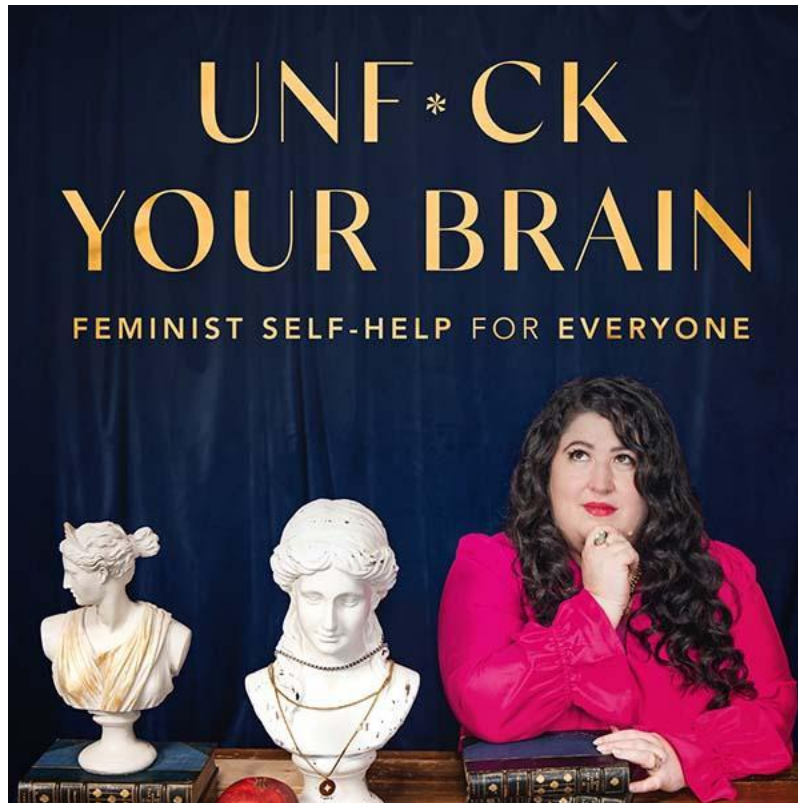


UFYB 383: Self-Help When the World is Burning (Greatest Hits)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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You know how it kind of feels like everything is going wrong with the world at once right now? Staying on top of the news is so stressful but ignoring it doesn't seem like an option either. It's exhausting and demoralizing, but I got you. This episode is going to help you solve this conundrum and figure out how to stay informed and realistic without just bottoming out in despair.

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.

Welcome back to our Greatest Hits series where I occasionally like to reintroduce you to one of the greatest hits of the podcast. Truth is, after doing this for so many years and having hundreds and hundreds of episodes, there are a lot of great episodes that newer listeners haven't heard at all or that longtime listeners could stand to go back and revisit. Each of these podcasts are some of my favorite, most impactful, most insightful podcasts, and they are definitely ones that keep giving you new things to learn and think about the more often you listen to them.

So even if you've heard this episode before, I really encourage you to listen again. You will pick up new things. Your brain will synthesize it differently. And if you haven't heard this episode yet, then you are in for a treat.

Today I want to talk about what it means to engage in 'self-help', which really, remember, is practical philosophy, when the world is burning. I live in this world with the rest of you and it can be very overwhelming. There's war. There's the murder of innocent civilians. There's global warming. The oceans are getting hotter. We have an election coming up between a

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centrist liberal and a literal authoritarian. It can feel just overwhelming and scary and destabilizing to even be minimally aware of what is going on.

And when we try to stabilize ourselves psychologically, our brains resist that effort for two reasons. So we have to understand those reasons and how to combat them in order to be able to use thought work and use managing our minds to show up better for this world and for ourselves. So first, our brains have evolved to scan for physical danger. This is the biggest reason that our brain resists calming down essentially.

The part of your brain that scans for danger is the oldest, most primitive part. It does not really distinguish between things that are truly physically dangerous or things that just set off an emotional fear reaction, even if they are not actually threats to us. And it doesn't do a great job of distinguishing between a fire next door and a fire in another state, especially when it comes to visual images. Certainly the intensity is lower, if you saw the house next door on fire, you'd run out of your house. You don't do that when you see it on the screen, but it is still triggering that alarm response in your brain.

Your brain did not evolve during millennia of access to live video feeds across the world. Your brain evolved when you couldn't see anything that wasn't in front of your face unless it was in a cave drawing or maybe a painting in a church or a temple of some kind. That was pretty much all the visual stimuli your brain was getting until about 100 years ago. So our brains have not adapted or evolved to deal with this.

