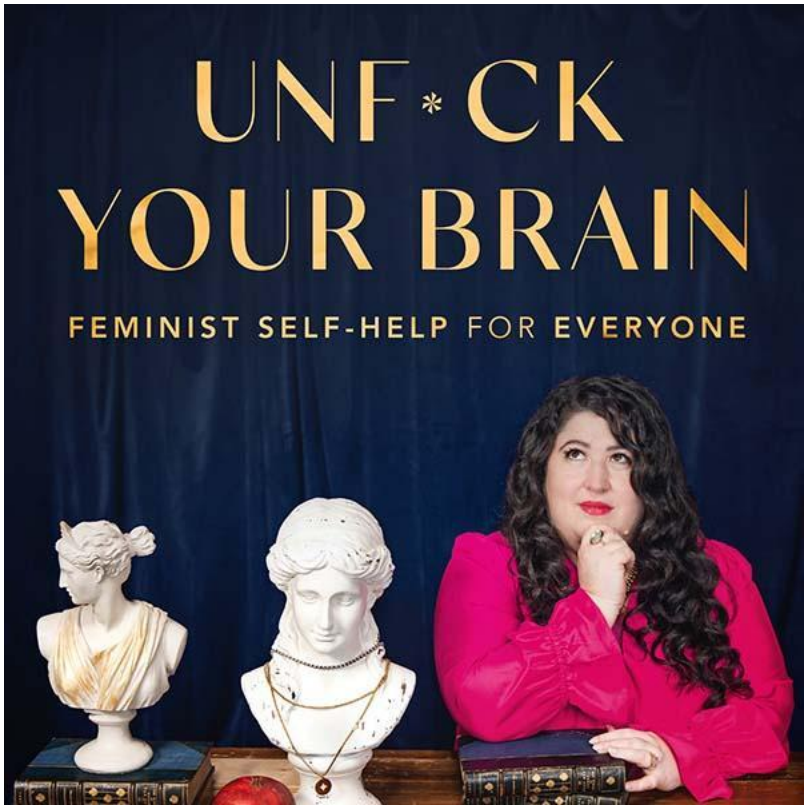
UFYB 384: The Logical Case for Positive Thinking with Oliver Burkeman



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

UnF*ck Your Brain with 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.

Kara Loewentheil: Hello, my friends. So we are journeying back in time in some ways today to the very beginning of my journey in self-development because we are going to be speaking with Oliver Burkeman, who is the author of one of the first books that actually made me think that a smart, rational person could also do some version of self-development, self-help, philosophical work. And so it was very meaningful for me. And so I'm very excited and honored to have him on the show. And I'm going to actually just ask him to introduce himself and tell us a little bit about who he is and what he does before we get going. Welcome.

Oliver Burkeman: Thank you so much. Yeah, my name's Oliver Burkeman. I'm an author trained as a journalist. I wrote this book, Four Thousand Weeks, and the more recent book, Meditations for Mortals, and some other books, but I won't go on and on and on. I live in North of England in the UK now after many, many years living in Brooklyn, New York.

Kara Loewentheil: All right, a former Brooklynite, but you got out. So I actually want to back up a little bit in your career too. And of course, we'll get to your newer work, but your book, The Antidote was kind of one of the first self-development books I read. I don't even love that term. I really think of it as practical philosophy, what I do and a lot of, not to speak for you, but a lot of what you do as well.

But it was one of the first, I came from a family of New York Jews, so I'm very pessimistic with a lot of historical reason for that. You know, certainly,

people felt like they had a real good evidentiary record for not kind of looking at the bright side, not ignoring any dangers, you know. And so, but I was sort of coming out of that being like, okay, I see the reasons for that. And this way of thinking is making me deeply anxious and unhappy all the time. But I certainly can't swing over to the spiritual bypassing gaslighting, like everything happens for some beautiful divine reason and all, you know, like that's not my vibe either.

