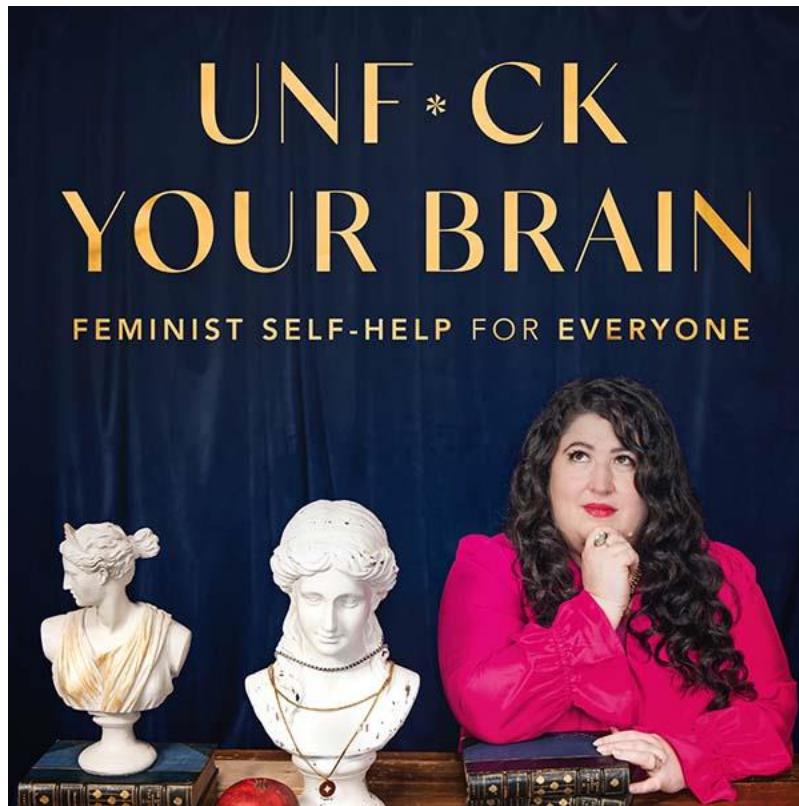


UFYB 370: How to Handle Disagreement Better



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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In general, I live my life by the most important adage of the internet age, which is, never read the comments. I don't find that arguing on the internet is a very useful way to spend my time. But the other day, someone left a comment on one of my Instagram posts, and we kind of got into it and had a bit of a back and forth, and it was really fascinating to watch how it unfolded. And it made me realize something really profound about how we process disagreement that I think will be so, so helpful for all of you.

So, in this episode, I'm going to share what I think is a really transformative lens for conflict and disagreement, and surprising me more than anyone else, I learned it from the comments on the internet. So just goes to show the exception proves the rule. Alright, 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.

Okay, so how did I end up writing a whole podcast based on a comment on the internet? Here is what happened. If you follow me on social media, you know that I shared a lot of free teaching and resources around election anxiety and despair and of course, I shared a lot of it here on the podcast too. And then the week after the election, we shared something on my Instagram about an upcoming offer. It was about the Brain Friday sale that we did last week.

And someone in the comments got very mad that we were talking about a paid offer in the context of election stress, which I have a lot of compassion for, people were feeling really activated about the election. And when you feel activated, you want a place to put your fear and anger, and it feels more powerful when you can kind of turn it on someone closer to you as opposed to a big system or someone in politics who you can't impact.

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And it's pretty natural, unfortunately, that because of that, we turn it on people close to us. Maybe your kids, maybe it's your spouse or partner, or maybe it's someone you follow with whom you have a one-sided but emotionally intimate relationship. I don't like the term parasocial, that's often used for these kinds of relationships because it sounds like parasite to me. And that's not how I think of my followers and my listeners. To me our relationship is real.

My relationship with each of you is real but obviously, there's an asymmetry to our relationship because you know my name and my face, and you listen to my voice. And you've created a relationship with me based on your thoughts and feelings about me as an individual. And you may have been having this relationship with me, which for some of you is very meaningful for years. Whereas, for most of you, I don't know you individually and my relationship with you is meaningful to me, but it's more collective and more abstract.

