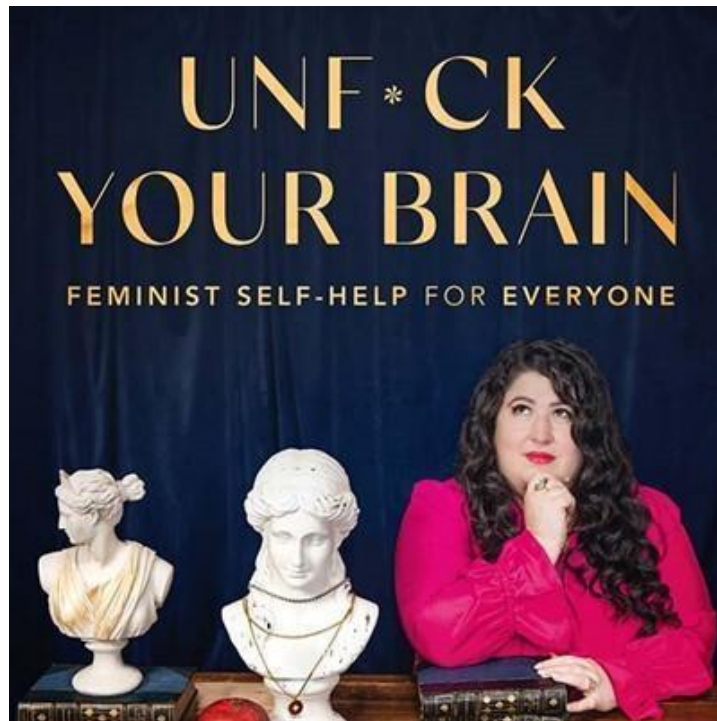


UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

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.

Kara: Hello, Elise, welcome back to UnF*ck Your Brain.

Elise: Thanks for having me.

Kara: So, for those of you listening, Elise is Elise Loehnen, who is the author of the New York Times bestseller, *On Our Best Behavior: The Seven Deadly Sins and the Price Women Pay to Be Good*. And if you have not heard our original interview, you can go back to 319, episode 319 and listen to that.

And I'm excited for this conversation today because before we started this, we were both having a, okay, how do we get it together to be a human today, conversation. Which, number one, is just important for you all to know that the people you listen to and follow, also human. We are not superhuman. We don't have it all figured out. We have days where we're just like, what am I doing? Should I run away and live in the woods? What's happening?

But your book and your workbook is so much about how to kind of grapple with the experience of being a woman in this world and how to move towards a way of experiencing that that is more integrated and connected to oneself, I think, if I can take the privilege of describing your work to you. So you have this new workbook coming out called *Choosing Wholeness Over Goodness*. So I'd love to hear, what led you to want to write a workbook in the first place?

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

Elise: Yeah. No, it's an important question and I think something that you understand. In many ways, I feel like you are the coaching complement to... our work obviously, is close cousins, maybe sisters. We're drinking from the same fountain and physicians healing ourselves, I think, which is what makes the work so potent because it's an ongoing, iterative process. As you know, you're never done.

Kara: I thought if I did the workbook, I would be done. Are you telling me if I did the workbook, I'm not done? Goddamn it.

Elise: No. Well, okay, so the impetus for the workbook is that I think of myself as a cultural therapist in the sense that I think I'm really good at identifying patterns and finding these sort of thematics that are collective stories for many of us, if not most of us. And these are stories that we inherit and we consume unconsciously and we find ourselves subscribed to as, that's just the way it is and that's how it's always been.

And I think your work and my work is drawing attention to, oh wait, I'm just running this program as though it's my birthright. And what would happen if I chose something differently, right? It's becoming more conscious and more aware of what we're doing, what we're thinking. It's your jam, right?

So after I wrote the book, I would go and speak to groups of women, primarily, although I love seeing men in those rooms too. And the question was always, okay, now that I recognize the way that I am enslaving myself to these ideas of what it is to be a good woman, and I'm performing this in the culture. This is what a good mother does. This is what a good friend is. This is what a good co-worker is, etc. And I'm choosing that over a truer expression of myself or more whole or human expression of myself. What do I do? And that was a question that I also had to be fair. And so...

Kara: You're like, great question. Let me figure it out.

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

Elise: Great question. I am not a coach and as you heard me, I said cultural therapist. I am not an LMFT. I have not trained to get in there with people and do that level of excavation.

But I know a lot of incredible therapists and healers and coaches. And so I partnered on this workbook. Often, when you have a really successful book, an editor will say, let's do a workbook. And what they expect is an empty journal with some really good prompts. Lots of blank pages. And I just don't do that. I don't know how to do that. It's part of my programming. And so I partnered with this woman named, friend of mine named Courtney Smith, who coaches the enneagram and within Conscious Leadership Group. I don't know if you've seen their process before.

And so in our work, just similarly to you, I could have done this with you, although you have your own thing going on. We decided to create a workbook where I set the context of this is what's likely happening, and then she created this core process that we take people through, which is essentially identifying through the first tool is called fact versus story. So it's identifying the stories, which are very different than facts. And then once you become aware of like, oh my God, I'm really married to this story.