So one of the things that I really found so powerful in The Antidote is the sort of logical case for self-compassion and somewhat positive thinking. And so, first of all, I recommend folks read the book, but I think self-compassion is something women struggle with a lot, and they think that they have a really logical case for self-criticism, right? It's like, no, this makes me better, this drives me harder, this is like why I achieve. And that self-compassion is basically like being an indulgent self-enabler. So I'd love to hear your thoughts about self-compassion, why it's important and why there is a logical case for it.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah. I mean, I have totally struggled with this myself and on some level continue to do so. So on some level, I think a lot of what I'm writing about can be seen as some form of trying to sort of reconcile with the things that make us and make me anxious. And I think that, yeah, that sense that if you're sort of hypervigilant, if you're hard on yourself all the time, if you really, really make sure you're always doing your best to keep things on an even keel, you sort of have to because if you let up for a minute, everything might go badly off the rails. It's pretty deep in me.

I guess what I have found so powerful in terms of understanding the case for self-compassion is in seeing that it is not a demand for special treatment of oneself. It isn't a demand to treat yourself as sort of much more deserving of kindness than anybody else. So there may be senses in which that could be worthwhile, but it's just not being more unpleasant and mean

to yourself than you'd ever dream of being to a good friend or even like a professional colleague or someone you met in the street or something.

So that idea of sort of self-friendliness, I think, was where things first began to click for me. There's a philosopher I've written about in more recent books called Ido Landau who makes this argument, he calls it the reverse golden rule, right? Just don't treat yourself worse than you would treat other people.

But I think in terms of the case for it, apart from just like fairness to yourself, it's something to do with the idea that I have found anyway, as I've got a bit older, certainly, that there's a sort of trust issue here, right? Once I, to sort of say, well, what if I was just a bit easier on myself? What if I asked myself the question, like, what do I feel like doing? At least sometimes, instead of just what do I have to do? What are my obligations? And how to how can I get more of them done?

The terrible worry is that if you took your surveillance system off yourself for a couple of moments, you'd just end up watching bad TV and eating potato chips and just doing nothing meaningful. That is a really kind of interesting and strange lack of trust in one's own person, right? And so I do think that when you find ways to push back against that in just small ways, you very quickly see that actually, to be interested in this stuff in the first place is to be the kind of person who genuinely wants to keep their commitments and live by their values and not break promises where you can avoid it. So the idea that you need to come at yourself with this kind of position of baked in distrust loses its foundations through living a little bit in a different way.

Kara Loewentheil: Yeah, I think that's why I think of this work as being very deeply philosophical, because really the question is, what do you think human nature is like in the absence of bullying, shame and coercion, which

is what you're using yourself, right? It's like, is your assumption that without those things, humans just lie on the couch and don't do anything. Anybody who's had a child knows you'd sometimes like them to just lie on the couch and do nothing.

But that is not actually what humans do before they've been socialized this way. They actually are constantly running around interested in everything, want to know everything, want to learn, want to play, want to create, want to grow, want to discover. But we assume for us, like, right, we're just going to turn into complete sloths.

Oliver Burkeman: Exactly. And it's partly about human nature, I think you're right. But it's also partly about there's almost like a, well, I mentioned it before, but there's almost like a logical issue here. If you're the kind of person who cares about not doing those supposedly time-wasting, pointless things, then you don't need to worry that you might be the kind of person who wants to do those things. We can pick any number of appalling people in the public eye and wonder whether they ever asked themselves these questions and be like, well, no, of course not.

And so the very fact that someone is invested in this in the first place is a really good sign that if they relaxed their guard a little bit, they would live that way.

Kara Loewentheil: Yeah, and it's such all or nothing thinking. It's like, yeah, you might not move at quite the frenetic pace you move now, but why are you doing that? Do you actually like how you're spending your time? What are you actually, what outcomes are you actually producing at that frenetic pace, right? It's like, people do this with intuitive eating, right? It's like, well, if I don't eat according to these really rigid rules, then I will only eat cupcakes and pizza forever. You'll find something in the middle.

