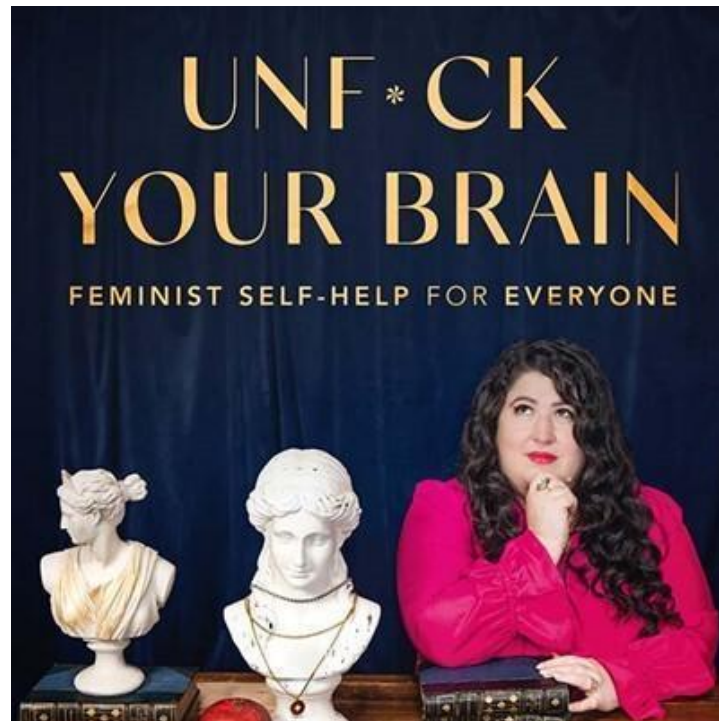


UFYB 416: Expertise Perfectionism Is Sabotaging Your Success



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

[UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

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You know that moment where someone asks you for your opinion in your area of expertise and you freeze, even if only mentally, only for a moment. Or maybe you start talking immediately, but in the middle of it, you're thinking that you aren't even sure if what you're saying makes sense, or afterwards you start worrying that you gave the wrong answer or you don't know what you're talking about. I call this expertise perfectionism. And it's a thought pattern that a lot of women have that interferes in our ability to show up as bold, creative, strategic, and powerful leaders. In this episode, I'm going to break down what expertise perfectionism is, how to spot it, and how to change 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.

If you are a listener of this podcast, and even if you're not, you've probably heard a lot of talk about imposter syndrome. About that pervasive sense so many women have that they haven't earned their professional success through talent or skill. Instead, they attribute it to luck, to hard work, to tricking people into thinking that they know what they're doing. And you've also heard me talk about how women are socialized to look for approval from authority figures and to outsource their own authority and decisions to other people.

Today's topic is kind of the nexus where those two thought patterns meet, but it's so important that it deserves its own episode. One of the ways that women tend to diminish and downplay their accomplishments is to undermine and second guess their own expertise. And this is an outgrowth of perfectionism where because we don't feel 100% confident that we have 100% perfect knowledge or skills, we assume that we are not yet

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authorities on a given topic. And this can be the case even when we are recognized as authorities by the outside world and we occupy a leadership role in a field or industry.

And it's not always super obvious. It does not necessarily look like having no faith in your own abilities. It looks like worrying a lot about whether you're doing a good job. Overthinking interactions with clients or colleagues or supervisors. Second guessing your own recommendations or intuitions or feedback. It can look like giving someone advice or your input all the while your brain is saying, does this even make sense? Do I know what I'm talking about? Do they think I'm an idiot? It can look like taking decisive action in some areas where you do feel confident, but then avoiding and procrastinating in other areas where you don't. It can look like double checking your interpretation against other people's opinions, crowd sourcing your confidence, running everything by everyone a million times to get their input, not feeling confident unless everyone else has validated that your idea is good or your feedback makes sense or your plan seems smart.

Obviously, there are times it's a good idea to consult other people. I'm not saying you should be a self-sufficient island. But you can spot expertise perfectionism by this chronic undertow of self-doubt and second guessing that keeps you from fully inhabiting the authority you have and fully believing in your own expertise. And this is a never-ending cycle because you don't ever achieve complete and full knowledge or become 100% perfect at your job, which is what your brain pretends you need to do in order to feel confident.

Fundamentally, this problem stems from a misconception, which is that you need to be unimpeachably correct all the time in order to be good at your job and taken seriously in your role. Now that didn't come out of nowhere. Women are socialized to be perfectionists and we're sometimes held to double standards in the professional world as well. So your brain has

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latched on to perfectionism as a safety mechanism. But this really hamstringing your ability to develop in your career because it keeps you from having an accurate understanding of your own expertise and the value that you offer.

And this is true at every stage of your career. I was talking to someone the other day who's a brand new life coach and she was having so much mental drama about how she didn't have enough experience to help people and she wasn't nearly as good at coaching as I was. And I said, well, yeah, you're not an expert yet. But you also don't need to be an expert to help people, at least not a world-class expert. By the time you've gone through a good coach certification, for example, you already know so much more about the brain and how people think and feel and create change than 99.9% of the rest of the population. Including any coach or therapist who doesn't know how to work with people's thoughts. You know way more than your clients do, and you know way more than you need to know in order to help them where they are.

