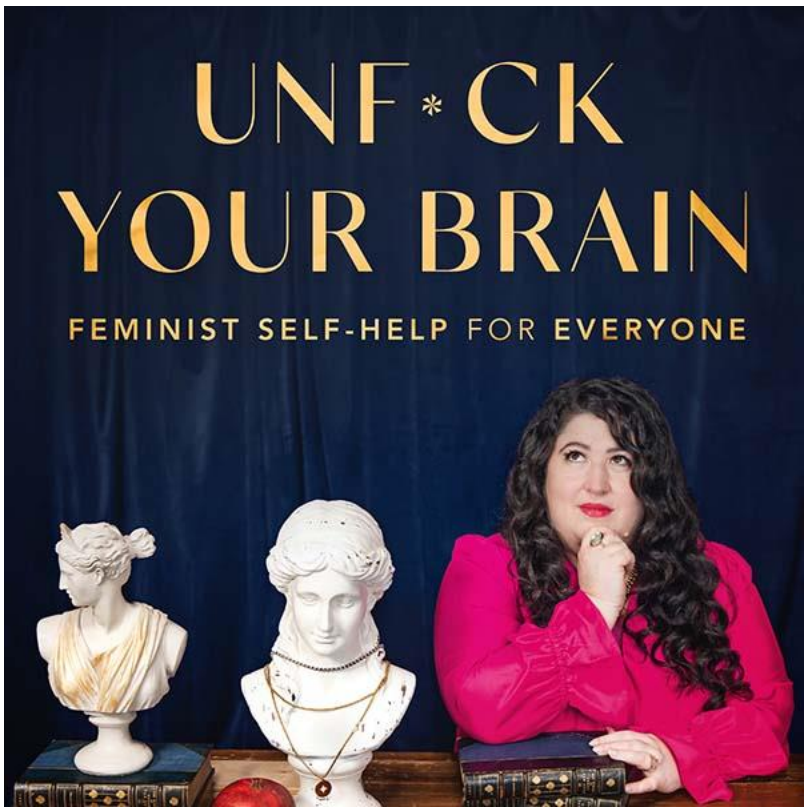
UFYB 368: How to Stop Avoiding Your Problems



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil

UFYB 368: How to Stop Avoiding Your Problems

Alright, buckle up you all, because I have a wild story for you today about problem avoidance and how it makes things ten times worse. And this is a story ripped straight from the headlines of my life. I was not the person avoiding the problem in this scenario. I was the person asking for resolution but the other person's levels of avoidance made their life so much worse and it was like watching a train wreck happen. So is such a powerful example of why it's crucial to deal with your problems.

So today in this episode I'm going to share this story. I'm going to explain what's happening in our brains when we try to avoid our problems, and I'm going to talk about how you can start facing your problems head on, so let's get into it.

Welcome to *UnF*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and Founder of the *School of New Feminist Thought*. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence and create a life on your own terms, one that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Alright, you all, let's start with story time. So, I'm being vague about the details because I'm not trying to put these people specifically on blast. I just want to talk about it as an example of how problem avoidance makes problems so much worse. So, a few years ago, I worked with a company for some professional services, and that company turned out to be not doing a very good job. And so, about a year ago I transitioned out of working with them and I had to hire someone else to try to fix the mistakes and recoup some of the money we had lost because of those mistakes.

And so, we did that. I got through it. I coached myself. I was ready to move on. Six months ago, I discovered I had incurred an additional financial cost I hadn't been aware of. And in this case it was this incredibly specific, obvious clear mistake that there was no misunderstanding that could even have happened, it was just not doing it. So, I reached out to the owner and

I asked him to cover the cost. And I sent them a list of all the mistakes that their team had made and the cost to me. And I said, “I’m only asking for coverage of this one most recent cost, and if you cover that, I will let the rest go.”

And just to put in context, this was not a huge amount of money involved at all, it was overall, not for this one last mistake I was asking for help with. But at that point, it just was the last straw for me in terms of having been the one to absorb the negative impact and pay for all these mistakes and pay for someone to fix them and coach myself. And this mistake was so egregious and basic that there was no possible excuse for having made it. And I was just like, “You know what, enough’s enough. I think they should contribute to solving this problem.” So, I sent this email.

