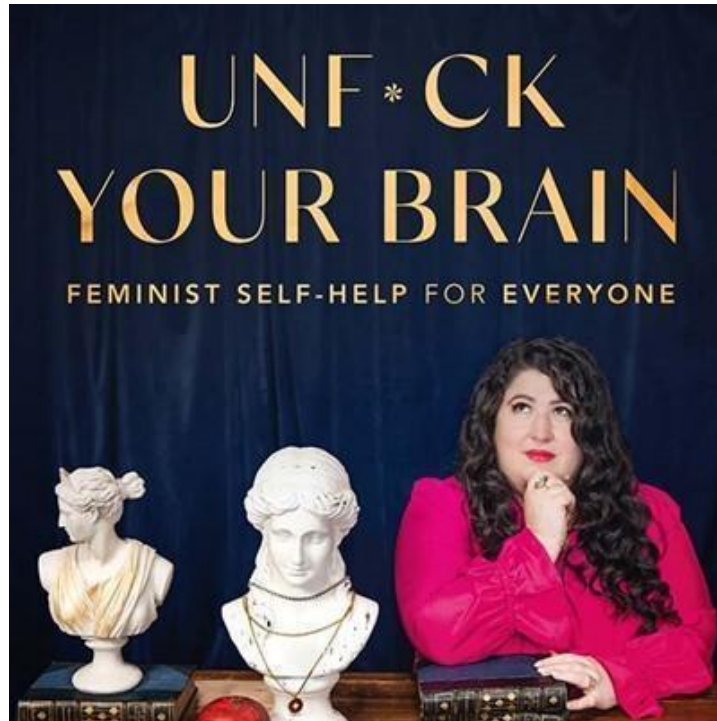


UFYB 98: Listener Q&A Vol. 14



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. Today we are having a kind of interactive podcast, except that I'm the only one talking. But I am going to answer a few listener questions and answers. I haven't done one of these on the public podcast for a long time. I say the public podcast because I do listener Q&As every week just for The Clutch members. So that's like, the private podcast. This is the public podcast. Okay, let's do some questions.

“Hi Kara, it's come to my attention that perhaps I become obsessive - unhealthy question, mentally, orthorexic? About doing this work. In addition to your podcast and taking two of your master classes, I'm also listening to Brooke Castillo's podcast, reading Byron Katie's *Loving What Is*, and taking a meditation class. Is there such a thing as working too much on managing your mind? I am prone to never feeling like I'm good enough and I don't want that to be what motivates me to work on myself.”

This is a great question and the answer to the question is actually already seeded in the there. And one of the reasons I picked this question is that it's such a perfect example of how we look too much at the action and not enough at the why.

So I can't tell by looking at the things you're doing, most of the time, the podcast, reading Byron Katie, taking a meditation class, just telling me that's what you're doing, I have no idea whether – well, it's never up to me whether it's a good thing, but I can't even tell sort of what your motivation is, what's behind it, how it feels to you.

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That's the A line. That's what we call it in the model that I teach my coaching clients and The Clutch. The A line is what your action is. And as humans, we all want to focus on the A line. We are always saying to ourselves well, I just don't know what to do because we have this bias that doing things, that action is what matters.

But what is really wild about the universe, the world as I now know is that it's almost never about your action. It's always about your thoughts. So for instance, eating food keeps us alive. It's an amazing thing. If you are doing it for that reason, it feels great. If you're doing it to punish yourself or to try to numb out from the world or because you feel compulsive, it doesn't feel great.

Same action. It can even be the same amount of food or the same type of food, but the feeling is totally different. And the same is true – or shopping or anything else. Even reading. Even sleeping. The same thing is true here. There's no way to know from your action line, from what you're doing, whether there's a problem or something to solve or something to work on. It's all about how it feels. What is that motivation?

If you are doing all this work to try to make yourself good enough to love, then that's never going to feel great and honestly, you're never going to really learn the work that well because you're always going to be hustling to try to get to that next point. But I certainly listen to more than one podcast and follow more than one teacher and read more than one book, and I do it because I love learning about my brain and I want to learn everything I can to teach to all my students who have day jobs and don't get to spend their day job reading about the brain.

I want to consume everything I can so I can digest it and feed it to all of you guys. It's like a gross baby bird example but you get what I'm saying. So there's no such thing as working too much at managing your mind in some objective sense that we can measure. You can be doing it all day in a way

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that feels amazing, or you can be doing it five minutes a day in a way that feels terrible.