But that's expertise perfectionism in action, believing that because you don't know everything and can't do it all perfectly, you don't even know enough to be helpful or to be allowed to show up. And you can sub in any profession. You're a beginning lawyer. Okay, sure, you don't know as much as the partner in your firm, but you know so much more than a lay person does. Same for a beginning doctor, beginning teacher, whatever else you are. You are holding yourself to the standard of being perfect. When actually the standard to be helpful and effective is really just, do I know more than the person I'm trying to help? Or do I know enough to be helpful?

You cannot judge your professional expertise by, have I ever made a mistake in my life? Or its cousin, can I be sure I will never make a mistake again? Those are impossible standards. And they have this implication that

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you should be perfectly self-sufficient from the start. So even as a beginner, you shouldn't need help, shouldn't need advice, and if you do, you're not good enough. Which makes no sense. So I want to share a better standard and some thoughts you can use to work towards a more reasonable metric for evaluating your work right after this quick break.

So, if we're not going to torture ourselves with expertise perfectionism, what can we do instead? The measuring standard with perfectionism is, how far am I from perfect? So what I want to suggest you look at instead is, how much help am I able to offer? It's a very different orientation. Rather than the baseline being perfection, the baseline is no help. So if you have helped out a client nine times with correct legal advice and one time you make a mistake or don't know the answer right away, your baseline would be, I've provided nine instances of help and only one was delayed or had an error in it. As opposed to, I was supposed to provide 10 perfect instances of help and one was wrong, so therefore that's the equivalent of zero value or help at all.

If you're a coach, to go back to one of my earlier examples, your baseline would be, I've been able to help this client understand their own mind better. Not, I have always known exactly the best thing the best coach in the world could possibly say to a client and it has always made them feel better right away. Honestly, feeling better right away is not even the goal or the point of coaching, but that is a whole separate episode.

One of the things that happens with expertise perfectionism is that if we feel nervous or insecure or anxious, or we think we made a mistake, we take that as proof that we are not good at our jobs. And we imagine that if we were good at our jobs or really an expert, we'd be perfect and therefore we would feel amazing and confident at all times. But I'm here to tell you that I am a world-class expert at mindset coaching and I still occasionally think, whoops, there was a better way to handle that. Or I think I talked too

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much in that session. Or I'm not following what this person is saying. I have no idea how to coach them. These are normal brain thoughts that come up no matter how good you are at what you do.

One thought template I often offer people to help with this is to think of someone that they really admire in their field. It should be a specific person and ideally someone you know fairly well. Now, think about whether that person has ever made a mistake. The answer is always yes. Which means now you can come up with a thought to practice like, even Amy, who's an amazing architect, has made mistakes. Or even Sam, who is a top litigator, sometimes doesn't know the answer in a client meeting and has to go look it up. Practicing this thought helps your brain connect the idea that expertise and mistakes can coexist and that expertise and not knowing the answer can coexist. And over time, your brain will apply that to you unconsciously.

Now, when I coach people on all of this, they have predictable perfectionist objections, which are probably running through your head right now, and that's totally normal. The usual objection I get to this is, if I'm not anxious about making a mistake, I'll make more of them. I have two responses to that. The first is, I don't think that's true. I don't think hypervigilance actually produces perfection the way we think it does. Because when we are anxious and stressed, biologically speaking, we don't think clearly and we have less attention to detail. It has to do with the parts of your brain that get activated in a stress response versus the parts of your brain that are active when you are regulated. So we probably make more mistakes, not fewer.

The second is that even if you made a couple more mistakes, you'd still be getting so much done that it would be worth it. If you won't speak up in a meeting to avoid ever making a mistake, you may never get put in charge of an important project. If you do speak up and are willing to occasionally make a mistake, maybe you get put in charge of 10 projects and even if

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you make mistakes on a couple of them, eight of them will advance your career way more than never making a mistake because you don't ever get put in charge of anything.

There's no version of life or career success where you can keep taking on more responsibility, having the opportunity for more success, going after more goals and yet never making mistakes. The good news is you don't need to be perfect to have an impact. You don't need to be a world-class expert to help someone else or render a service that is valuable to them. If you never go to get a coaching certification and coach clients because you are afraid you won't do it perfectly or well, there will be so many people who would have really benefited from your imperfect expertise and now they'll never get that benefit. They won't just go to another coach because they're people for whom you were the perfect messenger. You won't be putting your unique perspective that would have helped someone out into the world.

This is why in my new coach certification that I'm working on, spoiler alert, there's more on that in upcoming episodes, we actually work so much on confidence because so many coaches hold themselves back and don't have the impact they could have because of low confidence in their own abilities. And that is obviously not unique to coaching as I've been giving all these examples in this episode. It happens in every industry. If you put yourself out there, you may make some mistakes. And yes, some of them could have serious consequences. You're a doctor, you're an architect, you're a lawyer. But you'll actually help so many more people by doing that.

So it's a question of whether you'd rather do nothing and make no mistakes, which is like a 0-0 draw, or do 40 amazing things and make three mistakes and have a net 37 score. If your answer is that it's not worth it if you're going to make a mistake, that's a really significant limitation on your life and I promise it's holding you back. And I don't want that to be the story

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of your life. Whatever field you're in, you know so much and you already have so much value in your brain that you can share with the world.

So stop comparing yourself to perfect as the baseline and start looking at how far ahead you are from where you started, from someone who knows nothing in the field. And look at how much value you can already offer. The more you view yourself as having valuable expertise already, the less defensive you will be about feedback, the more resilient you will be about mistakes, and the more expert you'll grow as you learn and evolve. As always, releasing perfectionism actually increases excellence and it makes your life so much more enjoyable too.