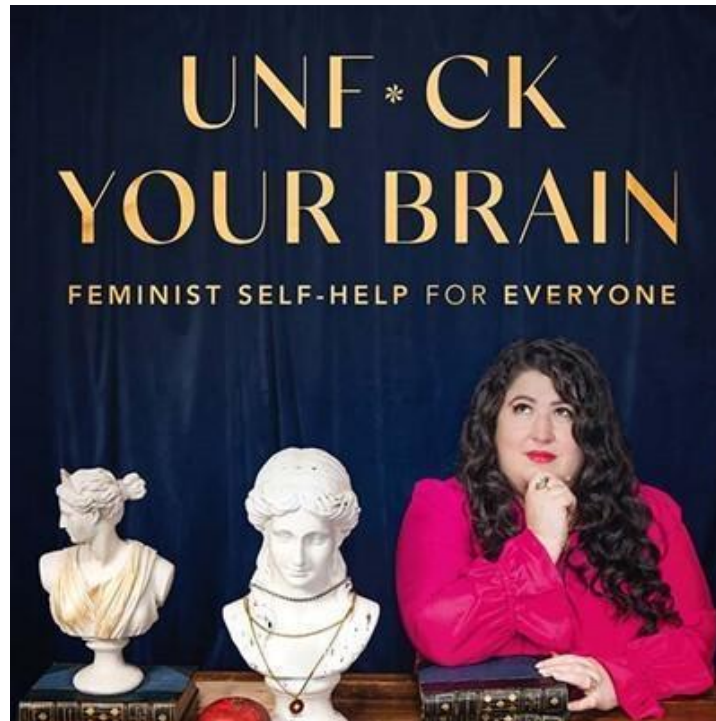


UFYB 396: Why You Obsess Over Some People's Opinions (But Not Others)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Have you ever noticed that some opinions other people have about you just roll right off your brain, like water off a duck's back for a mixed metaphor? And then some other opinions people have about you feel maybe more like sticky taffy that you can't get off your brain once it gets stuck on there. Sometimes these aren't even opinions you even know if someone actually holds; they're just opinions you think someone else might have or that you fear they have about you.

So, why does your brain care so much about what other people think sometimes, but not others? It's not because you only worry about the true opinions. I'll tell you that much. And it's not because of those people being important to you or having power over you, necessarily. In this episode, I'm going to get into why our brain is sometimes fine with other people's opinions about us and sometimes fixated and obsessed with them. 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. I have to tell you, the other day I was reading a graphic novel with my stepson and one of the characters said, "What's kicking, chickens?" And now, I just want to open every episode that way. I used to call my podcast listeners and my students chickens. I've moved away from that, but what's kicking, chickens?

Okay, so here's what's kicking. Last week, we talked about why we care so much about what other people think about us. We talked about while evolution does have something to do with it, women and other marginalized people are taught to care disproportionately about other people's thoughts

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about us. Much more than we care about what we think about ourselves, unfortunately. So we end up living our lives in fear of other people's opinions and judgment.

And this has been true for a long time, right? And true historically, like for a good reason. Think about *The Scarlet Letter*, the classic of American literature. It's all about a woman who's shunned because of her community's opinion of her.

So, what our community thought about us, it matters in proportion to a woman's lack of ability to live independently, right? The amount we need to care about what everybody else thinks about us is directly proportional to the amount that we don't have economic rights, don't have political rights, don't have reproductive rights, don't have social rights. The more we can't live our own lives on our own terms, the more we have to care what other people think about us because we can't live independently.

But today, being fixated on other people's opinions really holds us back and keeps us from living the kind of lives we now could live, legally, socially, economically, if we really went for them. So today, what I want to talk about is the kind of confusing inconsistency we can experience in our own brain when it comes to other people's opinions.

So, I often use the example of how my brain worked when I was dating, and I use this for good reason because basically, every unhelpful thought pattern a person could have existed all at once when I was dating in my brain. So, I would often be in a scenario where I rationally knew that a dude who I had just matched with online, who had said something insulting or who had ghosted or whatever, was not someone who was going to be important in my life. I generally didn't even know this person's last name. I had no idea if they shared my values or priorities. I had no idea if they were

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smart or interesting. I had no idea if I respected their opinion, but I was obsessed with what they thought of me.

Meanwhile, at the same time, if there were people in my life who I knew loved me and thought I was attractive and smart and wonderful, I completely discounted those opinions, right? Our focus on other people's opinions and beliefs about us is not a rational objective analysis. We generally discount other people's positive opinions of us if those already exist, right? We will drive ourselves to burnout trying to create a positive opinion about us in someone else if we don't think they have one or trying to change their negative opinion to positive.

But if somebody just naturally has a positive opinion about us, we immediately undermine that to ourselves. Like, how often have you waved away a compliment by telling yourself that the person was just being nice? They just like you. They have to say that. They're just being polite. They don't realize you don't actually deserve the compliment. You just worked hard, you just got lucky, right? Et cetera.