UFYB 384: The Logical Case for Positive Thinking with Oliver Burkeman

Oliver Burkeman: The whole of life happens in the middle ground. Absolutely. I'm reminded also of the quotation I've used in the most recent book from Marcus Aurelius who has this line about, there's also a sort of temporal thing here where we're sort of worrying a lot about the future and whether we're going to be able to respond appropriately in the future and whether we would just become in future these kind of terrible worthless individuals.

And yet, this is sort of belied by the fact that we're doing well and coping well to some extent in our lives right now. So he has this line about like, you know, don't let the future disturb you because you'll meet it if you have to with the same weapons of reason or whatever he's talking, you know, you don't whatever that you meet the present with, right.

So if you have inner resources that seem to be getting you through life right now, which sort of by definition you do, you can assume that all else being equal, you'll have them later on as well. And that can be a really good counterpoint to too much anxiety, I think.

Kara Loewentheil: Yeah, I think that's so important. A lot of the coaching I do ends up being around like, okay, but how could we practice believing that we will be able to handle what comes because there is that like, right, it's like you now are handling things, but you somehow imagine future you is going to be a total basket case with no resources, who's unable to cope with anything. And I think that it speaks to that thread that runs through a lot of these things, which is the perfectionism and desire for control.

And I know perfectionism is something that you talk about in a variety of ways. So I'm curious, what do you think drives our kind of society's perfectionism? Do you think it's worse now than it used to be? Do you think

this is a sort of constant state of humankind over the ages, or do you think it's gotten worse?

Oliver Burkeman: I think all of the above. I tend to slightly evade these causal questions because I just think it's so, as they say, over-determined. It could be any one of these things. It is recent technology and social media and the culture of comparison to inaccurate images of the best bits of other people's lives or AI versions of people that aren't really people at all. It is also capitalism, but it is also human nature.

And I think, if you really want to get down to the core of all this, it is a response to what it is to be a human, which is to be kind of in this vulnerable situation of just being kind of thrown into life in the historical period and with the resources and the parents that you had. Don't get to choose any of this. With time sort of running away under your feet, no matter what you do, it's all a very vulnerable situation.

Feeling like the psychotherapist Bruce Tift says. It's very intense to be fully present or even somewhat fully present in reality. And so, control seems to offer this way of being, well, maybe I could just get out and on top of life somehow. I could control it from a safer position. And yeah, there are huge numbers of cultural and economic forces that exacerbate that. But right at the bottom, I think it is that sort of dis-ease with just the situation that we're all in.

Kara Loewentheil: Yeah, I mean, if I think about Jewish religion thousands of years ago, it's just a very complicated system of things that you're supposed to follow perfectly, and then everything will be okay, right? So it's just like, here's the 700 different rules that you need to follow. I mean, right, it's like a form of perfectionism. And what is religion often promising is a sort of like, if you can be good enough.

UFYB 384: The Logical Case for Positive Thinking with Oliver Burkeman

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah, it's so interesting, because I think religion is often like a big culprit here and also is where a lot of the initial responses to that were sort of generated. So I feel, you know, a few hundred years ago, literally every thought anyone had, every philosophy anyone discussed was done in the context of religion. So of course, religion has it all.

But yeah, absolutely, that idea that if you just do all these things exactly, or with a more sort of Christian emphasis about this will lead to sort of salvation. And all these different emphases are all having common this, at least they offer the temptation that if you could just figure out the thing you're supposed to be doing and do it perfectly, like your side of the deal is I will follow this rule perfectly.

And the other side of the deal is in return, I don't quite have to take full responsibility for my life. I don't quite have to show up in all the vulnerability of it. And yeah, it would be a nice bargain. But I don't think it I don't think it actually works that way.

Kara Loewentheil: Yeah. And I want to talk about the alternative. I think that I'm curious about your experience, because I work so much with women, and I focus a lot on women's socialization. And a lot of what I see is that women are socialized to, to see themselves as people who need to follow the rules, who shouldn't trust their own discernment or their own authority. They need to know what the right answer is.