According to the primitive part of your brain, anything bad happening in the world now or that could happen that it thinks is bad, is dangerous. And so your brain wants to obsess about it at all times until it gets to safety. Global warming. Check. Slide into authoritarianism in the US. Check. War across

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the globe, famine, genocide, pandemics. Check. Check. Check. So your brain is thinking about these things a lot and it's releasing stress hormones in response. But those stress hormones are not doing anything helpful.

These hormones are designed to help you run away from a predator in the wild. So the way your system is supposed to work is that your brain perceives an actual danger, it releases these hormones. These hormones help you run real fast, and then as soon as you're physically safe, you are able to sort of discharge that stress and go back to normal. But that doesn't happen when the stress is news around the world that's coming in all the time.

It might actually be a good idea to run away from your phone. That's not what the hormones make you do. Because in this case the source of the fear, the phone, the news, the headlines is also the source of the information that your brain thinks is essential to know, to keep you safe and alive. So you get trapped in this loop of consuming a lot of negative, stressful news, creating a stress response in your body, then feeling drained and exhausted and burnt out from it because it never goes away.

So the solution to this is learning how to use thought work to turn down that danger signal. And I want to talk about why that's actually a really good idea. That level of danger signal is not actually an appropriate response to me. I think it's an evolutionary misfire. I keep seeing these posts on Instagram that are basically being devastated 24/7 is inappropriate and the correct response to our world. I'm not sure that that's true. I understand the sentiment.

I agree that it's not helpful to pretend that nothing is happening in the world or to sort of engage in toxic positivity and bypassing. But I also actually don't think that when our brain is in a 24/7 constant stress production over

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things that aren't even happening to us, that that is actually a good positive thing for humanity and what our brain should be doing. I actually think that is a sort of hijacking of an evolutionary system by a world that it wasn't designed for.

Constant agitation, distress, and despair because you're constantly exposed to everything going wrong at once all over the world is not what your brain was designed to handle. Even if you think about 50 years ago, okay, yes, we had TV. We had newspapers. We had the telephone. You'd still get your news in one dose. You would read the paper and then put it down and go on with your life. You would watch the six o'clock evening news and then turn it off, get a 23 hour break until the next day.

But now it's in the phone, it's with you all the time. And even our sort of social interactional platforms are a mix of so and so's new cute puppy and also here's a photo of a dam bursting ruining 10 villages. So your brain is just getting this input all the time and it's not designed for it. And of course, some of these things are important to know about and some are actually potentially dangers to us and we don't want to put our heads in the sand and just ignore them.

But I tell you, I really don't think that leaving it up to your amygdala, the part of your brain that sets off the alarm signal to decide how you should feel every day is a good idea. Because your amygdala has only one setting, which is fire, we are all going to die right now. And your body evolved to have that setting only go off when it was really needed and then go back to normal. But right now with constant exposure to these things, we're not going back to normal. We're just staying stuck in that position.

Humans have survived and lived and lost and loved and kept going and been sad and joyful and had the whole full human experience in all kinds of

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conditions across the ages. Bubonic plague, fall of the Roman Empire, the 1,000 year war, I'm not saying those were good or fun times. But I do think that we don't think enough about history, and this is particularly an American exceptionalism thing.

So we've actually lost sight of the idea that it is normal to have to live your little human life with your own little in the scope of things, concerns and relationships and priorities and fixations. While on a global scale both incredible and horrible things are happening near and far and all over the world. That is actually the normal human condition. So I think that some of the social pop psychology media is so damaging because it's constantly telling people that things going wrong around the world means this is not normal. This is not how it's supposed to be.

You should be on high alert all the time. I don't think if you look at history that that's accurate. I think it is the human condition and has been historically and globally to have to try to figure out our own little lives in the scope of a really big world where both beautiful and terrible things are happening. And historically speaking, there's a lot less violence than there used to be. People live a lot longer. We can cure more diseases.

So you could actually argue things are getting better. But even if they're not, I think that it's really important to just kind of have that context and normalize that when you are reading and taking in media that is telling you that sort of being activated and in a state of kind of hormonal emergency all the time is required and useful. I don't think that's true. Now, we can't really get the cat back in the bag. We can't go to not knowing and I'm not here to tell you you've got to throw your phone into the East River.

So we have to use thought work to manage our minds to cope and survive and thrive even with all that knowing. And we have to use thought work to

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help us rewire our brain so that we can respond appropriately in ways that are helpful to us. And so that we can set some boundaries around how and when we are going to inform ourselves and think about the state of the world and how and when we're going to work on being able to be present in our own lives and cultivate more peace and resilience now.

But there is a second big barrier to that in your brain, and we have to talk about that second big barrier in order to resolve this. So here's the second big barrier to changing the way that our brains respond to and consume all of the kind of negative news in the world. The second big barrier is that we have also evolved to scan for social danger. So we've evolved to scan for physical danger, and that response is getting kind of hijacked and set off too often, but also we've evolved to scan for social danger.

