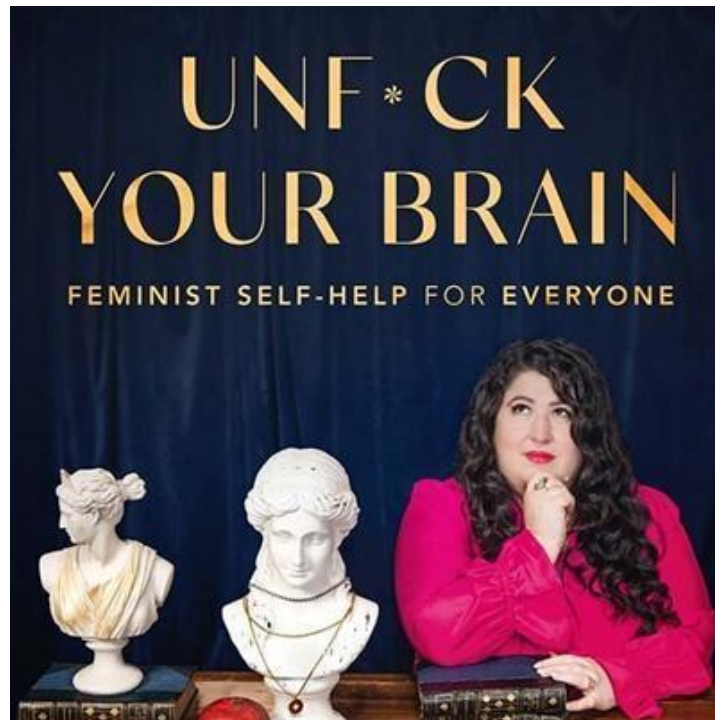


Bonus: How to Make and Keep Resolutions



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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'm so grateful for all of the thought work that I did to get myself from leaving the law and being kind of constrained to one place and creating this business and this life that lets me travel and work from wherever I want.

And I think we all have different priorities, but for me, having the flexibility and the freedom to move around like that, to be able to work remotely, to not be stuck in one particular place, to be able to go to yoga at 10am if I want and then work later, that was so, so important to me, and it was something I gave up for a while when I was trying to fit myself into the constraints of the legal profession in a way that didn't work for me.

Now, some of you love that. You love structure, you do great with structure, and that's awesome too. There is no right or wrong about this. But for those of you who are kind of stuck in a structure or a life that you don't love, that isn't working best for you, I just kind of want to tell you to keep doing the work because the freedom you find on the other side is so worth it.

Doing that thought work, working through your thoughts and your feelings and learning how to manage your mind and your emotions, you have to do that if you ever want to make any change in your life because your brain doesn't want to. Change is scary and your brain wants to stay in the cave.

It's totally normal, it's part of evolution. Doesn't mean anything's wrong with you. But it really does mean you have to learn to exercise that prefrontal cortex and take control of the thought process if you want to be able to get over all those roadblocks that your brain throws up to keep you from making change.

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So I think change is kind of the theme of today and it's the day after Christmas, so it's December 26th right now as I'm recording this. You guys will be listening to it a few days later, and New Year's is coming, and everyone's thoughts are turning to resolutions.

And it's so easy to make a ton of resolutions and then not keep any of them. I was the queen of this. Every year, my resolutions used to be basically change everything about myself so I can be acceptable in life. I was going to lose a bunch of weight and go to the gym all the time and create art and make new friends and throw dinner parties and cook all healthy food for myself and achieve my professional goals.

It was just let me overhaul every area of my life. Needless to say, I didn't do any of those things. I mean, I actually did do those things once I learned how to manage my mind, but I did not do those things through the resolution process.

So today I'm going to talk you through the two most important tools to use in making and keeping resolutions. And this is honestly true for any goal, any time of the year. But I like to teach this material around this time because this is when a lot of people are thinking about resolutions.

So the two tools you need to use to actually keep your resolutions or make any goal happen are constraint and massive action. So I'm going to teach you what both of those mean. Let's start with constraint. Most of us do not like that word. It sounds constraining. It sounds confining. It sounds too close to constraint. We all think we want to fly free, right?

