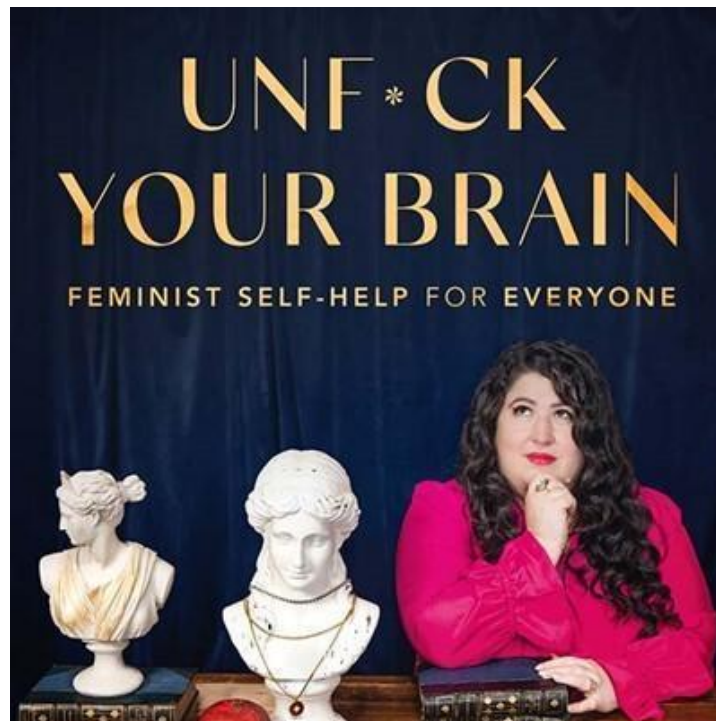


UFYB 393: How to Calm Down Right Now: A Conversation with Emily Decker



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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.

Hello my friends. All right. We are here today because of an Instagram post, which is not normally how I get my podcast episode ideas. But if you've been listening to the podcast, you know I have been talking a lot about the balance between being informed and engaged and not basically setting our brains into catastrophizing doom spirals all the time. And we've talked a lot about in the sense of the self-coaching model, the ways in which thinking like the thought that's like, I need to know what's going on to be a good person actually keeps you like spinning all the time and not actually taking any action.

So, I follow Emily, who is here on the podcast, Emily Decker, who is a somatic based personal trainer. And she posted recently about what looked to me like sort of the nervous system somatic side of the phenomenon I'm talking about in terms of how that kind of constant chronic stress and news absorption cycle can get stuck in the body and kind of what it does to us on somatic level. So, I DM'd her and I was like, we need to talk about this on the podcast. And so here she is. So, I'm going to introduce Emily. And Emily, can you tell us a little bit just like about yourself and what you do top level and then we'll get a little bit into like, how did you come to this work? And then how are you applying it in today's current moment?

Emily: Yeah. Thanks for having me. I am like you said, somatic based personal trainer. I've been studying somatic experiencing for three to four years and I have been a personal trainer for about eight. I have a Master's degree in social work from University of Southern California. I was going to be a therapist. I did not become a therapist.

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Kara: Like so many of us. Why be original?

Emily: But I just, you know, I really love being active and I was a non-diet personal trainer or like body neutral before I started incorporating a somatic focus and helping people to really kind of learn to feel into their bodies and align with their bodies in movement and exercise and find a new relationship with it that way. Most of my clients are online. I have a couple clients, I'm based out of Los Angeles. I have a couple of in-person clients here. But that is the very like nuts and bolts of exactly what I do for my job. And then being kind of plunged into this environment that nobody of us asked to be in. I have decided that I'm going to just take on some new challenges of online around trying to educate us about how we can interact with the news in a healthier way.

Kara: So I actually, before we get into kind of the news and the current events, I'd love to hear about a little bit about your journey because I think a lot of people, especially who are attracted to this podcast are like, oh, I'm just going to live in my brain. This is great. This is going to unfuck my brain and we're going to talk about my brain and I don't ever need to acknowledge that I have a body that might have feelings down there. I'll just change my thoughts. And that journey from kind of body positivity to a more somatic base is kind of like transitioning from like concepts and ideas to like the physical presence. So I'd love to hear just like, how did you end up on that journey? Like what were you seeing or experiencing that led you to incorporate somatic work?