And it kind of crucially hasn't built through time in my mind in a way where I have specific expectations of you as an individual and what you should or shouldn't think or feel or do. So, all that is to say I was not upset by this person's comment. I know how to manage my mind, of course. And if I took angry or rude comments on the internet to heart, I would never be able to have the career I have. And it's not super uncommon for someone when they are triggered to tell me that they have followed me for years and they love my work, but my actions cause their feelings, and I need to change my actions so they can feel better.

And listen, I get it. I know my thoughts cause my feelings and yet I still sometimes believe that my husband should act differently to make me feel better. I too have a human brain. So, all of that is totally fine. But here's where it got super interesting for me, and I think has a lot of potential to be helpful for you. So, this person left the comment, they expressed their

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anger, they expressed their opinion about why I should not have made this post.

And I responded and I laid out a couple of points about why I had done it and why I felt in alignment and in integrity in doing so because I wanted to take the comment seriously. And so, I talked about how I've worked in the space of teaching women how to feel strong in the face of misogynistic society for years. So, women's reaction to what was happening in the election is exactly where I help people. It's what I'm an expert in. And I talked about all the free resources I was offering to help as well and about how we all live in a capitalistic society.

And I have a responsibility to support my eight employees and their families who depend on their salaries as does my family. So, I can't just stop operating my business whenever something upsetting happens. Details of the response are not super important. I'm not going to go through the whole thing. What really matters here is that I gave her a really straightforward response. I listed four different points. She had shared her thoughts with me as a follower of mine for a long time. And I wanted to give her the respect of an honest response with my own thoughts about me.

Someone shared their thoughts about me with me and I wanted to respond with my thoughts about me. So, this is where it gets really fascinating to me. Her response to all this was to double down and get even angrier and specifically, she said that I had missed an opportunity because I could have chosen to engage with her. That was her exact word and I'm sharing that with you for a really important reason as you're going to see in this episode. That I could have chosen to engage with her. But that instead I was ignoring her concern, and I was making her feel guilty by mentioning my employees and that I was, and this again is a direct quote, disposing of her.

So, this is what I found really fascinating brain wise. This is again, I'm not trying to call her out specifically, that's why I'm obviously not using her

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name or any identifying info. It's not about this person but this language is such a window into what happens in our brain in conflict because the irony was that I had responded to her in depth. I had given her four numbered specific responses about why I made the choices I made and why I felt it was in alignment with my values and my responsibilities.

It was actually my response that had made her even more angry or she'd have thoughts that made her even more angry about my response. I literally did engage with what she was saying. She told me her thoughts about what I was doing. I responded and shared my thoughts about what I was doing, which did not agree with her thoughts. We had different thoughts about my actions but because she was activated and in conflict, she read everything in my response through an antagonistic lens.

So even though I literally did engage with her. I read her critique. I thought about it. I shared my point of view. What her brain told her was this person is not engaging with you. This person is refusing to engage with you. And because she had a feeling when reading what I wrote, her brain said, "This person's trying to guilt you." And because I didn't agree with her, and I had said, "And listen, if this triggers you and you don't want to follow this, that's totally your prerogative." Her brain told her, "This person is disposing of you."

And that's when I realized this really crucial insight about how our brains respond to conflict, especially in this day and age of internet echo chambers. So that is what I'm going to share right after this break, along with how to make sure that this is not how you respond to conflict.

Okay, so here's what I realized based on this interaction. At first, I was really puzzled by the idea that this person was criticizing me for not having engaged with her. And using that word, when I'd actually spent quite a bit of time and effort responding to her in good faith, or that I was disposing of her again, her word, because I didn't agree with her critique and that I had

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mentioned that if she found my work triggering right now, she could always choose to not follow me.

And then I realized that I actually see this all over the place, especially in internet comments, but I think we do it in real life too. It's just you can observe how people argue on the internet more easily. In real life, you have to spy on your neighbors to see this happening. So, here's what I see. I see people having discussions or conflicts or arguments. And the subconscious premise is, if you don't end this conversation agreeing with my thoughts, then you did not engage, or you didn't meaningfully engage. You don't understand. You are rejecting me.

And moreover, if you will not agree with me and do what I want you to do. And I choose to not be in a relationship because of that, or if you won't change the terms of our relationship to match what I want, you're the one rejecting me, even though that's kind of backwards. The person who walks away is the one doing the ending of the relationship. So, I am going to say this again because I think it's so important.

