UFYB 410: Fear of Doing Harm is Holding You Back

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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How often have you refrained from doing something out of a fear that it might harm someone else? You don't tell the truth so that you don't hurt someone's feelings. You don't take on a leadership role at work because you don't want that responsibility. What if something goes wrong? What if the project fails? What if the company loses money and they blame you? You don't take a risk in your business because what if it upsets a client or you have to fire an employee? You don't prescribe a more risky treatment for a patient who isn't seeing success with other treatments because you can't guarantee that there won't be bad side effects.

Whatever kind of role you're in, if you've been socialized as a woman, you've been socialized to avoid even the chance of harming anyone other than yourself, which you're often quite happy to harm, right? But here's my most controversial take: avoiding the possibility of ever harming anyone doesn't make you a good person. It just makes you delusional about your current impact on the world, and it causes you to hold yourself back and not have the positive impact that you could. I'm going to explain why that is in this episode. Consider it a loving but tough loving reality check, so buckle up.

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.

If you went to law school or you took a philosophy class in college, you've probably been confronted with the trolley problem. In the trolley problem, it's a thought experiment where a trolley is barreling down the tracks, right towards a bunch of people who are tied to the tracks. Let's say it's 10 people tied there. It's going to kill them if you don't do something. You can pull a lever that will redirect the trolley down a different track. But if you do, it's going to kill a smaller number of people who are tied to that track, one person, maybe two. So do you pull the lever?

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The problem is meant to tease out our moral and ethical beliefs about causality, responsibility, and how we determine what a moral action is. Some people say you do nothing because while more people will die, you have not caused anyone's death directly. Some people say you should pull the lever and divert the trolley because even though you did then take an affirmative action that kills one or two people, on balance, you are saving more lives than are being sacrificed.

But what if, when confronted with the problem, you simply freeze or procrastinate until you don't have to make a decision at all and therefore don't have to take responsibility for it? That is what happens in the mind of many people socialized as women when they face a situation in which they unambiguously have to make a decision that could produce some harm in the world.

Women, much more so than men, are socialized to believe that their value and worth comes from helping people and being essentially morally virtuous. In Western society, women are stereotyped both as being kind of lascivious and sinful, right, which is supposed to justify why they need to be under patriarchal oppression. And they're also stereotyped as being inherently more moral and virtuous, above this sordid world of men, to justify needing patriarchal protection. It's almost like the main thing that matters is that men have power and the rationale shifts depending on the era, who knew?

So either way, we're programmed to be very worried about being a quote unquote good person. Either because that's who we are supposed to be or to prove that we are not as bad as we were taught that the world thinks we are. But what is being a good person even mean? The truth is we almost never stop to consider and define it. We define it just based mostly on when we feel guilt or shame. If we feel guilty or ashamed or someone else acts like we should feel guilty or ashamed, we automatically then assume we've done something wrong and we're being bad.

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But guilt and shame are emotions created by thoughts, and society is what teaches you what thoughts to have. So your responses of guilt and shame will be shaped by how you've been socialized and what you've been taught makes you good or bad. And for people socialized as women, we're taught to feel guilt or shame about almost anything. We're constantly trying to do it all right and do it all perfectly and never do anything wrong, and we feel guilty and ashamed a lot of the time because, of course, that's impossible.

So this ends up holding us back in life because we play it safe instead of trying to play it big. And I could probably do an entire year of podcasts that were nothing but examples of this from all the women I've coached on this over the years, but I will just give you a few examples here. Let's say you run some kind of a business or provide some kind of a service: hairdressing, graphic design, consulting, whatever. And you don't ever raise your rates for your business. Even as your expertise increases, even as there's inflation happening because what if someone who works with you now can't afford your new rates, or someone who wants to work with you can't afford your new rates and you think you're harming them by making it impossible to work with you, and that would make you a bad person.

Or you're in a relationship you don't really want to be in anymore, but you won't end it because it would make them upset or hurt their feelings, and then you'd be a bad person. And this happens everywhere from decades-long marriages to people you've just hired in your business three months ago. You avoid going for promotions or taking on leadership or running for office because you don't want to have to hire or fire people, or you don't want to have to make decisions about competing resources, or you don't want to have to take big chances that could go wrong and end in potentially people losing their jobs or mistakes being made.