But here's what we all misunderstand. Constraint is what creates freedom. This is something that if you are resistant to constraint and resistant to authority, you don't understand at all. And learning to understand it will change your life.

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When you have absolute freedom, you generally will get nothing done. There are too many options and your brain experiences two things. Choice overload and decision fatigue. Choice overload is the terms for the psychological phenomenon of being too exhausted or overwhelmed by options, with the result that you have a difficult time making a choice.

Humans do not do well with too many options. Studies show that the optimal number of choices for a human to have is about three to five. If you have less than that, you only have one option, say, or even two, you may feel like there aren't enough options, you may feel kind of deprived.

If you have any more than that, more than five at the upper limit, you are likely to get overwhelmed and not make any choice at all. This is true about jam brands at the supermarket, which is where some of these stats are done. And it's true about your life goals.

You probably have experienced, if you go to buy something and there's too many options for it, you actually will give up and not buy anything, even though you need or want the thing, getting any iteration of it would be better than none, but you will actually give up and get none because your brain can't cope with the choice.

When you make too many New Year's resolutions, you set yourself up for choice overload. There are too many things to change about yourself. So you go and get overwhelmed trying to decide which one matters the most, which one is the most important, and which one should get your focus at any given time.

In fact, you're likely to experience choice overload simply during the process of making the resolutions. If you are only allowed to choose one resolution, you will probably be able to make a choice fairly easily from among your ideas. If you brainstorm 10 things you want to create or change and you're going to pick one from them, it's actually not that hard. Usually there is one, maybe two that seem most important to you.

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But if you're allowed to choose three to five, it's actually going to be harder for you to select them from a list of 10 because you have to judge and evaluate all of the resolution possibilities in relationship to all the other resolution possibilities, and there are going to be these much finer degrees of variation in their importance to you, and so you're going to get overwhelmed.

So that is what choice overload does. Choice overload means when you give yourself too many options, you don't do anything. This also happens with your to-do list. This is why I'm such a big proponent of scheduling shit on your calendar. When you look at a to-do list that has 15 items on it and you just have a day you're supposed to do some stuff, your brain gets choice overload.

It can't decide what to go, you get on Facebook for three hours, now you haven't done anything. Same thing can happen in choosing and executing your resolutions. In addition, having too many resolutions sets you up for decision fatigue.

So decision fatigue is the phenomenon humans display when they have to make a lot of decisions. As the series of decisions go on, our decision-making ability literally wears out, like it was a muscle, and we become more and more prone to irrational decision making.

Decision fatigue can have huge consequences. In fact, there have been studies that show that judges make worse and more irrational decisions the later it gets in the day because of the increasing number of decisions they have already had to make. A judge who sees lots of cases, has lots of motions, whatever a day, is in a job where he or she has to make decisions all day long. The later the day gets, the worse their decisions get.

When you make too many resolutions, each of those resolutions is going to require an implementation plan and it's going to require you to make

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different choices when taking action than you have in the past. If you try to do too many at once, you are setting yourself up for decision fatigue.

Whenever you try to change something, you're asking yourself to make new decisions that you haven't made before. Whatever old decisions you made created the habit or the result you have now, and if you want to change it, you're going to have to do new things. You have to make new decisions.

If you try to make one new decision a day, you are in pretty good shape. Because remember, the new decisions have to go on top of all the everyday decisions you already have, like what to wear and what to eat and what route to drive and who to talk to and all those things.

When you hear about people like Obama or Bill Gates reducing their wardrobe to just the same thing, I think Obama is famous for this. He has one suit and just 12 copies of it. Honestly, this is why they do it. It's one less thing to worry about.

I have a cousin who runs a very large corporation and he eats the same thing every day because it's one or three or four fewer decisions to make every day. This is why a lot of really successful people practice that constraint and eliminate some of their daily decisions for themselves so that they have the mental computing and decision power to make the big decisions that they really need to make that actually matter.