That's really the question. Why are you doing it? If you are hustling for your own worthiness, as Brené Brown says, she's using it in terms of self-work but that's her phrase. If you're hustling for your worthiness, if you're doing that, then yeah, I would stop and look at why and do some work on those thoughts. But you can't tell – it's not a volume thing. You can't tell by volume. It all has to do with the what's the thought driving the action. How does it feel?

Alright, next question. I have to tell you guys, I had such deja vu about this question. It was weird. I went back and checked and it does not appear that I've answered it before, but I don't know, the universe is trying to tell me something. Okay, and not deja vu in that I did the same thing. I just mean this question, maybe it's come up more than once. Maybe it's a common thing.

Okay, "Hi Kara, about nine months ago I cheated on my husband. I was angry and emotionally withdrawn and told him I didn't want to be with him. It took a month of working things out before I started to realize how much I really hate what I did and regret it. I love my husband and I want to have a life-long healthy relationship where both of us feel genuinely happy.

He's extremely depressed and angry and tells me often that he doesn't want to get help because he's waiting for me to make him feel better. Even though I've spent the last eight months doing everything I possibly can to prove to him that I'm sorry for what I did and that I regret it, including doing my best to always put him before myself and our toddler.

I know that I have a lot of work to do when it comes to managing my own mind because when he's upset, I fall right back into being so paralyzed by self-hatred that I won't do anything except cry. He gets mad at me at least

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twice a week because he'll have a bad thought and then blame me for not making him snap out of it.

But even when I do everything I can, nothing works. I don't talk to him about how I feel. I feel like it's pointless because he usually just gets frustrated when I express myself and tells me that this is all my fault. I know that isn't true since I don't control his thoughts or feelings, but it's hard for me to believe it when I feel so guilty for what I did. I do feel like it's my fault and I don't know how to forgive myself."

Okay, so these are all thoughts, my love. None of these are feelings. It's my fault is a thought. Guilty is a feeling, but I feel like it's my fault, not a feeling. It's a thought, and that's important because we can't just order our feeling to change but we can change a thought.

So here's your problem. Your husband doesn't want to be happy and you want him to be. You say I want to have a life-long healthy relationship where both of us feel genuinely happy. That is not up to you. No matter who you're with, whether you cheat or not, that's not up to you. You're not in charge of whether or not someone else feels happy. Genuinely or otherwise.

You are only in charge of yourself and whether you're going to be happy. And right now, you, I think, are thinking that you are not allowed to be happy unless he is. So you're waiting on him, and then you're trying to sacrifice yourself and prove yourself to him, which you will never be able to do because your behavior doesn't change his thoughts.

And obviously for some people, having sex with someone else outside the relationship can be an event that brings up a lot of thoughts and feelings, but I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that your husband had some of these tendencies before this happened. I don't believe that people's personalities fundamentally drastically change based on events like that.

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So I think more likely, this is kind of how your husband has always been. And now because of the cheating, you're taking responsibility for it, even though it's not any more under your control now than it was before. So you cannot control if he's genuinely happy.

You say very explicitly that you understand that you can't make him feel better, but I don't think that's true and it's important to stop lying to yourself about that. I think you think you can. You're trying to atone with your actions by putting him before yourself and before your toddler, as if that's going to do anything.

Your only problem here is your self-hatred. It's your self-loathing, it's your thoughts. That's why you take his so seriously. The only reason that you are so susceptible to his thoughts and feelings in the sense of the only reason you react to them so much is because you share them. You agree with him that you fucked it all up and that you're the reason he feels the way he does. So that is your work.

You say I don't know how to – it's hard for me to believe when I feel so guilty for what I did. You have this backwards. You feel guilty because you believe you did this bad thing and it has these bad outcomes. So that's what you have to work on. You can't keep your thought that you did a bad thing that caused this problem and then be like, but I don't control it.

You think you did. So this is really what I want you to think about. Did you know that there are some people, that when someone cheats on them, they're just not that worked up about it? Or they forgive them immediately, or they're willing to go to therapy, or whatever else. I'm not saying that's better or worse, but I'm just saying that cheating does not cause this feeling. His thoughts about it do.

And like I said, I suspect that he was a little bit like this even beforehand. So you have to really disconnect the action you took from all of his thoughts

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and feelings and you have to work on forgiving yourself. You are making this mean something about yourself as a person and because you think you did something bad, then you are taking responsibility for his feelings. Then you're finding fault and blame.