And this leads us to avoid opportunities for power or influence or impact because of the risk that they might involve harm. We only want that power or influence or impact if it will be all positive. Because if we help 99 people

and one person is harmed, we will feel as if the numbers were the opposite. And I have grappled with this thought pattern myself. When my coaching business started to blow up and my podcast went viral, my brain put up a lot of danger signals about this level of visibility and influence.

What if I was wrong about something I was teaching? Right? What if someone implemented something that was actually correct, but the way they implemented it harmed them or caused them to harm someone else? What if someone misused my teaching for purposes I didn't agree with? I can't control those things. And I wasn't alone. I used to run an advanced certification in feminist coaching, and this was one of the biggest issues that we grappled with.

Often what was keeping my students from showing up bigger and becoming leaders in their spaces and developing their own body of work was saying what they truly believed, telling the truth about their experiences, right? And they weren't doing that because they were afraid that they would make a mistake, do something wrong, or harm a client.

Now, let me say that obviously, it is normal and human for most of us, and very aligned with our values for most of us, to care if we hurt or harm someone else. I am not saying that we should be sociopaths. And while I do believe that we do not cause each other's feelings, being a coach or having a leadership role is still a responsibility. Especially if you're in a position of authority. You don't control other people's brains because some people hear what you have to say and don't believe any of it. But when someone is placing their trust in me personally at least, and they are looking up to me and they're valuing my opinion, I believe that I have a responsibility to take that trust seriously and to always try to show up and serve at my highest level and with the goal of their greatest good.

And I'm still a human, and I'm still going to sometimes make a mistake. I might say something that lands wrong, I may misunderstand what's going

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on with a client, etc. This is one reason that my coaching is so focused on helping people get in touch with what they truly believe, rather than telling them what to think or do. The more my work is teaching you to know yourself better, the less chance that my own beliefs or values or priorities are getting imposed on you. But it's not a 100% perfect system.

And sometimes a client has a particular way of thinking, their wiring, their pre-existing tendencies, their history are going to impact what I say in a way that they can use to harm themselves. Perfectionist women, for instance, come to my work all the time and use it as a reason to beat themselves up. Like they learn about self-coaching and then they are beating themselves up for not doing it perfectly. I don't model that, I don't teach that. I intervene when I see it happening, but I can't 100% control them from doing it either.

The way that many coaches deal with this is that they teach a simplistic solution, which is this kind of whitewashed, like, everything works out as it should, the universe is always conspiring in your favor, kind of belief system. So whatever happens with a client, even if it seems upsetting or challenging, the idea is that it's perfect and exactly as it should be. And I've seen this used for coaching women who are dealing with, you know, challenges or potential harms in a wide variety of areas, not just with coaches.

And I've talked before about how this is a very Christian concept that has infused our culture and especially like wellness and self-development spaces, this idea that the world is perfect because God made everything in it, and if anything doesn't seem good, it's because we just don't see how it's perfect yet. This is not how I make sense of things, and I find that pretty infantilizing as an explanation. And this matters a lot because most of you listening are not coaches, but all of us exist in a complex web of interactions in this world, and we all need to know how to grapple with the potential of causing harm, whether it's in our parenting, in our choices as consumers, or in our professional roles.

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So I have a more challenging but more authentic and I think more intellectually honest way that I teach my students to deal with this, and I'm going to share that right after this quick break.

All right, welcome back. So if we're not going to just believe that everything happens for a reason and therefore nothing is really ever quote unquote bad, and it's really just God's perfect plan, then what are we going to believe? So this is a little bit of a paradox because I do believe that it is our minds that decide what count is good or bad. I don't believe those are pre-existing objective categories. And still, I don't think the most useful way to solve the problem is just to decide never to categorize anything as bad or to never acknowledge how you could have done something differently or better.

Because I think that's morally infantilizing. And I think that's a symptom of how society treats women, and it contributes to black and white all or nothing thinking and perfectionism. It's like we can't hold moral complexity, so we have to believe everything is perfect. But here's the truth: it has never been possible to live as a human without doing any harm. Even as hunters gatherers, we killed animals to eat, we pulled up plants, we defended ourselves against threats from other animals or humans. We swatted mosquitoes. We caused accidents, we made mistakes. Our actions caused harm to other beings.

