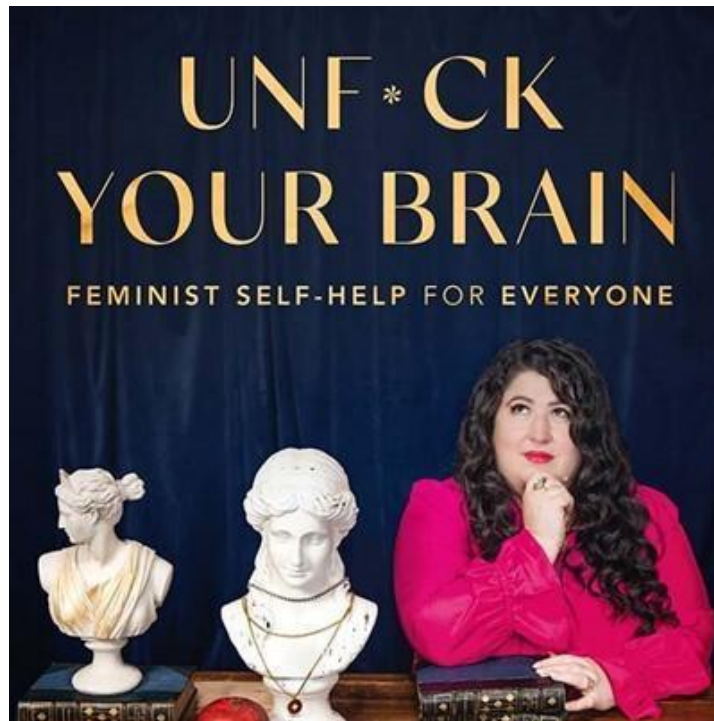


Brain Habits & How to Change Them (Turn Panic Into Peace Series #6)



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. So in this episode, I actually want to ask you to rewind your brain to before the pandemic. So we're going to do a little thought experiment. And I want you to think about what were you thinking about and worrying about before you heard of COVID-19 or the coronavirus or the pandemic or however it first came to your consciousness.

What were you thinking and worrying about? For some of you, it will be worries about money, for some of you, it will be worries about your job performance. For some of you, it's worries about your dating life. For some of you, it's worries about your parenting. It can be anything in the world.

So I want you to think about what that is. And now, I want you to think about what you're worried about in relation to the virus and all of the social and economic changes we're seeing. And I'm going to go ahead and bet you all - well, there's a lot of you, so I can't buy that many Cokes, but I'm going to bet you that what you are worried about now bears some striking resemblance to what you were worried about before.

And this is something that I have seen be true for me and for almost all of my students. Probably all of them. I just don't know what every single one of them is thinking about, is that of course there may be new thoughts coming up in relationship to COVID, but most of the time, what we are worried about now is what we were worried about before.

We're just hanging it on a new circumstance. I have coached so many of my students about this in The Clutch, which is my coaching community and

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program, and I'll coach someone about all of their fears about whether their income is going to go down, are they going to lose their clients, what's going to happen with the economy.

And when I ask, of course, it turns out that they were already worried about their income, they were already worried about losing clients, before they heard of COVID-19. And same thing for everything else. I will be coaching someone about how they are so stressed out because they were single and they were trying to date and now they can't date, so now it's going to be so long before they can find a partner and what were they thinking before the epidemic.

They were still stressing out about dating. They were thinking that it was taking too long and they didn't have enough time to find a partner, and there weren't enough people out there. It's all the same thing. And when you think about it, I'm going to explain to you why that is. It totally makes sense because our brains develop habits like anything else.

I've talked before in this mini-series and for sure on the general podcast about how the neurons that fire together wire together, which means when you think a certain thought, a lot of times, over and over throughout your life, it becomes like a mental habit. It's just like twirling your hair or biting your nails or how you do up your shoes.

It's anything that you do physically, we know that we get muscle memory in habits, and the same is true mentally. You just get used to thinking the same thoughts over and over again. And your brain really likes to be efficient and likes to believe it's right. It's very destabilizing to the brain to think it might be wrong about everything it knows.

So it likes to be right. So it just keeps thinking, your brain finds a thought and it's like, great, I'm going to keep thinking this thought. Even though it

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feels terrible to you, your brain doesn't really care. It just would rather be right and miserable, it wants to keep thinking the same thing even if it feels terrible, rather than admit it might be wrong.

So over time, your thoughts just become these really engrained mental habits, and that's why they can run so constantly and unconsciously. When something outside of you changes, that does not automatically change your whole brain.

If you put your body in a different house, you don't all of a sudden write with your other hand. It doesn't change that. It doesn't matter. You have the habit of writing with the hand you write with. That's your habit. Same with your brain. We can change what's in the newspapers to be about a virus or we can change whether you stay in instead of go outside to your job, we can change those external circumstances, but your brain is the same and it's worried about the same shit.