If someone just naturally comes up with a positive opinion about us, we spend zero time thinking about that. We don't focus on it at all. And in fact, we usually discount it, disclaim it, or explain it away. And this is important because our brain tells us that other people's opinions of us are so important, and we have to obsess about them and give them so much weight and make our decisions based on them. But in reality, your brain only means other people's negative opinions about you. Your brain really doesn't do anything with positive opinions of you. It doesn't believe them. It doesn't invest in them. It doesn't make decisions based on them.

So, first things first, you have to call your brain out on this. Like, no, brain, you don't actually think that other people's opinions are really important. You only think their negative opinions are important. That's why if someone

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has a negative thought about us, we're much more likely to obsess over it. But even when it comes to negative opinions about us, that can be confusing and inconsistent too.

When you learn how and why your brain is working the way it is, you'll realize it's not actually random or inconsistent. I'm going to explain that in the second part of today's episode. But it's undeniable that on the surface, when you're just experiencing it, it often does not make sense the things that your brain has decided to fixate on. For instance, sometimes there'll be a person in our life who has a lot of emotional power over us or for us, and we will care desperately what they think about one area of our lives, but not another.

So you might care a lot what your mom thinks about your boyfriend, but you don't care at all what she thinks about your wardrobe or your appearance. Maybe you care a lot what your boss thinks about how you participate in meetings, but you don't care what they think about your work on the team's social media.

Sometimes we care a lot what people think about us, even when we rationally know that those people do not matter and aren't important in our lives, or even when we completely disagree with them about the issue. So, your brain might obsess over a comment on Instagram from someone you don't even know that implies that you are greedy or you need to lose weight or you're parenting wrong. Or maybe there's a parent on the PTA, and even though you know that you and he have absolutely opposite parenting philosophies and you kind of detest him as a person, you still obsess over his condescending comments about you putting cookies in your kid's lunch.

Sometimes we are getting or imagining negative feedback about something that we have tried to convince ourselves we feel really confident about. And so then we can't understand why our brain is still fixating on it. So maybe

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you're pursuing an unconventional job, and you're telling yourself that you feel really confident about it, you don't care what anyone else thinks, and you're telling everybody that. But then you have coffee with a former coworker and they seem confused about your decision, and they don't seem to think your business idea is going to work. And suddenly you're obsessing over why they don't get it and how they aren't being supportive and that they're judging you.

It can feel very confusing, even maddening, to have your brain fixate on certain things and not others, to have somebody who barely matters take up an outsized space in your brain with their opinion of you, and to have your brain meanwhile be dismissing or ignoring good opinions about you, positive opinions about you, the opinions of people who actually should matter more to you. It's confusing.

But the reason your brain obsesses about certain people's opinions or certain opinions that certain people have and not about others that arguably make more sense, are more relevant, have more of an impact on your life, is actually totally clear and explainable when you understand how your brain works and how it chooses what to focus on. And that's what I'm going to explain right after this quick break.

Okay, so why do our brains act like this? Why do they obsess over opinions, sometimes of people we barely know or care about, and then sometimes are chill about opinions of people who should matter a lot to us? Or why do they take one person and care a lot about their opinion about some things and not about others? The secret is that it has nothing to do with the other person's opinion. Let's say that again. It has nothing to do with the other person's opinion.

Haven't I been talking this whole couple of episodes about other people's opinions? Yes, because that's what our brain thinks it cares about. But

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actually, what our brain cares about is our opinion. Other people's opinions bother us when they echo our own opinions or fears about ourselves.

So, I think of this in a metaphorical sense, as if your brain has little sockets for all of its own opinions. And those areas where you feel confident, the socket is closed. Outside input does not click into the socket. Nothing plugs in. No electric signal is sent. This is obviously a metaphor. There's not a socket for other people's opinions in your brains. But when you feel confident about something, that socket is closed. It's smooth. There's nowhere for someone else's opinion to dock into it.

When I was going on dates, I never worried about whether someone would think my hair was ugly because it was brown or curly, because I loved those things about my hair. So if somebody was like, "Oh, I only like blondes," I just swiped left and didn't give it a second thought. But what did I worry about? If they were going to think I was too fat, if they were going to think I was too needy, if they were going to think I was too much, if they thought I wasn't girlfriend material, if they thought their friends wouldn't be impressed with me, whatever.

Because these were all worries, fears, and thoughts I had about myself. Right? There was no socket space. There was nowhere for someone's opinion to dock about blonde hair or straight hair because I don't have any thoughts about that being better or my hair being worse. But I had plenty of sockets for these other thoughts because those were my criticisms of myself.

In my work, I have never worried about someone thinking I am too feminist. There is no open socket for that belief from someone else. Even though, in this case, I actually know for sure that people unquestionably think that. And I know that because they communicate it to me. They post it on my social media. They put it in podcast reviews. They send me emails. And my

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feminism has absolutely cost me followers, money, and public exposure because it's not as like milquetoast and mainstream as a lot of self-help drivel is.

