choose to do that to your child probably. So, I think that the bigger the pressure, the more lost you're going to be because your brain can't decide what to do because it has to pay off being this big, amazing thing.

Mary: Okay, the bigger the pressure.

Kara: So, we've got to take the standard way down. It's not, how do I maximize my potential and do this great big thing that provides for me and my family? I think it should be, what would I be interested in doing for three months?

Mary: Well, the answer to that question is playing pickleball. I've been playing pickleball.

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Kara: Play pickleball for three months and see what happens. Maybe you're about to invent the best pickleball business anyone's ever seen. I don't know.

Mary: And then I beat myself up even more because I'm like, "Why am I playing pickleball? I should be working on my dreams."

Kara: Right. But this is what I'm talking about. That's the thought we need to change. That thought, I should be working on my dreams is not serving you. So, I just want to suggest to you that that sounds like a nice thought, that I should be working on my dreams. But this is why we always have to check, how does it feel in our body when we think it? It doesn't feel good to you. Maybe pickleball is your dream, I don't know, but I don't really think that's necessarily true.

I think it's not going to work to ask yourself what you'd like to do until you've done the work to take down the pressure on this whole thing. So maybe we just need the 10% less shitty thought for you might be, I don't have to figure out how to maximize my whole life potential at the age of, how old are you?

Mary: 26.

Kara: 26, I don't have to figure out how to maximize my whole life potential at the age of 26. How does that feel?

Mary: Yeah. It feels okay. It feels like I'm going backwards now to be honest. Let me not lie to you. It feels like I'm going backwards because at 22 I felt so much more clearer. And I know it's seasons and every seven years we shed.

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Kara: But hold on, you're clear on what you wanted to be at 22. Did you think that was supposed to be you for life?

Mary: I guess no, but I thought it would be a stepping stone to be always growing.

Kara: Right. But when you say it backwards, your thought process is, it was supposed to be linear this way and at any moment, if I don't know where I'm going, then that's a problem.

Mary: Yeah, you're right. And you know what else, Kara? I've noticed the thoughts I'm thinking about this are nearly identical, though the context differs, but it's nearly identical to the thoughts I thought about my body and food and recovery.

Kara: Yeah. What's the lesson we can take from that? When you were in recovery and had those thoughts, what turned out to be useful? It was just letting yourself be in that place.

Mary: Yeah, it was just the process, yeah.

Kara: Yeah. So maybe we have to trust this process.

Mary: Yeah.

Kara: You felt very clear when you were also restricting in fitness modeling. You were very clear on what your goal was and not working great. I think you've got to stop fetishizing clarity as being a sign that you're right about something.

Mary: Could you say that to me again?

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Kara: Yes. You're fetishizing clarity as if clarity means something positive, but you've been very clear about goals you had. That in retrospect turned out to have been not good for you at all.

Mary: Yeah, I think clarity is my proxy for control.

Kara: Yeah, and it was with your food stuff too, totally.

Mary: Yeah, okay. So then talk to me about the kind of parallel part of it, and I don't lose sleep over this too much, what are people going to think?

Kara: They're all your own thoughts.

Mary: Yeah. If a post doesn't do well, I'm like, "Oh, my God, everybody's counting the amount of likes I got. And they know that I am becoming irrelevant because I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing."

Kara: Yeah, but that's all your thoughts because your thought is, I mean, talk about capitalism. Your thought is, I'm supposed to be ever growing, and it's supposed to be linear and I'm supposed to always be getting bigger and better and bigger is better. As long as you think that, of course you assume that other people are sharing that thought as well.

Mary: Yeah, exactly. And my education is economics, a capitalist model of economics, where it's always profit maximizing with absolutely no regard for say, sustainability or humanity and social issues.

Kara: Just think about all the people who have terrible opinions and a lot of people follow them. We cannot rank whether something is good based on just how many people follow it. What if you had a ton of followers for being not evolved to the place you are now, and now maybe fewer people are

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following, but they're more invested or they care more or they're willing to be with you until you figure out the next thing or whatever.

Everything you're worried somebody else is thinking, you're thinking. And when you make peace with where you are, you will stop checking how many people liked the post and your follower count and all of that.

Mary: Yeah. It's definitely this compulsive distraction where I get fixated on other things that feel like I could control, which is refreshing because the platforms are designed to help you feel that way.

Kara: But your brain's also always going to be looking for evidence of what you believe. Right now, your brain is programmed with this belief that you are becoming irrelevant and your brain likes to be right and it gets dopamine from being right. So, your brain will seek more and more evidence of that. So, you have to decide for yourself what you're going to practice believing and then go look for evidence of that.

Mary: Did you have any resistance when it came to building your business?

Kara: Yeah, every day. I'd like to hang up and go take a nap right now. I mean that's just normal, yes, being a human is to have resistance to doing things. Your brain likes to be efficient and it likes to sleep in a cave. That's where most of us came from. So, I for sure have resistance to doing things. But I mean, my experience in business has been exactly what I'm describing to you, which is the more you have your own back in it, the less you care what other people think.

When I first started I used to not want to tell people I was a life coach because that sounded so ridiculous. And I would be like, "I'm a cognitive

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coach.” I had all these other terms and now it just doesn’t even occur to me.

Mary: No, that is literally me, people ask me what I do and I tell them I’m a trophy wife. That feels better than telling them whatever else I do, that I’m ashamed of.

Kara: Which is also fascinating. Yeah, you’ve got a lot of thoughts to clean up about where you are in your career, my friend.

Mary: Yeah, for sure. I do have a lot of thoughts to clean up on that and I’m going to be diving into *Take Back Your Brain* to do so. And of course, your podcast, I’m always avidly listening to. And I’ve been loving the recaps you’ve been doing on social media, so thank you for those. Your work is so, so helpful and effective. Thanks, Kara.

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.

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