It's worried about the same things. If you were obsessed with worrying about your health before COVID, you're probably obsessed with it now. Conversely, if you were not someone who worried that much about your health but you worried a lot about your relationship with your partner, now you're worrying a lot about the impact of the pandemic on your relationship with your partner.

It's really not that different. So it's a fascinating experiment to look at, but it's been totally true for me and for my students as well. And here's why it's important. When everyone in the world is freaking out and there's so much news and stimulation and such an echo chamber that everything is terrible and the world's going to end, your brain kind of has an easier time convincing you that what it's saying is a whole new objective rational analysis that you need to listen to.

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If what your brain said was like, “Hey, I just always obsess about how I’m a bad parent and now I’m doing it now too,” that wouldn’t be convincing. But your brain is like, “Listen, everything has changed. It’s all different. I never said anything about you being a bad parent before, I’m sure, but now that we’re homeschooling our kids, I know for sure you’re a bad parent and here’s all the reasons why and it’s very true now.”

It’s like our brains are playing all the characters in one play and they just switch their costumes and their masks and they’re like, “Hi, I’m new, you’ve never met me before. Here’s a totally rational, objective thought that I’m telling you that’s 100% true and you have to believe.”

No. When you can see that, oh, my brain is recycling the same thoughts I used to have, it gives you a little bit of perspective to start to see like, just because I think something doesn’t mean it’s true. And just because you add COVID-19 to the thought doesn’t make it more true. So you have to have that perspective of oh, this is just my brain’s habit.

My brain is just feeding me the same thoughts it always has. It’s like tagging them with a new tag. Your brain is like, “Look, I gave this thought a makeover. Now it’s a COVID-19 thought and it’s totally true and you have to believe it because everybody else also has a lot of thoughts about it. So now things have changed and now I’m really objective.” That’s what your brain says.

It’s not true. Your brain has brain habits, it has mental habits. You are generally thinking very similar thoughts to what you used to think and worried about the same things. So it’s really useful to do an honest inventory for yourself and see, “Oh, let me look at what my worries and concerns are and my thoughts are about COVID and let me see how they’re similar to what my thoughts and worries and concerns were beforehand.”

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That doesn't mean we don't want to do some work on them. We can change them, but it's just so important to get that perspective and see, "Oh, I can work on these thoughts just like I could have before. These are not actually just an objective reaction to a changed world that I must therefore believe and follow."

The other thing to know is that all of us are subject to something called cognitive bias, which is where our brains, like I mentioned before, like to be right and so they only seek out evidence that agrees with what they already believe.

This is such an important thing to understand about your brain in any context, pandemic or no, because it sort of filters and shapes everything you see. So if you've ever seen those studies that are like, when you present people with evidence contrary to something they believe, they double down on their incorrect belief.

A lot of us have seen those studies about global warming. People who don't believe in global warming, if you show them evidence that scientists say global warming is happening and whatever else, it doesn't change their minds. They double down on their belief that it doesn't exist.

Now, it's easy for some of us to just kind of dismiss that and say like, oh, what's wrong with those people? They're stupid or whatever, but no, this is just how the brain works and your brain does it too. Do not get on a high horse. Maybe not about global warming, but about something else.

Think about something about yourself that you don't like, or something you have self-critical thoughts about. If someone gives you a compliment about it, do you just believe it or do you immediately look for a reason that it's not really true? "Oh, they're just trying to be nice, they have to say that, they

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just wanted to make me feel better, or they don't really know the truth, just the lighting was good, I just happened to get lucky.”

Same thing. That's cognitive bias. You have a negative thought about yourself, someone gives you a countervailing piece of evidence, they try to say something positive to you about it, you just find a way to dismiss it. That's cognitive bias at work.

And so when you are dealing with sort of very intense thoughts like some of us are having around the current situation, you have to understand how much cognitive bias is going to be working against you, unless you use it on purpose.

So your brain is just going to be doing the same shit it was always doing. It's going to be worrying about the same things, you're going to be looking for more evidence to support those worries, and then whatever thoughts that you are bringing to this new situation, your brain will just constantly be scanning for evidence of those. And given the news and social media, it's so easy to be in that echo chamber.

I find it so fascinating to think about the mental reality right now of the people who don't think COVID-19 is a big deal, aren't worried about it, aren't practicing social distancing, aren't doing anything.

Now, I'm not saying I want to be one of those people. I'm managing my mind to deal with negative emotion, but I do want to practice social distancing. I do believe in scientist predictions, but I think it's fascinating to imagine that because it just reminds me, it's all optional how we think about this.

The existence of the virus does not cause my thoughts and feelings because it exists and there are other people who know it exists, who have

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totally different thoughts than me. I have somebody in my life who I'm very close with who totally believes it exists and is practicing social distancing, all of that, but they just don't really have any anxiety about it because their thoughts are different.