So when you say I don't know how to forgive myself, this is one of those places where I think we tell a story about our emotions that makes them opaque to us and impossible to work on. I'm always lovingly yelling at my Clutch students not to tell a story about their thoughts and feelings.

When you say I don't know how to forgive myself, you just completely mystify it for yourself. It's like that's it, I don't know how to do it. Forgiving myself is some big abstract concept. Well, now we're out of luck. What you need to do is get really specific about the thoughts you're thinking like I fucked up, this is my fault, I'm a terrible person, whatever it is you're thinking. And then you need to practice different thoughts that are slightly more compassionate towards yourself.

That's how you forgive yourself. It's not magical or mystical. There's no flash of insight that's coming that's going to do it. You literally have to change the thoughts you're thinking about yourself and your actions. And that part is applicable to all of you, whether you have anything to forgive yourself for or not.

The more that you talk about your thoughts and feelings in this abstract story way, the harder it is to change them. People always come in to work with me and they're like, well I want to work on my self-worth in general. I'm like, absolutely not. We're not doing that. It's impossible to do that. I mean, it's not impossible.

We can practice general self-worth thoughts but it's so much more effective to get really specific and work on when's the last time – how many times yesterday did you feel bad about yourself and what were the exact

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thoughts you were having in those specific situations? That's how we work on it.

So I don't know how to forgive myself, I don't know how to love myself, I don't know how to change myself, I don't know how to be a motivated person, all of these stories as if we tell ourselves, the way we describe our emotions in this abstract sense is totally counterproductive and it just makes it all confusing to yourself.

So the way you forgive yourself is you write down all the very specific mean thoughts you have about yourself and then you look at them and ask, if this was a friend that I loved unconditionally, what would I tell her? What are some slightly more compassionate thoughts I could be thinking? And you practice those thoughts over and over again.

And you live with someone who shares your negative thoughts about you so you're going to have to practice a lot. And that's okay. That's your work. You're on your journey and he's on his. But you cannot be in charge of whether or not the relationship is healthy or whether you're both happy. You can only be in charge of what you think about the relationship and of your own happiness.

Alright, last question, I think. "Hi Kara, any tips for how to combat anxiety and repetitive/useless thoughts that wake you up at 3am? I find I am in such a confused state at that time and I have so much trouble switching it off. I would love to have a simple thought or basic skill to manage these thoughts and be able to quickly go the F back to sleep. Your work is amazing and life-changing. I am so glad I found you."

I'm glad you found me too. Alright, so this is like a couple part thing. The first thing is the more you manage your mind during the day, the less you will wake up in the middle of the night. At night, your brain is processing all of your experiences and thoughts from during the day and if you spend

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your day thinking a lot of anxiety-producing thoughts and believing that you have all these problems that you can't solve, you're much more likely to wake up in the middle of the night still thinking about them.

So it's like I wake up running a marathon, how do I not be tired? You got to train for the marathon while you're awake. So that's number one. You got to practice doing that. Number two, now sometimes, you still will wake up like that. For some people, it's a hormonal issue or a blood sugar issue, there can be other things that wake you up in the middle of the night.

And for some people, just waking up in the middle of the night – their brain is like, what's happening? So I'm not saying that working on it during the day, always 100% resolves this, although what I've seen with my clients is it makes a big difference. But you also got to work on it while you're doing that, what happens when you wake up.

So the whole problem here is you want to be able to quickly go back to sleep, which means you don't want this to be happening. So as soon as you are resisting it – you wake up and then you just start thinking I need to go to sleep. And you create agitation and anxiety around being awake and that is the worst thing you can do.

So just like anything else in your life, you have to practice it being okay that you're awake. Whatever your thoughts are, you need to have thoughts that you practice ahead of time and in the moment about why it's okay that you're awake, as opposed to the usual like, I have to go to sleep, I have so much to do, and blah, blah, blah.

You need to practice whatever thoughts will work for you like it's okay that I'm awake right now, I can totally get through a day on a little bit less sleep, it's not a big deal, lying here resting is still restorative, even if I'm not asleep. You got to figure out what thoughts you can practice.

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The other thing you can do that's little more of a tool is for some people it works when they wake up like that to have a notepad and pen by the bed, just download all their thoughts, like write it all down, and then be like great. Tell your brain like great, I have those written down, I'm going to deal with them tomorrow morning. So for some people that helps too.

