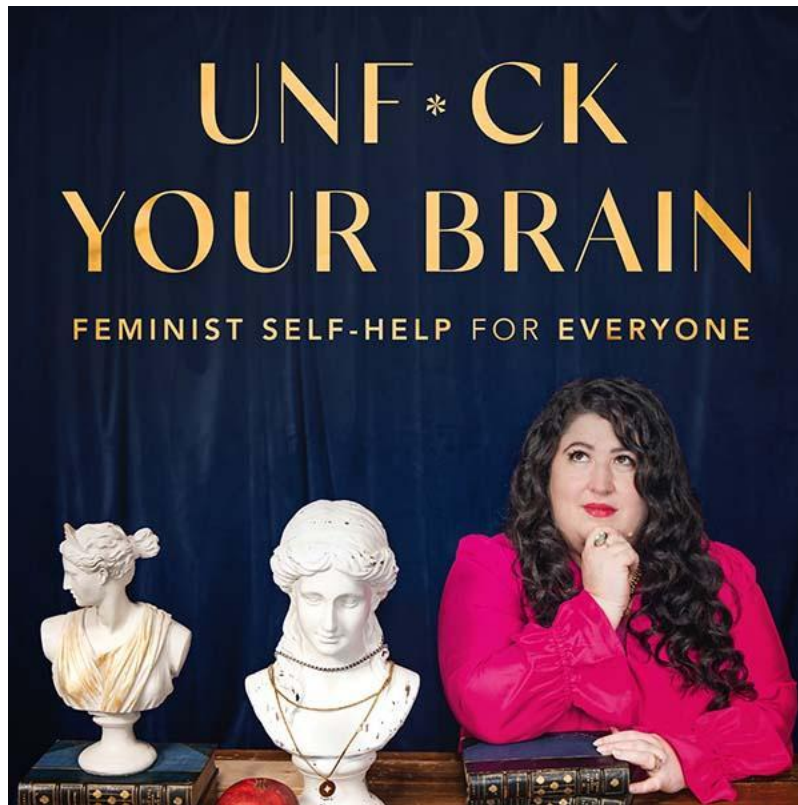


UFYB 385: How to Cope When You Don't Feel Ok



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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If you are having trouble focusing right now, you are not alone. The news is head-spinning, and while I know there are people out there living their lives only dimly aware of current events, that's not me. And if you follow this podcast, it's probably not you either. It is natural to feel disjointed and uncertain right now, but it's also not helpful to feel discombobulated indefinitely. So in today's episode, I want to help explain why you feel this way. It's not exactly what you think. And also how to help your brain keep it together. 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.

All right, my friends, we are all having a time of it. Am I right? It is funny being in the life coaching world after spending so long in the legal and advocacy world, because there are people in my life and parts of my network that are just unfazed by everything happening politically, not generally in the sense of being gung-ho about it, just in the sense of having a very different set of beliefs about the importance of politics or the relevance of political happenings to their lives.

And then there's a larger group, admittedly, in my life who are really fixated on what's happening. And I'm somewhere between on that spectrum. Certainly my predisposition, how I was raised, my education, my former career, would have me very firmly in the fixation camp. And I'm definitely sometimes there. But because of thought work, I've been able to at least somewhat detach my emotional state from my thoughts about the state of the world at every given moment.

But I know a lot of you are struggling right now, struggling to focus on anything else, feeling emotionally exhausted, finding it hard to get through

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the day, doom scrolling, reading the news way too much, even doing that compulsively, and I totally get it. Given the current political administration and world events, we are all on different places on the spectrum of how close to actual physical danger we are.

There are undocumented people in the United States and trans people in the United States who are much closer to physical or economic or social harm from the government in this moment than I am. And as a Jewish person, as a woman, as an outspoken feminist, I have more to fear from this government than my husband, who's a white cis-Midwestern dude, right?

Although he does have a Jewish wife and kids. So everything I'm teaching in this episode is not meant to be interpreted as, oh, there's no real danger here, so just calm down. That's obviously not my message. But however real or present danger may be, our ability to function is important to maintain.