And so that, of course, even they come into coaching that's explicitly advertised as feminist coaching, but then there's this instinct to want to be like, okay, what's the right thought I should think instead? I just want to know what I need to do to get the A. And it's so early. I see this in my stepdaughter, who's 11, of how do I just tell me what to do so I can do it right so I can get reassurance, essentially, so I can feel safe.

UFYB 384: The Logical Case for Positive Thinking with Oliver Burkeman

But I'm curious, do you think that that is universal? Maybe I'm just saying I think some of it comes from women's socialization, but everybody's running around with this thought pattern. I mean, it's interesting.

Oliver Burkeman: I don't want to be glib or to suggest that I do not have all sorts of advantages and privileges through being a man. But I also think that very often when I read accounts of the experience of being socialized in this way, and it's described in an article or somewhere as being something specifically for women, I sort of append in my mind like women and British men. You know what I mean?

Kara Loewentheil: I feel like any marginalized group.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah, right. The compulsion to apologize for oneself, for example.

Kara Loewentheil: Yes, the American men don't have that. So that may be a British thing. I love my husband dearly. He hasn't any of the thought patterns I work on.

Oliver Burkeman: Or I may have unusual thought patterns for a guy or anything, whatever. I do think that I'm always, and this is not just about the gender part of it, I'm always sort of negotiating in my work between what is universally true and then what is conditioned by demography or time in history or social economic status and all the rest of it.

So I think that this sort of antipathy towards vulnerability and this desire to have a feeling of security and control is easily sort of demonstrable through history as being universal. The difference is in the style of the response, right? The difference is in whether you respond by looking for the rules

you're supposed to follow and apologizing for your existence or whether you respond to it by launching wars, basically.

Kara Loewentheil: Right. Are you trying to control yourself? Have you internalized the control or are you trying to control other people?

Oliver Burkeman: Right. And I do think, you'd have to ask my wife for the full version, but I do think I am basically an internal controller person. So I think that is a difference. But yeah, so obviously very obvious differences in how different people go about trying not to feel vulnerable in this way. But I think that the trying not to feel vulnerable may be pretty universal.

Kara Loewentheil: I'd love to talk more about that because I think one logical error, whatever we want to call it, one thing that I see a lot in women, especially because women are socialized to believe that they're more emotionally astute, they're more emotionally self-aware, that's like a story we have, is that women think that they're very good at being vulnerable when they're actually not good at being vulnerable at all.

They are good at saying that they're upset, which is what they equate with vulnerability, but they are not good at sitting with a lack of control and a sort of true openness. This comes up in dating a lot with women who are like, wow, all these men are so emotionally unavailable. I'm like, you are also emotionally unavailable because you are trying to control this whole process, use this other person to validate your self-worth. You have all these standards and criteria and people need to meet them and then you're beating yourself up. Actually, none of that is actual vulnerability. So I'd love to hear your take on vulnerability.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah. I mean, again, I don't know how much this is sort of exactly distributed differently between the sexes, but I do think that you

can, like, trying to achieve a feeling of security and not feel vulnerable can be done either by kind of developing an abhorrence towards emotion, or it can be done sort of using emotion in a way. And so, you know, I always feel one I'm not sure this is quite an answer to the question, but let's see.

I'm always interested in the ways that stoic philosophy has sort of been passed into the modern world, certainly sometimes in the context of what gets called broicism, the idea of, you know, which has at its worst, you know.

Kara Loewentheil: I don't want the bros to ruin the Stoics for me. I wish I didn't know that.

Oliver Burkeman: Some of them are great bros, but there is an extreme that this goes to which is this notion that you ought to be able to be emotionally unperturbed by anything that is happening to you. At that point, it becomes pretty clear that this is a sort of quest to become invulnerable.