Like, it's harder to get on the Today Show when you want to talk about feminism. But even before I did a lot of thought work on having my own back, like even really before thought work, I did not care about this specific criticism. Because I don't think I'm too feminist. I think being as feminist as I am is a good thing. So I feel very secure in it. I don't want the support of anyone who thinks I should not be a feminist. I don't want to date anyone who thinks that. I didn't care about people's, you know, criticism of my work in academia if they were anti-feminist, because I don't have a socket for that criticism, because it's not a criticism I have of myself.

So even though I know for sure this is an opinion people hold of me and still hold of me, and the more my public profile grows, the more people have that opinion of me because the more people are exposed to me, I literally never think about this. I do not give it any thought except when I'm occasionally using it as an example when I'm teaching this concept.

But what did I worry about in my business? When I started out, I worried a lot about people thinking I was derivative and that I didn't have something unique to say because I had that fear in the beginning too. I changed that belief, and as a consequence, my content became more unique. That specific order. Change the belief first, and then my brain came up with more unique ideas. So now I don't have this fear anymore, but I worried about it a lot in the beginning, and my little socket was very open for that opinion or my projection that people would have that opinion.

These days, I worry a lot about my husband thinking I'm too critical, even though he has told me multiple times that's not how he experiences me. But I have the thought myself that I'm too critical, so I'm constantly worrying

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about it. And I have to manage my mind about it actively. We worry about other people thinking the things that we think about ourselves or that we fear might be true about ourselves. And this can be subconscious. So a client might say to me, "I don't know why I care so much what my best friend thinks about my job because I know I'm okay with it, and I'm okay with not making a lot of money."

But the truth is, they're worrying about it because deep down they're not totally okay with it. That doesn't mean their job's actually a problem. It just means they have some unresolved thoughts about their job and making money. If they truly felt secure in it, and they truly knew that their friend judged it, they would either make peace with that and not think about it or maybe end the friendship if that was important enough. But they wouldn't like fixate and ruminate about it and think about how their friend should have a different opinion or how to prove to their friend that it was a good idea that they were doing what they did or how to make money some other way to prove to the friend they could make money, right? They wouldn't be having all of that thought process.

When you care what someone else thinks, it's always because you secretly share that thought about yourself, or at least you fear it might be true and think it's a problem if it is. So the obvious objection I get to this is, "No, I don't think it's true, but the person that I'm worried about has power over me, so I have to care what they think." But let's break down whether that's really true. If I think that I'm really smart and capable, do I worry about whether my boss thinks I'm dumb?

First of all, no. In the absence of my boss saying, "I think you're an idiot," this wouldn't even occur to me. Because if I really believe I'm smart and capable deep down, there's no reason it would occur to me that my boss thinks I'm stupid or that I would interpret their behavior through that lens. And even if it was directly said, like if my boss did say, "I think you're an

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idiot." If I truly believe I'm smart, it's not really going to phase me. And I would not start to fixate and worry about it and worry about getting fired for it because I would think, "Okay, I am smart and I'm going to get a better job where they're smart enough to realize that I am also smart."

If a man said to me while I was dating, "I don't like that you're a brunette feminist. I prefer blonde conservative women," I would not be upset. I would not second guess myself. I would not try to change myself. I would just walk away, confident in knowing I can find a partner who likes brunette feminists. If I didn't feel confident about that, that would show me that, "Oh, I have a belief that maybe men don't like feminists." You know, if I in this scenario, obviously I'm straight and dating men.

Maybe they don't like feminists. Maybe I'm not considered attractive unless I'm blonde. Maybe I do have to change myself, right? Maybe this is a detriment to me. So, maybe I'm not believing that it's bad to be a feminist, but I'd be believing that it's a problem for me to be a feminist, that other people won't like it, right? That it'll turn people off and that's a problem for me.

When I first became a coach, I was so sensitive to other people's judgments or my perceptions or like conjectures of their judgments that coaching was not a real job, and I was doing something stupid by throwing away my legal career. And I tied myself into knots trying to prove to people that this was smart and sensible and a great idea. And I fixated on what everyone else was thinking about it. And now I literally never think about this, even though I know some people still think that this is not a real job.

And it would be easy to think that I don't worry about it anymore because I'm now objectively a success. But that is not why. First of all, some people still think that this isn't a real job. Some of them are in my family. And some people actually, the more successful I am, the more they think I must be

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like selling snake oil or something, right? That there's something sketchy about it.

Second, more importantly, I know that I changed my thoughts about this on purpose in the beginning. And that's what allowed me to put myself out there enough to be a success. So I knew I was fixating on this. I knew it was because of my own thoughts about whether this was a bad idea and I was throwing away my career. So I changed those thoughts. I had to in order to become a success. Because if my belief was just fixated on what other people thought of me and that I was making a mistake, I would not have been able to put myself out there enough to become successful.

We cannot wait for circumstances to change to help us not care what other people think. And we cannot just tell ourselves to stop caring what other people think. Your brain does not know how to do that. There's no way for it to just stop caring what other people think. We have to change the way we are thinking about ourselves in order to naturally stop worrying about what other people think because our brain is thinking something else on purpose instead.

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.

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