So one of my stories for sloth is, I'm the only one who can do things right, so I should do it all. Or one of my many stories about greed or money is if I get more, someone gets less, right? Or if I accept money from someone, then they own me is a big story for me. So in this process, we do it per sin, you identify the stories that are really running you and then you through the process, really work with them and make them big. You know, as big as possible so you can actually see what you're up to, have a good laugh. You know, give it a persona.

Kara: Critical part of the process.

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

Elise: Yeah. And then say, oh, I get it. I understand why this story has made so much sense in terms of structuring my identity and personality and getting where I have in the world, and maybe it's time for something different. So that's the genesis of how do you actually then start to shift these stories rather than feeling captured by them, enslaved by them?

Kara: Yeah. You mentioned the term like shifting from a good human to a whole human, which I think is something that my listeners definitely like the level of, and I say this with love to all of you because you're like me, rampant perfectionism is so fucked out being good at everything immediately, for sure, the first time you try it. Being good at activities, being good at skills, being good at identities, being good at roles, like that just all consuming.

I was actually just coaching with a good friend of mine who's also a master coach last night. And I said something like, you know, not everybody's surround like trying to figure out how to like self-improve all the time, 24/7. And she was like, wait, I'm not kidding. Are you serious about that? Like, are you really? And I was like, I really, I think that not everybody does that. So I would love to hear, I think my listeners really benefit from the idea of when you just tell someone you don't have to try to be, quote unquote, good all the time, there's this vacuum, right? Like, what am I trying to be instead? So can you talk a little bit about what you mean by like whole human and what that not antagonist, but it's like this other way of thinking about yourself and what being a human is versus just trying to be good all the time.

Elise: Yeah. So Carl Jung, who's a big influence in my life and work, I work with a Jungian therapist and it's one of the themes, the primary themes of my podcast, I think is using some of his big concepts. And he has a quote that's essentially, I'd rather be whole than good, which I think is so profound.

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

And after I wrote *On Our Best Behavior*, a friend of mine who's an astrologer and a Jungian therapist said, you know you wrote a book about the cultural shadow of women. And despite my fascination with his work, I had not made that connection, right? And I was like, oh, of course, because in our attempt to perform goodness or claim these qualities of being tireless and subjugating everything we want to other people's needs and not wanting any praise, attention or affirmation, and keeping our bodies as corralled and disciplined as possible, on and on and on, we suppress or repress whatever we code as bad, right? To be lustful, to be sexual, to be indulgent, to be in touch with our appetites and all of those instincts that make us human and make life pleasurable.

Kara: I was just going to say, all the fun things.

Elise: Yes. Like that's important. It's not about suppressing and repressing and projecting those ideas onto other people or other women so we can then police them about their sluttiness or their lack of body conformity or whatever it is that we tend to do.

Kara: Or their bad mothering, a favorite on the internet.

Elise: Yeah. Or how all what we collectively do to famous women who we think are too big for their britches, right? We just strike them down. All we need to do is reputational harm when we stake everything on goodness. All you have to do is say someone is bad and bye-bye, right? Bye. That's it. Whereas men can do anything they want as long as we perceive them as powerful because women are conditioned for goodness, men are conditioned for power.

So this idea of wholeness, which is essentially encompasses all of us, including our shadow. And the shadow are those parts of us that do not conform with what we perceive to be the sort of perfect personality or this

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

ideal version of ourselves. And so we take all those qualities and we stuff them in a hefty bag and sling it around our shoulder, and that's our shadow.

The reality is, your shadow is part of you. We are all whole humans. So I can look at you, Kara, and say, oh, I see, you might not own this tendency that you have, but it's in plain sight. I can see it, right? But you will be so defended against it as an assault on your idea of who you are that you won't see it. And so women, when we get into this perfectionism and I'm so good and I'm so perfect at performing all of these roles, our shadow, that hefty bag gets very heavy and we get very scared of whatever is in there that threatens this identity.

You know, I had to laugh. I was talking to this woman who's a mentor, and I was like in a fluster. I was like, you know, everyone I've ever worked with, everyone thinks I'm really kind. I'm just like really nice and I think that's my reputation and everyone has liked working with me. And she just looked at me and started laughing and was like, is that really what you believe? And I was like, yeah. I spent so much energy trying to control other people's experience of me, right? For fear that they're going to say, oh, Elise is a bitch. She's mean.

And she was like, honey, that's crazy to stake your identity on this idea that everyone must like you. I promise you, I know people who don't like you. You are not for everyone.

Kara: So good. I was at an event with my teacher, Brooke Castillo, and she asked, it was like 600 people in the audience, and she asked me, she like called on me cold called me from the stage to be like, what's your like positioning in your business, you know? And I was like, oh, I'm like, you know, you're kind of whatever, fun, nice, older sister, whatever. And she was like, absolutely wrong. That is not...

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

Elise: What?

Kara: So I was like two years into my business. She was like, no, you are not friendly at all. That's not what you do. And I was like, oh, that's fair. We get so- it's like, what we think we need to be in order to succeed or be accepted, even when it's, like, totally not consonant with who we are.