There's another way of thinking about that though, which is the idea that you could accept as I think very gradually and incrementally getting better at doing, that moods and feelings are things that come and that are there and that you don't necessarily need to dictate your actions or spiral into them. But there's a way of being stoic that I think is at least in tune with the original philosophers that would absolutely involve really feeling your feelings, but being, I guess, to switch to Buddhism, non-attached to them, right? Having this stance of being able to let them be and also act alongside them. And I kind of feel like that would be useful medicine for both the emotion deniers and the emotion users when it comes to vulnerability.

UFYB 384: The Logical Case for Positive Thinking with Oliver Burkeman

Kara Loewentheil: Yeah, I'm curious to hear how you would kind of define vulnerability. I'm trying to think, I think that the way that I think about it is actual vulnerability is like being honest about your experience without an attempt to control the response you get or the other person's experience about it. It's sort of like a sharing without attachment to outcome maybe, but I'm curious how you...

Oliver Burkeman: I mean, I think that's really a great way of putting it. I think it also highlights how tricky this can be because a person can certainly do what might look to a third party like just sharing and that in itself be a form of kind of putting your things onto other people in an attempt to relieve your own anxiety about being vulnerable.

Kara Loewentheil: Oh yeah, it's gotta be like, only you inside can know if it's true vulnerability. There's no-

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah, no, absolutely. And it's, you know, it's sort of, there's a sort of a feeling or a move, I guess, like an inner gesture, which I've written about in different forms, and I'm always trying to put words on. But in a way, one of the ways that I've written about it that seems to work for me anyway, maybe for some other people, is that moment if you're in a rainstorm, and you haven't brought an umbrella or proper waterproof gear or whatever, and you're braced against the rain, you're in some futile way trying to keep yourself dry by tensing your body or punching or something.

And the moment that can happen when you're so unmatched to that situation, the situation is so not avoidable that you just sort of relax and get drenched and realize that there is nothing terrible about the getting drenched and that the suffering of the situation was in the bracing against it rather than in the getting drenched.

UFYB 384: The Logical Case for Positive Thinking with Oliver Burkeman

It's not a perfect analogy because obviously there's real pain in lots of experiences in life but I think there's something powerful in that notion that like vulnerability is for me anyway is the willingness to not brace against reality in that sense. And the discovery that obviously has deep roots in all sorts of philosophies and therapies that a large part anyway of the awfulness is thereby reduced and that there's some mysterious way in which you can experience even grief, even anger, even sadness in a way that is not a problem. I mean, language really runs out here.

Kara Loewentheil: No, I actually love that metaphor for I mean, I spent a lot of time trying to explain what it means to accept a feeling and not resist it. I mean, that's like an always the sort of, it's so whether it's some form of innate plus this our social, our current cultural, whatever, just the like, the resistance to negative emotion, and the availability of distractions from it and how easy it is to just kind of constantly try to get away from it.

So I'm always trying to explain, okay, what do I mean when I say to allow the feeling, to not resist the feeling. I think that's a great metaphor for that as well, where maybe these things are the same thing of the difference between. And I would add the story, part of the suffering in the rain. It's like, oh my God, now my hair is going to look terrible and I didn't want this to happen. And now when I show up, people are going to think I look frazzled. Now I'm so cool. It's like all of that. And that moment where you're just like, oh, I'm just gonna get wet. And like, even if it's mildly uncomfortable, it's okay. It's not going to be the end of the world.

I love that release. I just kind of circle back to your book, Four Thousand Weeks, which I really loved because I think for me existing in the life coaching industry, I see a lot of coaching around time that it's sort of a combination of several problematic strains. One is the coaching is sort of like, don't stress about time because there's plenty of time for everything.

UFYB 384: The Logical Case for Positive Thinking with Oliver Burkeman

There's always enough time. It's sort of like you don't need to think about how you spend your time because just believe there's enough time.