So you got to practice during the day managing your mind in general and practicing thoughts ahead of time about what you want to think if you wake up in the middle of the night. When you wake up, you need to practice accepting that it's there, not catastrophizing about the lack of sleep and practicing thoughts that calm you down.

And you can try getting all the thoughts out of your brain. I know some of my clients do the coaching model we use in the middle of the night sometimes, just to solve the thought and go back to sleep. You can also just download it all on to paper and then be like okay brain, I'm going to deal with that in the morning. So it's practice, acceptance, and then some action can help. That's kind of the rule for everything. Practice, acceptance, action.

Alright, one more question actually. I know I had another one somewhere. Here we go. "Hi Kara, from episode 18, I understand the thought ladder concept. I've tried to think up like you advise so I've been practicing thoughts maybe two to five times a day by just thinking the phrases I wrote down, checking I believe them, and then having a think about them and why they are true.

Throughout the day, I try to remind myself about the new thoughts as much as possible. I've been doing this for about a month now, but in the heat of the moment, I find I just go back to old thoughts and have the same reactions. For me, this is social anxiety. So as soon as I'm in a situation where I'm nervous, all the same things happen as always and I have no idea how to tackle them.

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I remember the thoughts I should be thinking and I do remind myself of confirmation bias, but my other thoughts are much stronger once any strong emotion arises. Should I be just trying to think my new thoughts even more often or am I missing something? I love you by the way.”

I love you too. Okay, so there’s two parts to this answer. The first one is as a former lawyer, there’s never just one answer. Okay, you have this backwards. My other thoughts are much stronger once any strong emotion arises. It’s important not to misunderstand how this works because you tell yourself a story about what’s happening that then becomes true.

Your thoughts create your feelings. You having a strong emotion does not make your thoughts stronger. It’s the other way around. You have your old thoughts and they create the emotion. That’s all that’s happening. So without knowing your exact thoughts, I can’t say specifically in the sense that it’s possible that you’re not yet really aware of the actual thoughts you’re having when you have this reaction and so the thoughts you’re practicing aren’t really connecting to it or aren’t really directed at it.

That’s possible, but also this just takes practice. It’s normal. So the way that I think about it is when you first start working on something, you’re not even aware of when you lose your mind and you can only look at it and see it afterwards. Then there’s a stage of the process where you are aware while you’re losing your mind that you’re losing your mind, but you can’t stop it. I think that’s where you are.

Then there’s a stage where you become aware that you’re losing your mind halfway through the experience and you can kind of right the ship with a lot of effort. Then there’s a stage where you just stop losing your mind. I think you’re in stage two, which is that you are aware while it’s happening and you can’t yet change it.

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And you think that means something's gone wrong, but nothing's gone wrong. That's just a normal phase. Your old thoughts you've thought a million times. That neural network is really strong and that circuit is really habitual. You are now trying to create new thoughts.

So it is going to take practice. Now, the more you practice, the better, but I'm not saying two to five isn't enough because there's really no such thing. It's just a matter of how long it's going to take for them to kick in. If you practice a thought 20 times a day often, it's going to be a shorter period of time before it becomes natural than if you do it two to five times a day.

That doesn't mean two to five times a day is wrong or bad. It just means it's going to take longer. But the important thing is just to understand that this is going to happen and nothing's gone wrong. And prepare for it. Don't go into social situations thinking I hope this is the time it magically is all better.

It's like, if you were lifting weights, you wouldn't be like, well I've lifted weights a few times, now I'm ready to bench press 300 or whatever. It would be like, each time it's a little bit better maybe, but you have to be willing to have the experience you're going to have. So when you go into a social situation, you want to be thinking alright, I'm probably going to have those thoughts and feelings and I'm excited to practice my new thoughts and be 1% less anxious.

Rather than expecting that somehow you're supposed to not be anxious now that you've been thinking those thoughts. I also want you to be careful that you are not telling yourself that external things have anything to do with this because you said as soon as I'm in a situation where I'm nervous, all the same things happen as always and I have no idea how to tackle them.

Nothing is happening that you need to tackle. It's all just thoughts. It doesn't matter what's happening outside of you and there's nothing to tackle.

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That's the action again. Remember from the first question. It's all just your thoughts.

So you just want to be practicing your thoughts and understanding that progress is going to be bit by bit. It is not going to be like, well I practiced for a month and now I have no more social anxiety. And yeah, the more you practice often, the quicker those new networks come together but you have to be willing to have your current experience for as long as it takes and not expect magical resolution overnight. That's true for anything you're practicing on.

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