Emily: So, believe it or not from where I am now, I was once a CrossFit coach for five years and phased out for a lot of reasons from that. But I've always actually really loved like intense movement and I recognize that not everybody does and I also don't think that it's for everyone. But then I also recovered from my own eating disorder, which I was kind of in denial about for maybe a solid like 20 years.

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Kara: It's so easy to be when society is like telling people to have disordered eating. It's like so easy to not know that.

Emily: And complimenting you when you're kind of like at the height of it as being successful. So, so as I started becoming more aware of my own body sensations and what was going on with it. I actually think like intuitive eating was probably a really instrumental piece of that for me. And so I kind of at the same time that I was starting to kind of become like more take more embodiment classes that, you know, friends relating and things like that and find them really transformational.

I was noticing that a lot of the clients I was working with from this like non-diet framework were like kind of bumping up against this like resistance to exercise in different ways for whatever reasons because they had recovered from their own eating disorder and had these terrible negative associations from it. You know, or because of like chronic illness and fearing a flare or I have a lot of clients who just like I resent, dread, avoid exercise and don't know why. And there are plenty, plenty, plenty of cultural and experiential reasons why that happens and that shows up.

When I looked for something to study around it to kind of get more in tune with what was happening inside other people's bodies because there was something kind of intuitively in me that when I'm sitting across from someone like I'm seeing a certain like constriction and protectiveness against the idea of exercise. And I had kind of always experienced that as a trainer, like people kind of you tell them you're a trainer and they're all of a sudden apologizing for their habits.

Kara: Right. They're like, this is I'm not actually in charge of your workout regime. It's okay.

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Emily: Yeah. Yeah, and it's nothing to apologize for, you know? And so the more I started applying like a somatic framework to exercise, the more I like saw exactly how they go hand in hand.

Kara: So, as we said, we're sort of all, well, I think you said none of us asked for this time. Like I guess some people did, but none of us most of the listeners in this podcast did not ask for this. And so one of the things I'm seeing, right, is people like a lot of ruminating, a lot of fixation. I'm like coaching myself in my own brain, right? There's this sort of the constant news and media cycle. You go on social media, right? The algorithm feeds you more and more of what you want to see or what it thinks you want to see. And so there's this like ongoing state of activation, right?

And then people are exhausted even though they haven't actually done anything. They've just been like reading the news and going through normal life, which can be exhausting. I'm not taking away from that. So I'm just curious sort of what has been your experience of like entering this moment? What has inspired you or how did you end up sort of thinking like, oh, I think, you know, the tools I have are like relevant to what's going on here for people?

Emily: Having education and training around like understanding other people's nervous systems. It's something you can't unsee once you start kind of really delving into it because, you know, you go to these trainings and you practice on other people and you sit across from them and you and you watch and you listen. And something that I noticed as I talk to people about the news and current events is reactions they have that are like kind of consistent with just being blown out of their window of tolerance.

And at the same time, like we're so addicted to our phones. Like I for sure, like have to really be intentional if I'm if I'm not going to get totally caught up

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in that. In addition, like I think there's something that kind of happens in more progressive areas where kind of sharing the most upsetting content feels like doing something. And so between kind of like the election and the inauguration, like I really kind of seeing how people are getting really like dejected and hopeless. And when we're in a hopeless space, you don't hear about people who change the world from a hopeless space. So like misery isn't action. Like taking action and also responding in your own system to the news are separate things.

You know, they can be, like we can use civic action as a way to respond to like our mobilization response in our bodies in a way where that urge to fight, if we believe in the actions that we're taking can be really helpful for feeling empowered in that. But that isn't the same thing as the kind of like constant like dopamine scrolling, like trying to find a solution online for this problem that our brain and I would say our brain is telling us an is an emergency, but in a lot of ways, like it is somewhat urgent. But urgency in the political climate and urgency in the body again are not the same thing and don't need to be the same thing.

Kara: Yeah, that's there's so much stuff in there I want to unpack. So first, can we back up for a minute? Can you explain to people what is the window of tolerance if they don't know and what does it look like to be inside of it or outside of it?