Their thoughts are, here's the statistics and the numbers, I'm doing what I can, I'm probably going to be fine. Again, who knows? No one can know, but it is just fascinating to watch, oh, we believe the same things about the existence of it and even what we should all do now, but our emotional and mental reaction can be so different based on what we're thinking.

Again, that doesn't mean you should change your thoughts to not caring about it. It just is to show you that it is actually optional how you want to think and feel about it. And so the big question is is there a third way? Can I believe what I want to believe about the science and about how I want to handle this right now and how I want to participate in what we're being asked to do, can I do all that without the freaking out?

What kind of thoughts could I cultivate that would help me stay calm, stay centered, and take the actions I want to take from love instead of fear? And you have to understand that the cognitive bias that your brain always is using is going to make that so much harder for you if you are not aware of and controlling it.

This is one of the reasons that I recommend so much that you limit your news and social media. Yes, that is changing a circumstance. You could say like no, you should read it all and manage your mind the whole time. But you have other shit to do with your life.

And if you don't understand brain habits and cognitive bias and you just keep feeding your brain a constant stream of headlines and social media posts that seem to support what you already believe, your brain will literally

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filter out the good news and just keep looking for the bad news. So interesting.

I had someone post in The Clutch the other day, we have a Facebook group where people can post their self-coaching and get help with their coaching and discuss it, and she posted, “It’s so interesting when I see good news about the epidemic, like maybe the rate is slowing here or there’s this advance in the testing there, that my brain almost glitches and seems a little weirded out by it and doesn’t know what to do with it.”

And I was like yes, exactly. Because you’re looking for more evidence to confirm your belief. That’s what your brain is doing. Your brain likes to believe it’s right. So in a weird way, your brain actually gets off a little if it believes things are terrible and reading more news about how it’s terrible.

Your brain is like oh yeah, I’m right, look at that, I’m right again, feels so good to be right. That’s what your brain is doing. And your primitive brain right now really wants you to be in a state of constant panic because it thinks that’s going to help.

So it actually is in a weird way, it enjoys reading more information that proves that it’s right. That’s why part of the reason it’s so hard to stop reading the news and stop scrolling social media. And it can feel weird to look for evidence to the contrary and consciously absorb it and not just let your brain dismiss it.

But if you want to have a realistic perspective, like a true perspective of what's going on, you can’t just be allowing your brain to only absorb bad news, not question what your brain tells you, not correct for cognitive bias, not have that perspective that your brain is just doing its brain habits from before the pandemic.

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If you want to be able to manage your mental and emotional life and you just even want to have a more objective, balanced perspective, you have to be consciously intervening in the way that your brain is working. Not letting cognitive bias just run wild with you.

So I like to have my brain go to the opposite. So if my brain is like, “Everything is terrible, we’re all going to die, it’s over,” I’m like, I know that if I can go scroll social media and the news and I could find more evidence for that, I know that’s how my brain works, it will just look for that. What if I ask it to look for the contrary?

What if I say, “Brain, go find me some good news. Go find me some reasons for optimism. Go find me some positive possibilities that could come out of this.” You have to take control of the wheel and not let your brain just drive to the same destination over and over again.

So those are two ways to kind of get some perspective and intervene with your brain a little bit and to kind of get that perspective that okay, just because the outside world has changed doesn’t mean that actually now, I need to believe everything my brain says to me.

My brain is still my brain. It did not get a sudden makeover. It still has its old habits. It still has cognitive bias operating and I still need to be the captain of the ship and I need to make sure that I am evaluating what my brain says to me knowing this.

Your brain is like a biased witness. If you think about a courtroom TV drama, your brain is that witness who will change their story constantly whenever the prosecutor catches them out in a lie, just to keep saying the same thing. Like, “I saw him do it. Oh, I wasn’t there. I mean, I heard him do it. Oh, no one told me. I mean, I read it in the news.”

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Your brain will just keep doing that, so you have to be the one to step in and be like, listen brain, I hear you, thank you for trying to keep me safe, but your glasses are dusty, your vision is distorted. I'm going to take control here and I'm going to give you instructions for what I want you to go look for, what kind of evidence I want you to find, what kind of thoughts I want you to practice thinking, rather than just letting your brain's unconscious habits rule you.

You have to be the boss of your brain. Not the other way around. So that is it for today. I hope that those two habits are helpful and I promise you, if you work on those, you will see such results, whether or not you're worried about COVID-19, after the pandemic is over, these are two crucial things to understand about your brain that will give you so much more control over your mental and emotional experience at any time because it has nothing to do with what's happening outside of you. It is always to do with understanding how your brain works and how you can intervene to take control of it. I'll talk to y'all in a few days.

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