And right now the kind of social story about terrible happenings around the world, at least in more kind of progressive circles. And again, if you're newer to the podcast, I was a reproductive rights litigator, an academic. I was an activist and advocate for 20 years. I consider myself in these circles and part of progressive circles. So this is not a critique from the outside, it's an observation from the inside.

The social story is that you need to be glued to the news and thinking only about injustices in order to be 'informed'. And that you must be informed in this specific way in order to be considered a good and virtuous person. And that if you're not, if you are sort of ever thinking about anything else, you are a selfish, privileged asshole. These are extreme versions of these positions, but I think if you pay attention, you'll recognize this concern in yourself.

So in a weird way, spinning out in your own head about the state of the world can be a form of people pleasing. Where the people that you are

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pleasing are the audience in your head who evaluate whether you are a good person who is upset enough about the state of the world. Plus, of course, women are socialized to always be looking for fun new ways to feel bad about ourselves and to feel like we don't deserve any happiness or any peace so this fits right in. And I don't think it's a surprise that I mostly see this kind of social enforcement happening on social media among women.

I don't really see male musicians being told they shouldn't make music when there's a war somewhere else in the world. But to be fair, I don't spend a lot of time on male musician social media. In any case, I get it. There is some intuitive appeal to this idea for us because women have been socialized for millennia to believe that we are frivolous and silly. So the message that it is silly or frivolous to think about our own confidence or empowerment or our own suffering or our own happiness fits right into that narrative. Who are we to care about such things in times like this?

And we are socialized to believe that thoughts have moral value. And so the idea that the way we demonstrate being a good person to ourselves or to others is to emotionally suffer about what's going on in the world, fits right into that socialization. So this is why to me, self-coaching is always about looking at what returns are my thoughts creating? That is how I can easily decide whether or not I like what I'm getting for the mental and emotional investment I'm making.

Because when we are in this cycle, I don't think we're thinking about the actual alternatives that we're deciding between in terms of our mental and emotional energy. So if your dilemma is, I have an idea to solve climate change and I'm not sure if I should go to Washington to share it with the president. That's a hassle and I'd kind of rather go to the spa. Listen, I do think if that's you, your self-development and the spa can wait, let's save the planet. Then you can do some visualizations and get a massage afterwards.

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But for the vast, vast, vast majority of us, that's not the dilemma, that's not the question. It's not, do I devote every moment of my energy and my entire life to literally saving the world, or do I devote it to my own mental and emotional health? Most of us are actually doing less than we could to help improve the world because we are emotionally burnt out by our stress and anxiety and overwhelm.

And there's this strange aspect of the globalization of social media that makes it seem as though the individual average person is morally wrong for caring about their own lives if they are aware of suffering anywhere in the world. Even though they generally don't have the ability to directly do anything about that suffering.

Now, do I believe that our collective action can change the world? Yes, absolutely. But again, let's talk about what does that mean in the concrete when we're really talking about what you're doing with your mental and emotional time and your energy. On a global level, how can you change the world? You can vote, how you vote, donating money, showing up to protests. Those are kind of the ways that you can impact big picture. And doom scrolling on your phone may impact your voting and maybe it spurs you to donate money.

But for most of us, voting, donating money, even showing up to protests, that's not a full-time job. So when we are contemplating whether we are sort of allowed to care about our own lives, our own mental and emotional development, whether it would make us a bad person to not be as upset as we are all the time. We've really got to think about what returns are we getting, what is being kind of reactive and drained and exhausted and anxious all the time producing for us? Is that producing something that is helping the world? I don't think that it is.

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And actually I think that it's blocking most of us from the places that we actually could make a difference. Because I'm going to guess that when you're doom scrolling, it's not provoking a lot of action in your actual community around you. So one of the problems with this globalization of social media is that we are exposed to the biggest catastrophes and horrors around the world. And then there's this moral valence assigned to whether we're outraged about them, talking about them, posting about them.

And those things raise awareness, that can be important. But it can also, when it's taken too far, come at the cost of us being plugged into our actual reality and what is happening around us. And what does that cost us? So for instance, imagine that instead of thinking about all of you and what you need help with, I just spend hours doom scrolling on my phone, reading depressing news and spiraling out on the couch. And yes, maybe I also donated to a fundraiser while I was doing that. Is that fundamentally actually making the world a better place and if so, in what way?

So I am not saying, don't read the news. I read the news, personally. I do follow what's going on in the world. This is the real life coaching world over here. I am not saying to not know what's going on. I have multiple subscriptions. But you get to decide how to consume the news, how to consume social media, how much time to spend on it, what to consume and what to make it mean in your thoughts. When negative emotions come up around these things, it is natural.