Emily: Yeah, so the window of tolerance, a lot of things online you'll hear about like having a regulated nervous system, which in SE, in somatic experiencing, we actually talk more about it as a coherent nervous system. So like a nervous system that can rise and fall in ways that it's not getting stuck in any certain reaction. It isn't actually healthy to just try and be calm all the time. Our nervous systems are going to be reactive to the environment and to what's currently happening.

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Kara: It's called being dead if your nervous system doesn't respond to anything.

Emily: Yeah. So the window of tolerance is the space where we can navigate those like ebbs and flows most adaptively. And then if we're going outside the window of tolerance in an activation way, we're potentially going to go into like hyperarousal and have like the fight or flight, have that urge to run, urge to fight, urge to and eventually that could become like, you know, something like a panic attack or like an explosion of rage if we're not careful and you know, taking it out in ways that we don't mean to. And then the other direction is going into like a freeze response or a fawn response and kind of collapsing into not having any sense of how to get out of our own bodies and feeling trapped in them.

Kara: Yeah, so it's I think when I think about this and the way I would talk about your thought work or your cognition, it's like when you are within your window of tolerance, your brain is still online. Like you are able to think and reason and problem solve. And when you are, you know, we know that when you are activated, your prefrontal cortex becomes harder to access, right? It's like harder for you to think straight. And so I think that leads to that second point you made, which is like the distinction between urgent in a like geopolitical sense and urgency as it's felt in the body. Can you talk a little bit more about what you mean by that and how you would kind of describe those two things?

Emily: So the first comment I want to make on that is that kind of like I alluded to, it isn't bad to be activated and it isn't necessarily bad to go outside of your window of tolerance. Ideally, you know, in a flexible nervous system, we're going to come back. We're training the nervous system to come back to that coherence, to that window of tolerance when it gets sent out of that space. Now, the urgency around the geopolitical climate, like

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most of us, and I've heard you say this on your podcast, like most of us, this is not our professional work.

So we have actions we can do that are important because of how powerful they are at large scale and because of how powerful individual actions can be even when one person is undertaking them. And at the same time, a lot of those actions do take what you're talking about, that like kind of executive function planning. Whereas in the exact moment of being in that urgency response in the body where the body is telling you like, I have to do something, I have to do something, I have to do something, that can be absolutely the time that you start brainstorming and you kind of like start figuring out what more you might be able to do or you call a friend and talk it out or that's when you call your representatives.

But that's not, you know, always going to be happening on the same day as a protest. And it isn't necessarily what people who are organizing large scale protests are experiencing in their bodies because you don't need to be experiencing like a constant sense of urgency in our body, which the news absolutely can have that effect on us, that isn't the same thing as organizing and resisting necessarily.

Kara: Yeah, I think that's so important because there's also I think among the left and progressive circles, maybe also on the right, I don't know, but that's not my media, that's not my echo chamber. There's like a the sort of the conflation of, well, this really is actually old and religious, right? The conflation of like thought and morality basically, that like if you have certain thoughts, you're a good person, if you have certain thoughts, you're a bad person. And I think that has been like transmuted into our kind of current belief of like, you need to be having a certain emotion in order to demonstrate that you care, right?

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Like if you're not freaking out, if you're not despairing, if you're not hopeless, if you're not like having an extreme emotional reaction all the time, it means that you're not a good person, you don't care, you're too privileged, whatever it is. So then we have this like counterproductive thought pattern that is actually incentivizing us to like, if we ever do calm down, go look online and get ourselves activated again, right?

So I think just being aware, like those of you who are listening, you have to watch for that also kind of almost like subconscious motivator. So you have like your you have your nervous system's maybe more inherent tendency to like get activated, to go looking for relief, unfortunately, in the same place that activated you. And then when you are back in that window of tolerance and you are calmer, you then sometimes have this subconscious like, it's not okay to feel calm.

If I notice that I'm not freaking out, then I think A, maybe I'm missing something. I better go look and see if anything else bad has happened I need to know about. And B, I'm going to feel like a bad person if I actually just enjoy this birthday party even while democracy is crumbling or whatever. Like there's this sort of connection between like your emotional state and your morality when given modern media, it's possible to feel terrible 24/7 by looking up. Like there's always something terrible happening somewhere and we're not designed for that ecosystem.