And being in a fixated, distracted, discombobulated state can be problematic even for a short-lived crisis because it spikes your stress, it disrupts your sleep, it makes you worse at strategic thinking, it keeps you distracted, it makes you worse at kind of evaluating risk and acting appropriately, keeps you glued to screens for more of your day, which are pretty much inherently dysregulating for a lot of people.

But this is an even bigger problem in a situation like our current situation, because this is not going to spontaneously resolve soon. Our political problems have been years in the making and they are not going to be resolved overnight. There's probably a lot of uncertainty ahead.

So today I want to talk about why your brain is fixating because it's important to understand what your brain is looking for. And it's not just the

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obvious like looking for danger or trying to be informed. And then I want to talk about one powerful shift you can use to cope better.

So first, let's talk about what is going on in your brain, because when you know what you're looking for, each time you check the news or start ruminating, it can help you redirect your brain.

So the first and more obvious thing you're looking for is just danger. Your brain evolved to scan for danger, and it doesn't distinguish between actual literal physical harm that's right in front of you and danger that could theoretically happen or is happening somewhere else or is imaginary.

You can distinguish between them a little bit, like your stress hormones will spike more if a car is speeding at you than if you read about cars losing control and hitting people, but it's on a spectrum and it all can cause actual stress responses in your body.

So danger is one thing your brain is scanning for. And in some of our cases, that may be appropriate and necessary in real time, which is important, right? Our ideas that it may become appropriate and necessary that we may be in danger in the future are not the same thing as being in danger right now. So for many of us, it's more about fear of what may happen in the future or identifying actions that harm others or conflict with our values as dangerous in a way that our brain conflates with actual physical danger.

The other thing that is not as obvious is kind of the inverse, which is that your brain's not only looking for danger, your brain's actually looking for safety. And it seems ironic because that keeps us checking the news and reading more things which make us feel worse. But I think we're partly checking to see if anything new has happened. In other words, is there yet another danger or are we status quo for right now?

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And I think we're sometimes even subconsciously checking the news, hoping for relief or reassurance. It's like we have some subconscious hope that we'll open up the New York Times and the headline will be something like, "National Nightmare Over, We Now All Live in Utopia." We keep hoping for some good news that will make us feel better about what is going on.

And this is useful to understand because it means when you are opening the news yet again, when you're supposed to be working or making dinner or playing with your kid or reading a novel, you can remind yourself that there is zero chance that opening the news is going to give you the relief you're looking for. That headline is not coming.

And the way that news algorithms and financing works, there's a huge incentive to freak you out all the time. And that's true even for individual social media accounts, right? The more it upsets people, the more it gets seen and shared. That doesn't mean that some of it isn't true and important, but opening the internet because you subconsciously are hoping it will make you feel better or you're looking for relief from stress is betting against the house, and the house always wins.

What will actually make you feel better is being present in your own life and paying attention to things that are not the news. Being off screens and doing something that occupies your brain and your attention, like connecting with another human on non-news topics, making a meal, eating a meal, having sex, getting a hug, reading a book, gardening, whatever. Even organizing and taking direct action around our current circumstances can feel better because that is kind of self-efficacy and proactivity and usually connection with other people and pursuing a sense of meaning and pursuing a sense of power, that feels much better than scrolling.

So to summarize, the news fixation is partly because your brain is looking for danger and partly because your brain is looking for safety or relief, and

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it's looking for both of those things in the same place, which is a screen three inches from your face. So you can guess by now that I don't think that's the best place to find either of those things.

So after this quick break, I'm going to explain what I think works much better to help you cope better. When we are constantly scanning for danger or looking for relief, we are living in an extreme emotional state, and then we are trying to regulate back to normal. And we think that we can only feel normal if we can get back to a state of feeling kind of okay, as if this whole thing wasn't happening.

I noticed this in my own brain when I was coaching myself around the news and political circumstances over the last few weeks, that I was expending all this effort trying to coach myself to feel totally calm and focused and normal. I wasn't trying to ignore what was happening intellectually, obviously, but the goal emotional state I seemed to be after was to feel as normal, quote-unquote, as if this was all not happening.