So when you try to change something, you're asking yourself to make new decisions you haven't made before. And so if you try to make one new decision a day, you probably can. If you try to make 20 new decisions a day, on top of all the decisions you already have to make, you're going to run out of steam.

If you choose one resolution, like take a walk once a day, you only need to make that one decision every day, on top of all your other decisions. If you

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try to resolve to take a walk every day, change your eating habits, meditate every day, go to bed at 10pm, eat six vegetables at every meal, journal for an hour a day, you have to make so many new decisions every day and you're going to experience decision fatigue before you even get out of the house in the morning.

That also means you're more vulnerable to making impulse choices later in the day. The more you use up your decision fatigue earlier in the day, the more you will make impulse choices later in the day that will conflict with your goals. Like ordering in, or opening the second bottle of wine, or turning on Netflix instead of going for a run.

So choice overload and decision fatigue both argue for making a very limited number of resolutions. One or two at the most. And focusing all your energy on those.

Constraint also allows you to make a much better plan for implementing that one resolution you've chosen. When you're trying to plan five resolutions, you're just going to do a very basic plan for each one without much detail.

Your plan is going to be like, eat three vegetables at every meal, go to yoga twice a week, that's it. That's your plan. When you only pick one resolution, you can really plan ahead. And it's amazing how much planning really needs to go into actually ensuring success with a new goal or accomplishment, even a small one.

And that's also sort of a good example of the way that when you are planning a resolution, you've practiced constraint in picking one, you are planning only one, you actually will have a better shot of achieving it if you practice constraint in the creation of that plan.

So what I mean by that is the more decisions you make ahead of time so that you reduce decision fatigue and don't give yourself options, the better

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chance you achieve the goal. Okay, you want to work out more, get more specific. How many times a week? Which days? What time of day? What are you going to do?

The more decisions you make ahead of time, the more constraints you place ahead of time on yourself, the more likely you are to actually accomplish your goal. It is much easier to go to yoga at 7pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays when you've already looked at your schedule, made all the accommodations you need to, you've created the thoughts you're going to think on purpose when it's time to go to get you going, you decided all that ahead of time.

When your resolution is just do more yoga, that is way too broad and confusing and vague. You're going to have choice overload every time you look at your schedule for the week. I could go on this day, but what about this, but if I want to go out to dinner on that night, then I should go on this day, and you will just not go.

And I'm sure many of you have done the thing where you put it on your calendar earlier in the week but you haven't really made it concrete for yourself, you haven't really committed to that. You've told yourself, "If that doesn't work, I could do it later." It gets pushed farther and farther in the week and then eventually it doesn't happen.

Constraint and making decisions ahead of time are the keys to avoiding that phenomenon. And then finally, there's a really important self-regard and self-love argument for practicing constraint in choosing goals or resolutions.

I think as women, we're encouraged to constantly be in a state of self-improvement. Society tells us daily all the things that are wrong with us, and it promises that if we just fix them, we will find that elusive self-confidence and happiness that we seek.

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If you ask the average woman to make a list of all the things that are wrong with her, she will happily oblige and it will be a really long list. I think constant self-evaluation and self-criticism is one of the ways that society teaches women to undervalue themselves, to undermine themselves, and to hold themselves back.

So much of resolution-making comes from this really self-critical place of thinking we need to change and improve so that we can be worthy. And there's a long list of things we have to change in order to reach that state of worthiness. It's never just one thing. Have you noticed that?

Your brain is never like, if you just do this one thing you're going to be totally worthy and love yourself. No, it's always like 10 to 20 things. Because as I've talked about on this podcast before, the idea that if you just change enough about yourself you will feel good about yourself is the lie of perfectionism.

Your care for yourself, your acceptance of yourself, your love for yourself, those all come from the thoughts you think. Not from changing and improving and hacking and optimizing yourself.

Choosing only one goal for a resolution, making one resolution has to come from a different place. Your thought can't be let me change all these things about myself so I can feel okay once I become perfect. That thought gives rise to 30 resolutions.