The owner ignored me for two months. I could see that they had opened it because you can track that in some email providers but they never responded. So, I followed up. The owner ignored me again for another month or so. Then I followed up again and said, “Listen, if I don’t hear back in a week, you’re going to hear from my lawyers. I’m going to have to pursue legal action.” So, then the owner responded and said they would get back to me that week. And I invite you to guess whether or not they got back to me. They did not.

So, I did contact my lawyers and in the course of putting together what’s called a demand letter, it’s a letter that says, “Hey, here’s all the ways that you didn’t do what we agreed to or all the mistakes you made and here’s what it costs.” We ended up uncovering and listing additional mistakes and costs. And so, we sent that to the company and they ignored it and we followed up multiple times. And eventually we heard from the company’s malpractice insurance representative. And so, we shared the whole list of mistakes with them, with the insurance company.

And then the insurance company started trying to get sign-off from the owner for the settlement. And the owner kept avoiding the insurance company too. So, we would hear from the insurance agent, who was very sympathetic to our claim surprisingly and approved them all because they were so obviously correct, that they couldn't get a hold of the owner and they couldn't get in touch with the owner. And so, they couldn't finalize the settlement because the owner would not respond to them.

And the longer the owner avoided, the more mistakes we found, so we just kept emailing the insurance agent and adding to the list. And eventually we ended up with a full settlement for eight times what I had originally asked for, that is 800% of my original ask. The first ask had been fairly nominal for a business owner, but the final settlement was significant. If the owner of the company had just paid the first ask, which I was so entitled to, dead to rights, extremely clear and proved error on their part below professional standard of care, really no argument to make on that one.

All of this would have gone away for that small initial amount, but instead because they avoided and avoided and avoided, the problem got bigger and bigger and bigger for them, and the costs got astronomically bigger as well. And their insurance company may be covering some of it. I don't know how they're deductible or their plan works or whatever. But they're going to have to pay part of it, at least that I'm sure is bigger than my initial ask. And plus, now their premiums are going to increase or they may even get dropped from their insurance altogether for being so unresponsive and expensive.

And imagine the mental and emotional stress that they have created for themselves with all of this avoidance, just months and months of burying their head in the sand and wanting it to all go away and instead it just got worse and worse and worse.

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Okay, so why am I telling you all this? Because we all do this. We all avoid problems in our lives and hope they will just go away. We all tell ourselves we will respond to that anxiety producing work email later or we will bring up that tension with our partner next week or we will address our kids' bad habit after the school year ends. We all tell ourselves that next year, we're going to stop smoking or start lifting weights or finally clean out the basement chaos or finally get our finances in order.

We know intellectually that the problem will not go away and will probably get worse, which is exactly what happened in my story. So why do we do this? We do it because of the feeling we have when we imagine dealing with a problem or when we make any attempt to start dealing with it. So why do we avoid the email from an upset client or colleague in our inbox? Because when we read it, we feel ashamed, when we imagine responding and them reading our response, we feel anxious. We don't know what to do to make the feeling go away, so we just avoid it.

Why do we avoid trying to help our kid change that bad habit? Because we feel overwhelmed when we think about all the work it's going to take, all the reminders. Or we feel anxious because we think we don't know what to even do to get them to change it or we don't want to experience the conflict around it. Or we feel ashamed because we think that the existence of the habit means something bad about us as a parent. We avoid things not because of the thing itself but because of our feeling about the thing. Either the feeling we have now when we think about it or the feeling we anticipate would occur when we start trying to address it.

It seems common sense to assume that we want to solve our problems, because solving them would feel good. And so, then we're even more perplexed about why we aren't solving them and we usually assume it's because there's something wrong with us. Obviously it would make sense to get my finances in order. And so, if I'm not doing it, I either blame it on the circumstance, I'm just so busy, I just don't have time. Or I personalize it,

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I blame myself. I'm just like, "I don't have enough willpower and I don't have enough discipline, and I can't get my shit together." But neither of those is the case.

We don't solve our problems because while the fantasy of the solved problem feels good, solving a problem feels bad while it's happening. I'm going to say that again. It seems to make sense that we would want to solve our problems because we imagine when the solution happens we'll feel good. So, it seems mysterious that we're not solving them and we just tell ourselves we just have to get around to it or have to be better or whatever. But actually, our brain does not want to solve our problems because the actual solving of a problem generally feels bad while it's happening.