And then that's particularly problematic, I find, for people socialized as women because, again, at least in my cultural and social context, they're overfunctioning for everybody in their lives, right? And so to be completely in charge of the household and overfunction for their husband and overfunction for their children and do all the unpaid committee stuff at work. There's so many social expectations of women being of service to everyone else.

And so the part that's pretty important, which is like, well, let's back up what actually matters to you and how do you want to spend your time is a big piece of this. And so there's something for me very bracing about even the title of your book just being like, hey, this is a limited resource and this is how much you have. And let's have a serious conversation about what you're doing with it. I'm curious, how did you come to that book and what were you really hoping to get people to face with it?

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah. I mean, this is all totally, obviously, from sort of personal grappling with all of this too. And I and I again, maybe this is one of those women and British men's situations. I don't know.

But there's that feeling of obligation has always been a very sort of serious issue with me in the sense that like, if you feel that something is an obligation, then it's on you to find a time to do it. And also even more sort of basically that there must be time, there must be a way of finding time to do it, otherwise it wouldn't feel like an obligation, right, which is a mistake, but it's a persuasive one. And I think that the sort of process that I have gone through or begun to go through that I'm trying to write about and pass on in that book is that the answer to this or the sort of path forward on this is not

necessarily to convince yourself that things you felt were obligations are not do not feel obliging anymore. It's not it's not just to be like, you're fine.

Don't worry about those things. Just focus on yourself. It's also not this kind of really stressful, you've only got so much time, so you really wouldn't better pick the right things. And if you screw up, you're a loser. It's actually to say, yeah, that there is too much to do. There is too much that feels meaningful. There are too many things that feel obligatory. There are too many things that would be wonderful for all the people you'd be doing them for if you did them.

Yeah, there is too much to do. There is too much that feels meaningful. There are too many things that feel obligatory. There are too many things that would be wonderful for all the people you'd be doing them for if you did them, right? That's a real situation, but you're so outmatched just by being human, not because you're particularly rubbish, but because that's what it is to be human, that there's a kind of relaxation to be found there, right?

Right? That's a real situation. But it's you're so outmatched just by being human, not because you're particularly rubbish, but because that's what it is to be human, that there's a kind of relaxation to be found there. Right? It's like you are never gonna get close to doing all the things that weigh on you an obligation, especially in a society that makes so much feel like an obligation, especially for women in the sense that it's unevenly distributed that way.

And, like, if you really grasp that, if you really grasp how finite we are relative to this sort of effectively infinite pool of things we could be doing, in an important sense, the pressure's off, right, because it's no longer possible to hope to meet the kind of perfect outcome. And obviously one response to that is like, why do anything? Everything's like terribly depressing.

But another response is like, oh, okay. Maybe my job is only to do to sort of curate a handful of things that really matter to me. And some of those might well be pro social and selfless, but some of them also might not be because there's no chance of doing all the things that belong under any of those headings.

And I always come back to this. I mean, I've said it before and I've written about it, but it just seems so apt here. This line from the British-born Zen master, Hunjiu Kennet, who said that her approach to teaching students was not to lighten the burden of the student, but to make it so heavy that he or she would put it down. And I think there's something really beautiful about that notion.

If you just really see how bad things are about the situation of being a finite human, it's like, okay, cool. Now we can just roll up our sleeves and do the things that we can do as well as we can do them and not be tormented by the fact that we can't do an infinite number of things that will always be there and that will still be on your mental to-do list the day you die.

Kara Loewentheil: Yeah and I think you can have both those reactions sometimes in sequence. I definitely have people who are very high achieving, who have really based their self-esteem and their self-worth on that dopamine of ticking the things off, doing the things. And then when you get to this point, they sometimes do go through a few weeks of like, well, what is the point of anything then? But it's just like that intuitive eating period. It's like you'll come out the other side.

There's gonna be an adjustment. Your brain has to find other ways of essentially feeling good or self-validating. I don't want anyone listening to think, well, I had the first response, so I should just keep trying to do all the things and control all the things. That's sometimes the first phase. But so

much of this goes back to that control and resistance. It's like the pain and the suffering is the ever more frantic attempts to control an uncontrollable thing.