So one of the things I thought was really helpful was just sort of walking through like, what is happening in your body and nervous system when you are constantly taking in that news and the kind of, I almost think of it as like, it sort of felt to me like you were talking about like contraction and expansion or like a flow in and out of states instead of being stuck in one. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

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Emily: Yeah. So, one thing I mentioned I also responding to what you just said, like before I answer that question, that's okay. We get our cues from people in groups that we trust. So in the kind of groups of people that we're following or aligning with, you know, if other people are miserable, then like yes, like it might actually feel really or seem miserable. I will say that because we went like again, when you're seeing people post on social media, they're highlight reel or they're like miserable reel. Like you don't actually know what's going on with them. But I can totally understand how it would like feel guilty to like feel joy when that's actually like incredibly required to sustain a population through difficulty or in resistance.

And we take social cues from everyone from other people from, you know, even like an ancestral level. But it's confusing on social media when you're not actually with the people and we don't have spaces to process on a community level, our grief, our rage. Like that's like kind of the product of like a colonized culture where a lot of these really rooted kind of rituals and experiences to come together and process these things and help each other have like kind of been written off.

And so to answer your question about like the kind of expansion and contraction, noticing what's going on in your body. Something that I've noticed pretty strongly is that when that people don't feel safe. And when they're reading the news, they don't feel safe. And there is definitely reasons for that and a lot of people, there's a lack of safety in general for a lot of people right now, like and there might be for more. And also, I'm recording a podcast with you right now and I couldn't be recording this podcast if I wasn't physically safe. And I kind of say repeatedly on my page, like if you're scrolling on Instagram right now, you're probably not being chased by a tiger.

You know, so our nervous systems don't necessarily know the difference. So when we're consuming upsetting information. So, you know, a lot of

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times if you kind of notice you're scrolling on social media, you're going to be consuming probably a lot of upsetting information and then having that kind of like whiplash sensation of like someone's beautiful dinner.

Kara: Right. I know, it's so bizarre.

Emily: It is. If you notice what's happening in your own body, when you kind of like pause as you're scrolling and just kind of like sense into what is happening in your own body? How like loose or tight is it? How are you sitting? How is your breath? Notice what happens if you set the phone down and come back to the room that you're in and take some of these visual cues that like a tiger isn't chasing you.

And that's when you might actually notice like some of those like waves of our natural nervous system waves, you might come down a little bit from being so activated. But if we're not taking those moments to notice that, to tell our bodies and remind our bodies that we are not inside of our phones, we are not in what's happening in that moment, then we can just be kind of stuck there when we put our phones down and not have that settling, that's resourcing for the actual actions that we need to take in order to make a difference.

Kara: Yeah, one of the things that I have noticed myself and talked about on the podcast and one of the reasons I think we get even more sucked in online is that when we get stuck in that state, then it's like we want to feel better, but because we don't know how to drop into our bodies, we like go online to feel better both because we're just conditioned to get dopamine from our phones and because I almost think sometimes we're scrolling hoping for like a headline that the cavalry has come and the nightmare is over or something, right? It's like we're like looking for some reason for optimism online, right?

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And that I think just like perpetuates this sort of disassociated state where your brain is experiencing it as if your world is living, as you said, like in your phone and online, right? And one of the things I really appreciated about the post that led us to this conversation was, I could be misremembering this, but I feel like you were talking about that practice of like it is normal to take breaks from that, to be back in your body and like listen to the birds sing or eat something or move your body. Like we're not saying obviously neither of us are saying like, don't worry, nothing's happening. Don't check your phone. You are not actually a brain in a jar.

So when you are sort of living in your phone in that way, right? Your nervous system never gets the chance to like come back to the window of tolerance or like discharge that energy or like resettle and then you're just, I guess you can't see if you're listening, but I'm making like a flat line with my hand, right? You're just like stuck in whatever that state is.

So one thing I think I'd love to hear from you in terms of some suggestions is like, what are some kind of somatic things people can do to when they notice like, like I'm I feel agitated. I put down the phone, I still feel agitated or I still feel stressed. One of the things you mentioned was like looking around, giving yourself like literally the visual cue that nothing around you is physically dangerous. Are there other techniques or things that you think are accessible to people that they can try?