The whole reason we have the problem is that we're avoiding a feeling we don't want to have. So, if we try to solve the problem, we're going to have to have that feeling and we don't want to do that. For example, if you have the problem of drinking wine every evening, because you're stressed from work and you want to stop because you're not sleeping well and you know it's not good for your long term health and whatever else. The reason you're avoiding this problem is that you anticipate how it will feel to come home and not drink.

The negative emotion you anticipate feeling is more powerful than the positive outcome you envision because humans have a negativity bias. We anticipate and remember bad feelings and experiences more than good ones. And when we're trying to solve a problem, that good feeling is far in the future. But the bad feeling that we have as soon as we try to deal with it is right up close to our face. So, we are trying to get our brains to go straight into a bad feeling with a promise that it'll feel better later. And our brains are generally like, "Thank you, no."

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Solving the problem often entails encountering with an experience and coaching ourselves through that feeling we are trying to avoid. So, solving the problem actually does not feel good a lot of the time, and that's why we're avoiding it. So, the first step is to start to get awareness of why you're avoiding your specific problems and how to move forward. And I'm going to share that right after this quick break.

Okay, so how do you start to get more insight into why you're avoiding your specific problem? The first question to ask yourself is, what am I avoiding right now in my life? You may have a whole list, that's fine. Write them all down. This may seem an obvious step, but actually we usually are kind of avoiding even knowing that we have a problem we're avoiding. We sort of know, but we don't really want to know. Some of us are very aware of what we're avoiding, but some people were trained as kids to repress any negative emotions or to ignore anything that wasn't perfect about life.

So, some of us may not even really know what we are avoiding or that we're avoiding anything. So, you want to take some time to really think about it. What are the people, circumstances or problems in my life that I am avoiding or delaying dealing with? This is a non-exhaustive list of some indicators. I'm not saying all problems fall into one of these categories, but looking at these areas can be a good way to spot problems.

First, anything you're procrastinating is a good clue. Anything you put on a list and you never get to, you keep moving it back. Any email or text you keep telling yourself you'll respond to, but you don't. Anything you think about solving, then tell yourself you're too busy, you'll deal with it later. Any project you keep putting off and putting off. Also, anything that bothers you that you've told yourself you cannot do anything about and you just have to 'deal with'. This can actually be a form of avoidance.

You tell yourself that you just have to deal with your ex-spouse calling you all the time when you don't want them to because you're avoiding dealing

with the interaction that you don't want to have where you ask them to text or email instead. Now, once you know the problem, you need to ask yourself, what feeling do I associate with this problem? This is a two-part question and you have to make sure you do this separately for each problem you're avoiding.

So, if you listed more than one problem then I want you to ask part one and part two of the next question for each problem separately. So, part one is, what feeling do I associate with having the problem? And part two is, what feeling do I associate with solving the problem? Be careful, I'm not asking what feeling you associate with the fantasy of how you will feel once it's solved.

The question is, what feeling do you associate with the process of actually solving it, of working on it, of figuring it out, taking the necessary actions? What is the emotion you experience when you think about what you would have to do to solve the problem? Once you've answered these questions, you know what you're avoiding and why. And starting with those feelings, you can work backwards to figure out the thoughts that are creating them.

For instance, maybe you're avoiding feedback on that work proposal because your thought is, there's going to be so much to do to incorporate the feedback, and I don't have time to deal with it. And that's what's creating your feeling of overwhelm that leads to avoiding the email. Or maybe you're avoiding dealing with the nightly bottle of wine because your thought is, if I don't drink, I'm going to feel stressed and I'll be craving it all night.

And that thought is creating this feeling of anxiety about what it would look like to not drink. Once you've identified the thought and feeling driving your avoidance, you probably think I'm going to say that the next step is changing your thought. Yes and no. There's actually another step I think is helpful first and that's why I told the story I shared in the beginning of this

episode. Part of the problem with avoidance is that our brain over-weights the immediate pain and underweights the long term pain.

So, your brain is overvaluing not experiencing the immediate negative emotion that dealing with the problem would create and it's undervaluing the impact of the problem building up over time. So now that we've identified the short term discomfort you're going to have to experience, that emotion that you associate with solving the problem. It can be useful to identify the long term discomfort that you're inviting with your avoidance.