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah. The phrase, I'm sure I'm misusing it because it's like real hard science, which is not my domain, but it's like something has to metabolize. And when you stop to think about it, like I'm being sort of jovial in my chiding of people who have the first response there. I don't want to actually be mean. But if you honestly think life is a terrible thing because you can't do all the things, it's like that is such a strange definition of the meaning of a well-lived life, right?

To say that as one human in this infinitely complicated world with a limited amount of time and energy and attention, like if you can't do everything, you might as well not do anything. No, clearly by any definition what we're here to do, and this is totally consistent with being really ambitious in career or anything else. But even at the really ambitious level, clearly, what we're here to do is a fraction of all the things that could be done, and a fraction of the things that we could think of that would feel worth doing with our time and probably only to a certain level of the standard that we could conceive of, right? That's just baked into finite humans doing things in the real world. So to say that anything that met those criteria wasn't worth doing, it just makes no sense.

Kara Loewentheil: Yeah. I think this is where the self-friendliness comes in, because this is something people can grasp intellectually. But emotionally, if the way they have been taught to think is that they're not worthy of love or acceptance from themselves or anyone else unless they are doing the impossible, all the things, that relationship with yourself has to be the foundation of that. It's like, what do you actually value and care about? What does actually matter to you and how are you gonna talk to yourself about that process because for so many, at least the kind of women who

come to me, it is, I've been praised since I was little for my accomplishments and doing everything and it's like we call working moms super women.

It's like all of this is sort of like, you know, that's what you're getting praise for. But as you say, it's impossible. I mean, I have this metaphor I use when I'm coaching people about work, which is like, because people are constantly like, I'm just, I'm always behind. I'm never going to get on top of it. I can never get it all done.

Right. And I talk about work being like a river that never ends. It's like tasks come in, tasks go out. And like, that's normal and what's supposed to be happening. Until the day you die, there will be things on your to-do list that you wanted to do, whether you're professional working or not, just being a human being alive. You're not supposed to get to zero and then just chill for the rest of your life.

Oliver Burkeman: Right. And you wouldn't want to either, by the way, right?

Kara Loewentheil: Right. That's what happens. People get retired and then their death incidence goes up because they aren't doing anything if they don't have those full lives. So I think that's sort of, I love the, It's sort of like positivity through nihilism. It's like nothing matters, so choose what does.

Oliver Burkeman: That's a fair way of describing it. And as various people have – I'm not the first person to suggest this – but there's something very interesting about asking yourself, just allowing yourself to wonder. Imagine – this may also be another area where I should credit Bruce Tiff to I mentioned before, but it comes from various different strands of thought.

UFYB 384: The Logical Case for Positive Thinking with Oliver Burkeman

Take the thing that bothers you the most about yourself and your personality or anything else that you always see your life as a fight against and just allow yourself to wonder what it would be like if you knew that you were always going to have some degree of that for the rest of your life and you knew it for real. Can you see how that opens up some amazing possibilities?

You could be like, oh, okay, I can let that be and get on with some things that matter. And hilariously, this even works for procrastination, which is the failure to get on with things that matter. You can be like, oh, maybe I'm always going to have a tendency towards avoiding important actions. Okay. Well, somehow putting that to bed means that I can just get on with some important actions. It's a very strange thing.

Kara Loewentheil: This is the thing that I think breaks people's brains the most when they come to coaching because they're like, but I came here so you'd fix this. And I'm like, but what if I never do? What if this is with me forever? But because it's that resistance, right? It's like, and of course, paradoxically, when you accept it, usually it lessens.

You do figure out how to change some of it. None of it is black or white, but it's sort of the same. It's like people will grasp that they can't change other people, but then they think everything about themselves needs to be malleable and changed and fixed. And it's similar to the work thing. It's like, I'm just going to fix everything about myself, and then I'll be done.