Emily: Totally. And I think what you just naturally said about listening to the bird sing, I think that's as powerful as anything else. You put the phone down and see what you hear. I really love an orienting exercise that I'll use with my clients and I'll do myself when we're feeling or having a hard time like settling into the space, into the room. Noticing the closest sound to you can hear, and then trying to notice the farthest sound away you can hear as that can um really click something different in your brain to kind of give you

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a sense of your space and a sense of how far your safety might be going in the current moment.

There's so many like wonderful grounding tools. I find like nature is kind of unmatched because that's in our that is in our blood and bones to like, you know, they say like when a human sees a river, their blood pressure drops or listens to-

Kara: We bought a house upstate on a creek and I was like, that's the only requirement. The house has basically no doors inside, really an unusable space, but there's a creek. Like that's running water is like such a natural regulator.

Emily: And I heard from that I heard that from a lot of people, you know, during the pandemic this and I experienced it myself too living in like the center of Los Angeles. I was like we were actually in this like very serious emergency and the body like wants to know that it's going to have its resources. And so like kind of knowing-

Kara: And if you don't live near a river, you can order a little rock garden that you plug in and put water in and that will run water. Right? You can take advantage of your brain not knowing the difference between big things and small things.

Emily: Sure. Yeah, I mean there's lots of apps that have river sounds. sounds. And I also want to mention something you said about trying to find online the news that's going to make you hopeful. And this is the exact reason why I launched, let me preface by saying like, I have no idea if the people who follow me actually want to be seeing this. Every once in a while somebody says that it really has given them hope. But I have kept posting it, which is every time that I see like encouraging oppositional news coming from both sides.

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So either like someone on the left doing something that's like could be really like cathartic to view or like you really realize someone's standing up for you or someone on the right who you probably like wrote off is like never going to have like a significant part of the resistance, like doing something kind of unexpected, like drafting like bipartisan legislation to limit tariff executive power over tariffs, which that just happened.

So I have those highlights on my page like specifically because there is such like an influx of terrible, terrible news. And I do think it's important also if we're developing long-term strategies to see some encouragement and see that there's a building of a coalition because I see that there is. And also, I realize that with the media I passively consume, I don't. I actually have to go look for it.

Kara: Yeah, there's not as much of an algorithmic like benefit or advertiser benefit. You don't get sucked in, right, with the good news. God forbid, you put your phone down and go live your life, then the advertisers don't make as much money. So, I think one of the things I want to tell people like when you are, especially for those of us who aren't as like practiced in these somatic things. When you put your phone down and you try to orient, you may not feel calmer right away.

Try to stay with it because I noticed even like in even in myself and I do these things, when you have like sort of accustomed your body to like that feeling sort of agitation or of constant simulation, it takes a minute to be able to regulate to engage in something that moves at a normal biological pace, like even like reading a book or watching a either a creek or a little fountain in your house. Like whatever it is going for a walk, like when your brain has just been in this like very overstimulating fake world basically, it like takes your body and brain a minute to adjust.

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So you won't necessarily feel better immediately and this is something I talk about with thought work all the time, right? I think sometimes people avoid becoming aware of their bodies or trying to learn how to regulate themselves because it's uncomfortable at first and your brain would prefer to go back to just kind of being stressed but dissociated in that space you're used to.

Emily: And there can also be a host of feelings that come up that we may not want to be accessing. And I think another strategy as you're saying that came to my mind is we are constantly co-regulating. And so we kind of talked about that at the top about how like we are upwardly co-regulating when we're scrolling online and seeing like really upsetting stuff. So taking those times to be in the communities that we have and to be like intentional about the activities we're doing together and also being with your pets, tuning into their nervous systems, like being present and co-regulating in that way can sometimes you know, make it a little bit easier to kind of come to that space because realizing that we aren't alone is a really big part of knowing that we're safe.

Kara: Yeah, whenever I spend time with friends, I have found even my most lefty engaged activist friends, like when we're hanging out, nobody really wants to talk about what's happening for that hour, right? Because people need to like experience normal human life connection because normal human life does keep going on even in the midst of everything, like political And I'm not saying, I shouldn't say normal because I don't mean things may not be normal in a sense of socially or politically.