And in today's incredibly interconnected modern world, we are all complicit in harm. You're listening to this on a cell phone that you already know was not made in the kind of working conditions that you would be personally happy to sign up for. It was sent overseas to you using fuel that implicates greenhouse gases that are contributing to the climate crisis. You may be driving a car while listening to it, even though we know a certain number of people die in driving accidents every year, and even if people drove perfectly, a predictable number of people die whenever we build a new road or bridge. And that's just like two small details of your multifaceted and complex life.

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Or to take another example of a thing women try to do perfectly: parenting. It is impossible to parent without causing harm to your child. You will accidentally drop them, you'll grab them too tightly to keep them from crossing a street and hurt their arm, you will say something unkind when stressed, you will pass on your own mental drama and quirks to some extent, no matter how much work you do to try to parent better than you were parented. You can't define what makes a good parent as perfection and never harming your child in any way. And you can't define what makes a good person as never being complicit in any harm to anyone else or the world.

It's just not possible. You will do harm. And the bigger the life you want to lead, the bigger the impact you want to make, the more you want to shake things up and change how things are done, the bigger the chance that you will also cause some harm along the way. That doesn't mean that I'm saying to be cavalier about it. That doesn't mean to just crash around like a bull in a China shop, breaking things because you don't even pay attention and you don't care what you ruin. I am not saying that.

But you absolutely cannot have a big positive impact on something in the world, whether that's global affairs or your own family life, without running the risk of creating some negative impacts too. And programming women to believe they should be morally perfect and pure and never do anything that might harm or even displease someone else keeps women from participating fully in life and in our society. And meanwhile, plenty of men who never think about the harm they might be doing at all are collecting power, making decisions, and running the show.

So when I saw this fear come up in my own mind around my platform and my business and my influence, I knew I had to decide. I could not go forward pretending that I could somehow do this perfectly and prevent all possible harm. That was only going to lead to paralysis. So I decided that my job was to show up as my full self and do my best to make my impact

on the world and overall net positive one. Not to make it entirely positive, just to do my best to make it more positive than negative.

I decided to be willing to teach something that could be interpreted in a harmful way by five people or even 50 people if it would help 500 or 5,000 others. I decided to coach thousands of women, even if a few of them ended up feeling like they had gotten bad coaching or bad advice or made bad decisions afterwards, if it meant that so many others were going to learn how to change their lives for the better.

It's willful ignorance to be a person existing in our technologically and economically complex global society today and pretend that you can exist without being complicit in harm. If you are able to listen to this podcast, you have the privilege and responsibility of benefiting from some of the ills of the world. You have electricity, you have technology. Most of you have secure housing and food, and many of you have luxuries well beyond that. All of them are part of our interconnected global financial and technological systems, and those systems have both positive and negative effects.

So you can pretend to not see all of that. You can embrace an illusory moral purity and just never take any risk so that you can pretend that you're never possibly doing any harm. But you're already complicit in some harm and you're holding yourself back from creating a lot of good. To stick with the parenting example, it's like refusing to acknowledge that anything you do as a parent could cause harm, and that actually makes you totally out of touch, unable to see yourself clearly, not interested or willing in doing the work to actually improve your parenting and really make it better, and unable to repair when you do mess up. So you actually become a worse parent that way.

Or you can take ownership of the complexity. You can acknowledge the complicity. You can woman up to make something of your life and to create more positive outcomes in the world to the best of your abilities, knowing

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that you can't control the outcome, but being willing to live fully by fully trying. And understanding that when you set the goal to be, I need to do it perfectly so there are never any bad feelings or bad outcomes anywhere, will keep you paralyzed and doing nothing.

Whereas when you choose to think, I need to show up fully and be in my best capacity and be in my own integrity and try to be the best person I believe I can be and let go of the outcomes, you actually show up in a much bigger way and you are able to make a much bigger impact on the world. That's what I choose to do, and that's what I want to invite you to choose as well.

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.