Picking one thing makes it more about accomplishing a goal. Achieving something hard that you didn't think you could do. It's not about fixing everything about yourself so you can be acceptable. It's about strategic goal setting to create something new in your life that you think would be exciting or valuable or important for you.

And yeah, you'll absolutely get to feel proud of yourself when you accomplish it and you should, but that is entirely different from making a

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dozen resolutions in the desperate hope that if you change everything about yourself, you can finally feel okay.

Practicing constraint means coming to terms with reality. Resolutions are often a way that we actually practice denial and magical thinking and passivity. It's ironic because resolutions seem like they're active. But so many of us make way too many of them, knowing that we rarely keep them. We give up before we've even started and we resign ourselves to another year of self-criticism and self-defeat.

When you practice constraint, you have to get real. You commit to making one thing happen, rather than being able to hide in the overwhelm and confusion of trying to change 10 things about yourself all at once, all the while secretly knowing it probably won't happen because it hasn't yet and you've been trying this for 30 years, or 40, or 50.

When you practice constraint and you pick one resolution, you have to confront yourself. You have to really learn what you want and why you don't have it yet. You have to strategically plan how you're going to get where you want to go.

This cycle of perfectionism and self-criticism and failure is such a comfortable place for so many of us. But it is an old, tired song. If you want to write a different tune, constraint is what will get you there. So pick one goal and give it your all. Take massive action until you succeed.

Now, massive action is such an important concept that I'm going to do a different podcast about it all on its own, but essentially it means taking action until your goal is met, no matter what. It doesn't matter what effort seems reasonable. It doesn't matter if you get bored or tired of it. It doesn't matter how many times your brain tells you that you're going to die.

You just keep taking action. The way you know you're done taking action is if you've accomplished your goal. If you haven't, you are not done. Massive

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action takes away all the guesswork, the negotiation, the back and forth over whether you can or should do it or how hard you should have to try or what's working or what's not.

It eliminates self-pity and indulgence and confusion. You take action and you keep taking action and you don't stop taking action until you have the result you want. That's what massive action is. And when you commit to massive action, you are actually creating mental freedom. This is what's so crazy.

The brain is such a liar. The brain says, oh my god, taking all those actions, that's so much pressure and constraint and I would have to do all those things, it's such a burden, it's such an obligation. It's the opposite. When you commit to massive action, you create mental freedom because there's no confusion. There's no negotiation with yourself.

There's no constant evaluation of whether you've accomplished the goal yet, or is it too hard, or should you give up, or is it fair, or anything else. If you are not where you want to be, you are not done, so you just take more action. That's it.

And ironically, it really relieves you of the pressure of getting the right strategy, of doing things the right way, because it doesn't matter because you are not allowing failure as an option. You will fail a lot of times as you try different strategies to get to where you want to go for sure, but you are never allowing not getting there as an option.

You have just committed, you're going to keep taking action until you get there. So it actually removes a lot of the pressure. It's like, this thing didn't work, well that's fine, I'll try the next thing. It creates so much mental freedom because it removes all of that indulgence, all of that confusion, all of the negotiation with yourself.

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When all of that is gone, you have so much more time. If you practice constraint and pick one goal, and then you practice massive action and you keep taking action until you achieve it, you will blow your own mind. And that is what feels truly amazing.

Blowing your own mind by doing something hard, even when your brain tries to kill you is the best feeling in the world. It is better than losing 10 pounds, it is better than losing 100 pounds. It is better than a gym habit, it is better than giving up sugar, it is far better than the thousand cuts of perfectionism and shame that pass for most people's New Year's resolutions.

So practice constraint. Pick one goal. Plan it out. And do it for the sake of learning something new, of growing, of becoming more the person you want to be in the ways that matter. Someone brave, someone who can do hard things, someone who knows how to manage her mind, to create what she wants in her life.

Those are the kinds of growth that matter, that produce real satisfaction and self-regard. Set one ambitious goal out of love for yourself and your dream and take massive action until it happens. You'll never be tempted to make another resolution again.

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.