But I mean the like almost like the normal biological life of like eating and sleeping and talking to other humans and connecting to them and like that sort of local community because one of the other things I talk about a lot is like the antidote to that sort of diffuse alienation of online where like you're constantly thinking about the big picture political stuff even though you

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don't have a daily way to impact it as much. You can of course call senators, go to protests. You can do all those things and should if you want to.

But there's always need in your community right around you that you can participate in on a practical physical level. You can make a meal for a neighbor who's sick or just had a baby. You can go volunteer at a food bank in your neighborhood. You can go hand out flyers that explain how to talk to ICE in the language of more undocumented people in your area. Like there are things you can do on the ground and you will feel so much better because it involves a lot of the things that help regulate your nervous system, which is like taking proactive action, moving your body around, interacting with other people, feeling self-efficacy about contributing to a solution.

Emily: Yeah, 100%. And the post that we've been referring to, I was also talking about my experience during the fires in Los Angeles and how it has informed my view of social media and news consumption because of how clear it was when it was time to evacuate. And then when I got to a safe space, how clear my body was that it was safe. Even though we still had like looming threats and they did keep popping up. But for some reason, I noticed a difference in like how I was riding those waves. And I did not lose anything. I was so lucky. But how I was riding those waves versus how people who were witnessing it unfold online seem to be when I would talk to them, you know, my clients would talk to me then when we had sessions.

And it's like they, you know, had no idea what they could do to help and everybody wanted to help. And so I think also, if you do, you know, feel called to help, there's so many ways that we can and believing that it matters and knowing when it's time to go and knowing when it's time to rest are so integral.

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Kara: Yeah, I talk a lot about the thought work side, practicing thoughts that are like trusting yourself that you'll know what to do when the time comes, right? So it's not gaslighting yourself that like nothing is going wrong. You might not have to make hard decisions. You might whatever. But the constant like, yeah, a little bit of planning can be useful, but if you are constantly ruminating on like, what to do, what to do, what to do, what to do? At that point, it's just a sort of futile attempt to feel better through control of things you can't control and predict, right?

And so it's really more about believing like, I know how to like see my resources, I know how to make decisions. Like I will know what to do. Having that trust in yourself, which I think women especially it gets eroded because we're socialized that like we don't know what to do and men are leaders in a crisis. Even though women are putting out dealing with crises every day.

This has been so helpful. I want to ask just one last question, which is, is there anything that you wanted to share on this that I didn't ask you or anything else you want to tell those listening?

Emily: We covered a whole lot. I think the one thing I will mention that I that I regularly think about is like when I did work in social work and people who whose work is involved in like either crisis intervention or even in kind of dealing with some of these like political issues. They have to develop long-term strategies around supporting themselves and having community support and having like going to therapy or having, you know, groups where they unpack what they're seeing because otherwise like they can't do their job and they're and they're not going to feel good and they're probably, you know, might have some like health results from that.

And I think that there's something to like learn from the nervous systems of people who are kind of like in those fields and also around how they're

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choosing to boundary what they do. Like I had a really hard time with certain aspects of social work. And so like I switched internships because that was not for me or, you know, when I worked at a shelter for women fleeing, women and children fleeing violence. I really loved working in the transitional living space because people were coming out of their emergency shelter stay and I was helping them rebuild their lives.

So kind of noticing for you, if you feel like called to be part of this and if it's upsetting to you, then there's probably something in you that has a value that you want to be helpful. And like you just said, like noticing in your community and with your resources, how can you both like best be helpful and where's the intersection of that while balancing your own self care.

Kara: Yeah, I love that. I mean, I was a reproductive rights attorney and policy person advocate before I became a coach and like the burnout was so endemic and one of the reasons that I became interested in these tools because you cannot fight the fight long term if you're burnt out and if your system kind of shuts down. Get offline. Go do something in the real world. Bottom line is you will feel better if you get offline and you both do something in the real world with your within your own body to orient and if you go help someone in the real world, it will feel better than endless hours of scrolling. Where can people find more to follow you? On Instagram, ironically enough, not in person.

Emily: Yes, right. Instagram, Emily Decker Fitness and my website is emilydeckerfitness.com. Those are pretty much the basic places.

Kara: Great. Thanks so much for coming on.

Emily: Thank you.

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