So, you can ask yourself, what are the long term consequences of continuing to ignore this problem and how will they feel when they happen? This is almost like hacking your brain's catastrophizing abilities to serve you, by using them to conjure up an emotion you don't want to have to feel in the future. It feels bad to read an email asking you to pay a small amount for a mistake your company made as in my earlier example, yes.

But if you stop and consider what it will feel like to read an email from your insurance company that you have to pay eight times that amount and they're firing you as a client. You can see that that will obviously feel much worse. This is not about shaming yourself, obviously, that's never helpful. It's about getting your brain to focus on what the problem will feel like if you don't solve it longer term.

Normally, as you all know, I do not recommend catastrophizing, that's because normally when we do it, we're not in control of it. We're not doing it consciously in a scenario where we know how to prevent and solve for that outcome. So, it's like a substance where we normally take a totally overwhelming poisonous dose and I'm just recommending a small controlled dose, like a medication. This can be useful because when you are avoiding a problem, your brain is living in a fantasy world where there's this option of just not ever having to feel bad.

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That's the fantasy of avoidance, that dealing with it would feel bad, so let's just avoid it and we won't ever have to feel bad. Magic. But that's an illusion. The choice is actually feel a little bad now or feel a lot bad later. And playing out the consequences of your avoidance and what that will create in your life puts the choice in a better context for your brain. It removes the illusion that you have this third choice of just never dealing with it at all and never having to be uncomfortable.

You do have to get uncomfortable to solve a problem. There's no way around that, And so really, framing it more as, do I want to be a little bit uncomfortable now and solve it and never have to worry about it again? Or do I want to be really uncomfortable in the future when I have avoided it until it blows up? Those are your two real options. The good news is, solving the problem doesn't have to feel as bad as your brain imagines it will.

This is the last and crucial point that will help you stop avoiding problems. Your brain imagines what dealing with the problem will feel like with your current thoughts and feelings. In other words, with a basically unmanaged mind on this topic, but that's not actually how you have to deal with the problem. You can choose to change the thoughts you have about the problem. You can decide what to think about getting the feedback on that project and finding a lot of changes in it.

You can decide to change the way you're thinking about your stressors. You can decide what to believe about a night without drinking and what that will feel like, or why those feelings are bad. You can decide to change your thoughts about your own capacity to handle challenging things. You can decide to believe that you are someone who solves problems, but I guarantee, if you're still alive on this Earth, you are. You can decide to believe whatever will make the current discomfort feel bearable and the future discomfort feel worth solving.

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If you want to learn how to do this in depth, today is your lucky day because we're doing our first ever Brain Friday sale. It's like Black Friday, but actually useful, and for your brain. So today through Saturday only for three days we have two special deals, one is for people who have never been in *The Clutch* or the *Feminist Self-Help Society*. And one is for alums of those programs.

So, if you've never worked with me in either of those programs, we have an awesome Brain Friday deal for you. We're offering a standalone self-study course on exactly how to change your thoughts to make them more positive, empowering and resilient. So, you can decide how to think about solving this problem, whatever problem you're working on. It's called How to Coach Yourself, the Feminist Mindset Fix. And this will teach you the exact process that I usually only teach inside my membership programs.

You'll learn how to become aware of your subconscious thoughts that are driving your behavior without you knowing what's driving this problem avoidance. You will learn how to handle uncomfortable feelings like a boss so that you can solve the problem. And you will learn how to change your thoughts so you can see the solution to any problem in your life. This mini course is self-paced, we have audios, we have workbooks and we're including a bonus of video recordings of the last time I taught this material live. So however, you prefer to learn, we've got you and it is all only $49. I told you it was a ridiculous steal.

You can get access to this one time mini course offer by going to unfuckyourbrain.com/brainfriday, all one word unfuckyourbrain.com/brainfriday or text your email to +1347 997-1784 and the code word is Friday. But this mini course is only available until and through November 17th and then it goes back in the vault. Now, if you are an alum of the *Society* or *The Clutch*, check your email because we have a really special offer just for you all to welcome you back with an incredible bonus. But that's a secret just for alums, so check your email.

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Alright, my friends, let's get our brains in order before the end of the year. It's not too late to make massive progress in the way you think and feel. And I can promise you now that any problems you solve in 2024, you will be so happy to not be dealing with in 2025.

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. 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.