And since I do read the news, I experience that and I work on receiving those emotions and I work on letting those emotions flow through me and move me to action. But I do not require myself to consume every depressing article I can find. Nor do I require myself to feel devastated every day, all day about the state of the world in order to feel like I am

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being realistic, being prepared. Because I'll be honest when I think about that stuff, I don't actually do anything to prepare.

It's not like spinning out about climate change has gotten me to make even a go bag for some kind of disaster, I just spin, then I go to sleep, then I do it again the next day. And so I don't require myself to sort of have any particular emotion or level or duration of negative emotion to prove to myself that I am a good person or doing the right thing or caring the right amount. Because that's sacrificing change, I can actually make in the world for my own ego.

When we are doom scrolling and spinning out and our brains don't want to change that because they think that would make us a bad person. We're actually subconsciously choosing that we think it is more important to feel like shit and often do nothing in order to be allowed to believe that we're a good person who cares. Versus not spiral out, feel better, actually have emotional energy to show up in the world and actually do something in the world that might help someone else.

So that is why looking at the return you get on the investment of your thought, not what's my thought about the thought and feeling, not does this make me a good person? Am I feeling the right way that everybody tells me I'm supposed to do? Am I thinking the right thoughts that everyone says I should have? But what is actually happening in my body in its physical form in this world when I think this way? What am I doing with it?

You're going to see so clearly when you are actually sacrificing your ability to get up and go out and do things to improve the world in order to perform a certain way online. Give yourself permission to think a certain thought about yourself, all things that are just about you and your ego. And I don't

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say that as a criticism. We all have an ego. A lot of thought work is learning to look at the actual returns in my life rather than what does my ego say.

So in my book I talk about the idea of finding something small you can actually do to improve the world. Now, some of you listening to this maybe are in the White House talking to the President at high level meetings about what to do in a war zone. And I hope you use this podcast to be confident and share your best ideas. And then a lot of us, myself included, are not personally poised to impact foreign policy and global events beyond again, voting, donating, protesting, all of which is important but is not a full-time job for most of us. For some of us it is.

You might be a community organizer. Again, I'm not talking to you, talking to everybody else. A lot of us have to look at what is our sphere of influence. So I have a bigger sphere of influence than the average person. Mine is the podcast, my students, the people who read my book. But what's yours? Is it your family? Is it your office, your job, your workplace? Is it your profession? Is it your hobby community? Is it your religious institution or organization? Is it a place you could volunteer?

Doing something small and local feels like it 'doesn't matter' because the problems of the world are so big. But I think that that's a misaligned thought. That's a thought error. We think that way because, one, we have been trained to be perfectionist thinkers and that sabotages us in every single area of our lives. And two, we have lost our ability, I think, to see and appreciate the local, the proximate, because we are now citizens of this global social media. And again, nothing is all one thing or the other.

Being able to see and hear about what's happening everywhere in the world and connect with people around the world is an amazing gift. And it has this downside of making us feel we somehow live in that sphere when

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in fact our actual lives take place in communities that are on a different scale most of the time. And I'm not necessarily talking about just physically local. I don't really consider my sphere of influence to be my neighborhood, although some of my neighbors totally would, because there are people who are really involved in our neighborhood.

My community of influence is all of you, it's my podcast listeners, my students, my followers, my clients, my employees, the readers of my book. Whoever you are, I want you to think about what is your sphere of influence. And I want to encourage you to not include or define that as your social media profile, unless you're actually someone who uses social media for real life community organizing, in which case, carry on.

But if you're not that person, if you're not actually someone who is doing organizing work online that translates into the real world. I want to recommend you pick something other than social media as a sphere of influence to think about. Because we get sucked into the doom scrolling to begin with, and it can be an echo chamber. I really want you to think about what is your sphere of influence in the real world and how could you make it a little bit better?

You will be shocked how much focusing on that question will actually help you feel much more grounded and empowered. So we can use thought work to reset our kind of emergency response, to reduce the stress and anxiety when we are learning about what's happening in the world and we are paying attention, which again I am never saying we should not pay attention. We use thought work to help recalibrate our response to those things.

We could also use thought work to help us focus on and create something in our lives that is an improvement for some other person. You will be

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amazed how much that will help you feel again, grounded in your own life and empowered in a way that pulls you out of that heady, anxious fog and down into your body and reality. And that is much more powerful than dooms scrolling on the couch. So in order to actually create any positive impact in the world, you have to manage your mind.

At this time of all times, we need to be thinking on purpose and not letting our unmanaged mind run the show. Because when the stakes are high, that's when we need to be showing up with our game face, with our head on straight. And learning how to manage your mind will make your life feel better to you, which is important because you are a person who matters and it will help you show up in a different way for everybody else.

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.