And then at age 45, I will be a perfect human specimen who's reached enlightenment. And then I'm like, okay, what are you doing for the rest of your life then? Like, how boring. You're just going to coast in your perfection as the Buddha from 45 to the grave? But like, that's how we're thinking about it.

UFYB 384: The Logical Case for Positive Thinking with Oliver Burkeman

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah, no, absolutely. There's a sort of secret benefit to thinking that you're still in the process of fixing yourself and you're not quite there yet. It's the same kind of drawing back from plunging in fully because you get to tell yourself, this isn't quite real. I've got to do all this fixing first, finish all the coaching, find the right productivity techniques and everything, and get the right job security, whatever. That's when real life begins.

That's really depressing, but it does have a payoff. There's a reason we do it.

Kara Loewentheil: People do this with things. The things I see in my practice the most are weight, finding a partner, getting a certain job. Those are the three big things that are sort of like, well, once I lose weight, then I'm going to be able to do all these things. Or like, well, I don't want to go to Paris yet because I want to go with a partner. I'm like, go to Paris now! Like, you can't...

Oliver Burkeman: Yeah, right. And making that shift in attitude will in no sense reduce your efficacy at the project, like a partner or anything like that, right? If anything, it's going to make it a lot easier. There's certainly nothing to lose except the feeling of control. There's a great Elizabeth Gilbert quote, you were scared to let go because you were scared of losing control, but you never had control. All you had was anxiety.

Kara Loewentheil: I think people, it's like when they imagine, it's like if you go to Paris now, you're just a human in Paris. We're having a human experience where like, some of it's fun and some of it's annoying and sometimes you'd stomach ache and whatever else. But when you hold off on all those things, you get to imagine that they're all gonna feel like fantasies, right? Like relationships always gonna feel good, Paris is gonna

feel like you're in a movie. They're all these like, I call them the, we're always searching for the exit ramp off the human experience.

Oliver Burkeman: Exactly. Yeah, great. And there's no harm in a little bit of that kind of fantasizing as part of one's life, but it's a tragedy ultimately to let it mean to accept it in lieu of going to Paris with all its annoyances.

Kara Loewentheil: Yeah. I think that's a beautiful place to bring this conversation. But I do want to ask what I always, well, not always, what I often ask, which is, is there anything you wanted to share or you would want to communicate to people that I didn't ask you about?

Oliver Burkeman: No, I think we've really focused on it all. I think one of the phrases I've written about most recently that I find quite useful to sort of sum this up, it's about sort of starting from the values and the place and the orientation that you want to have in life rather than seeing them as something to strive towards that are off in the future. It's about figuring out what matters to you and, as another writer has written, acting from that identity immediately in some way, however stumblingly, however badly and incompetently because 10 minutes of action done in that spirit is invaluable compared to all the greatest hypothetical action in the world that never actually happens.

Kara Loewentheil: I love that. And for everybody listening, if you're thinking, I don't even know what my values are, literally, practically, go Google a list of values, circle 10, take it down to three. You don't have to marry them forever.

Oliver Burkeman: Right.

UFYB 384: The Logical Case for Positive Thinking with Oliver Burkeman

Kara Loewentheil: You do know, just because the words are coming to mind, like when you look at these lists, I've done this exercise, things stand out to you and things that aren't really your values and you can try one for a week, then try another one. Don't turn this into a perfectionist episode of like, okay, I just got to read 12 books and do a year of journaling and then I'll know what my values are and then I can act from them perfectly for the rest of my life. No. Just try something to get in the habit of connecting to something you care about and using it as a guide to make decisions.

Oliver Burkeman: Absolutely.

Kara Loewentheil: Where can people find you? They can find your books probably wherever books are sold.

Oliver Burkeman: That's right. Certainly the best way to support what I'm doing. My website is OliverBurkeman.com and that's where you can sign up for my newsletter as well.

Kara Loewentheil: Perfect. Thank you

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