I didn't say it to myself in those words, but I just noticed as I kept coaching myself that I would read something or think about the current political situation or have a fear about the future of it, and then I would be trying to coach myself to feel the way that I would have felt if like none of this was happening. And I realized that I subconsciously thought that in order to live my life, run my business, support my family, economically and emotionally, enjoy my life, or basically do anything other than obsess about the news, I would need to feel as normal as if nothing was happening at all, right? Trying to get myself back to how I felt two or six months ago.

That is not realistic and not helpful. And I realized that the most powerful thing I can do right now in this moment is be okay, not feeling okay. Because in my mind, the only alternative to feeling normal and fine was to feel crazed and panicked and unhinged. So I was swinging back and forth between the sky is falling, the world is over, I'm gonna die tomorrow, and

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then trying to be like, no, no, just trying to feel like normal and fine and trying to coach myself to do that. And those are not the only two options, right? Absolute meltdown and total willful ignorance are not my only two options in life.

I can choose to make peace with this being an unsettled time. I can decide to be okay with not feeling okay. I don't have to keep comparing this to feeling okay to normal life and trying to get back to that. I can actually still be present in my life while not feeling okay about what is happening.

This is that perspective of the watcher that's often taught in meditation. It's observing your feelings and even experiencing them without identifying with them and without being fully enmeshed in them.

So what does this look like? It looks like making space for and respecting the difficulties of this moment without abdicating presence in the rest of your life. Maybe it looks like spending two hours on a weekend morning, making some contingency plans for what might happen to your job and what you would do next, really problem solving, and then putting those away and not checking the news again until the next day.

Maybe it looks like respecting that your body will need more rest during this stressful time, and taking some commitments off the calendar, or making peace with takeout or convenience food a couple of nights a week to give yourself a break. Maybe it looks like prioritizing time with friends or family right now instead of pushing to advance your career immediately so you can refill your cup when it's draining faster than usual.

Maybe it looks like reminding your brain when it starts spinning out that you appreciate that it's trying to keep you safe and that you are aware of the possible dangers and you're keeping an eye on them. I sometimes just think of my brain as like a nervous pet that wants to know that I have things in hand and I'm keeping an eye on the danger and I'm going to protect it.

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And then I can kind of relax and trust me a bit more. This might look like finding ways to be in solidarity and take action to help support other people who are more at risk than yourself, but knowing that you are also allowed to be in your own life and not falling prey to the all or nothing thinking that if you're not going to leave your family and start an encampment on the White House lawn, then nothing you do matters, right?

How can we be okay with not being okay? How can we be in our lives when our lives are feeling very different? How do we bridge that gap? Over and over again, it looks like noticing when you're trying to feel better or normal or okay, or resisting that you don't, and just practicing accepting over and over that this is the time you are living through, and these are the emotions of the moment.

And I hope this is clear, but I'll just give the disclaimer anyway. None of this means condoning the circumstances or not working to change them. It's actually the opposite. Because my experience is that when we are in a lot of resistance for this being a difficult time, when we don't want this to feel difficult, we don't wanna feel scared, we don't wanna feel uncertain, we just want everything to feel normal and okay, that's when we get in a compulsive way, right?

And that's when we are either numbing compulsively, reading the news compulsively, talking and thinking about politics compulsively, and that actually is a distraction from having the resources to not just show up in your own life, but actually show up to try to change the circumstances that you are freaking out about.

So we're not condoning the circumstances, but when we are causing our own suffering by resisting reality, and by trying to feel normal in abnormal times, one of the ways we can reduce that suffering is by simply being willing to be where we are and feel the way that we feel.

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So in other words, we can stop trying to feel okay. And paradoxically, when you accept that you're not going to feel okay a lot of the time or some of the time or a little bit of the time or most of the time right now, you actually will be able to function much better because you realize that you can feel not okay and still be you and still be in your life and still go day to day and even still have moments of pleasure and connection and joy and you'll be able to function much better. Really paradoxically, you'll even feel a little bit more okay too.

All right my friends, that's it for this week. Have an okay or not okay week, but know that it's okay to be wherever you are.

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