I think so many of us, when we engage in conflict, are having unproductive conflict because our unconscious assumption is that if the conflict does not end with the other person agreeing with our premise or agreeing with our thoughts or agreeing with our interpretation. That means something has gone wrong or the conflict has to continue. We think they don't understand what I'm saying because if they did, they would agree with me. Or their premise must be wrong because if it was right, it would be the same as my premise.

Or they must not respect my thoughts or feelings or opinions because they're not changing theirs to match mine. Or they're not engaging with me meaningfully because they're not agreeing with my thoughts, my interpretation. I think that in this, when we're in that mindset, the only thing that would satisfy us is if the other person says, "Oh, wow, you're

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completely right. I didn't think of that. I am sorry. Let me change all of my actions to match what you want." Except that even that wouldn't satisfy us when we're in that mindset.

Because we've all had that experience where we're mad, and someone does apologize and we still don't feel better because we're still having our same thoughts and our emotional activation hasn't dissipated. So, I actually think nothing would satisfy in that moment, but our unconscious assumption is that the only satisfactory outcome would be if the person agrees to give up their thoughts and adopt ours. And I recognize this pattern because I see it in my own brain and in so many people around me.

I think we are all susceptible to this and yes, from so much self-coaching, I am much less likely to fall into this trap with strangers on the internet. But I still see it come up sometimes in my relationship with my partner, for instance, where we had this recently over something small, but I think that's why I was able to see it.

That was the same phenomenon where we have a small conflict and then even after he's told me his thoughts and why he felt the way he did. I want to keep talking about it over and over because I think that since he had a different thought at the time or hasn't changed his thoughts to agree with me now, he must not understand what I'm saying. And then when he capitulates and says he agrees, so I will stop talking about it. I then tell him that I don't want him to just agree with me without meaning it. And I'm very sure I'm not the only person who has done that.

So, I really think that we have this unconscious assumption that the point of trying to resolve conflict is to get to agreement on our own, an agreement that is that we're right. And that our thoughts are correct, and that other person needs to adopt our thoughts. And when we're thinking this way, we actually feel powerless. We framed engagement or connection as requiring agreement. So, if there is disagreement, we think we cannot feel

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connection and then we feel rejected or alienated and we blame the other person for that.

So, if we don't agree, if we don't have the same thoughts, if we don't have the same interpretation, we think that means we can't feel connected to the person, we can't feel intimate with the person. And so, then we feel rejected and alienated and we blame them for that rather than our subconscious belief that connection and intimacy require us to share the same set of thoughts and to be in agreement. I think that's an optional definition.

And ironically for some of us, I think this makes us less likely to say what we really believe because we've made the stakes of disagreement so high. So, we won't tell our partner how we think or feel because if they don't agree, we're going to feel so bad about ourselves or so bad about the relationship or so disconnected from them. And we think that's caused by the disagreement but actually it's caused by the belief that disagreement is the same as disconnection and that intimacy can only be found in agreement.

So, we shrink, and we stay quiet rather than take up space and speak our truth. I am finding this such a powerful reframe that you can use so easily. Notice when you are in conflict, if you are upset because the other person's not agreeing with you and ask yourself how you could feel peace or resolution, even if they never do. Notice when you are in conflict, if you are prepared to make peace without full capitulation to your point of view. And if not, make sure that you like your reasons for that.

You can practice the belief that intimacy can exist and even get stronger amid conflict and disagreement. You can practice the belief that resolution does not always mean agreement. Even just noticing how often when you have conflict, you have the unconscious belief that the outcome should be the other person agreeing with you or you agreeing with them. Just noticing

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that can be transformative because what if the goal of conflict is not to reach agreement, but to share perspectives and find a way forward that honors those different perspectives?

How would you argue differently if you did not believe that the goal was to make the other person agree with you, for the other person to agree to let go of their own thoughts and adopt your thoughts? How would you argue differently if you believed that you did not have to agree with the other person either, that you are allowed to keep your own thoughts?

And if you're someone who does not speak their mind because of all the meaning you layer onto someone else's disagreement, how can you start to unwind that? How can you have your own back and feel grounded in your own perspective? What would it mean to be open to hearing someone else's experience of events without immediately second guessing yourself or blaming yourself or abandoning yourself to agree with them? I really encourage you to try this out preferably in real life and not in the comment section.

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