Elise: Accurate. And it's not really accurate of anyone, because guess what? All of us are capable of being shits and mean and grumpy and unkind. Not to mention, this idea that you can create this experience of yourself and that everyone's going to experience you in that way is actually insane, as this woman said to me. She was like, I am sure you have made people cry, and I am sure you have also made people laugh. Like, let go of this idea that you are going to put this forward. And as she was saying this to me, I mean, I just. I mean, even talking about it now creates anxiety, right? Like, there are people who don't like me, Kara?

Kara: You're like, wait, back up to that part. What?

Elise: Yeah. People who have had a bad experience and think I'm mean. Meanwhile, as I go deeper into it, I'm like, all right. I mean, I don't. I work mostly by myself, but I'm. I'm a workaholic. People I've worked with like, affectionately called me the robot, which I always thought was funny, but now I'm like, oh, I get it. It's because, like, I don't remember people's birthdays. I don't really ask about their week. Like, I just am there to work. I don't know, as I go into it, I can relax around it. But the larger point is, like, I wasn't allowing that wholeness. I was like, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. People love me. People love me.

Kara: And it's like not allowing that individuality. It's also like denying our individuality. Like, we all need to converge on this anodyne norm in the middle as opposed to, like, yeah, there are people who are like a pleasure

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

to work with and I am probably not one of them. That's okay. Like, when I divert, I mean, obviously respectful towards my team, but like, like, you, I have to be like, okay, right. Ask people, like, about their weekend and try to, you know, I can either spend a bunch of energy doing that or I can just be upfront about like, who I am and who's a good fit to work with me and put my energy into the things that I do do well. It's like both being a whole human and just being like your version of a human, as opposed to like, like all of us should converge on this, like, nice, unobjectionable, but still somehow incredibly successful, but not at all arrogant, but right, like, version of a woman. And we should all just be like carbon copies of that ideal template.

Elise: Relaxing into that wholeness. It doesn't, it's not the opposite of goodness, I don't think is badness. It's just wholeness. Like, it's humanness.

Kara: Yeah, it's who you are and you, like, we all think we have to be. I mean, I feel like one of the one way of articulating what is done to women's brains is the belief that like, in order to be successful or loved, we need to be different than who we are. And so we're spending all this time trying to be different from who we are, when in fact, like, the path to success and real love and acceptance is from being who you are.

That doesn't mean, like, obviously you and I are like self-improvement junkies. It doesn't mean being like, well, I just punch people in the face when I get mad, so I guess I'll just be upfront about that. And people can select in, like, it doesn't mean that you're not always trying to like, learn how to regulate yourself better, communicate better. Like, be more of a soul integrated person who, like, integrates their shadow, but not trying to be some stereotype of what you're supposed to be or, like, the way your best friend is or the way your mom was, or like, whatever it is you're trying to perform as.

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

Elise: What you're saying, too, is, like, our orientation is always other focused. We're seeking approval from the other, et cetera, rather than being internally driven. And then having faith through work through that integration through, like, I did not like myself back there. I maybe owe that person an apology or I want to show up differently next time. That sort of inner discourse and sort of training. I don't know if that's the right word. But then to have faith, like, it's okay. I trust myself. I know I have integrity. And, yeah, it's okay if I'm not for everyone. I cannot actually navigate my life through that lens. I have to navigate it from myself.

Kara: Yeah it's impossible. I mean, right. Two people have different, what it's almost like you made a director's board and the three people have three totally different ideas about who you're supposed to be. So even if you were great at following other people's opinions, they're not consistent.

But it does bring up that like really intense fear, right? So you talk about this fear in the book that like when fear dictates our behavior, we're just, as the way I think you put is like we're just solving for safety. Like we're just trying to not be afraid in that moment. And I think about this a lot. I coach about this a lot because people are constantly saying, I want to feel safe and I'm like, what does that mean? Right? And it usually just means like, well, I don't feel afraid, right? It's always like trying to get rid of this bad anxiety, fear feeling, and then what anytime that's not around, I call that safety.

So in the book, you talk about the drama triangle, which like I like because it reminds me of the Bermuda Triangle. And it can be like, like drama, emotional and mental drama really feels like the Bermuda Triangle sometimes. But can you tell us about the drama triangle and how it relates to like fear and those recurring patterns?

Elise: Yeah. Yeah. So essentially, it's we're talking about existential fear, right? Fear of safety and security as you mentioned. And that's one of the

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

fears that sometimes you can identify out of the gate. The other sort of two big fears that we use in the workbook are fear of loss of control, which again, tied to safety and security, fear of loss of approval, also tied to safety and security. I can't say this with any real authority, but I think fear of loss of approval is typically very real for women, whereas fear of loss of control can maybe be more real for men, even though I think we have both.

Kara: But I think for women control is maintaining other people's approval, right? It's like controlling other people's opinions of us. So we feel like we're losing control if we feel like we're going to give up on trying to control other people's opinions, or if people are going to be just allowed to think things about us that we don't like, that feels like a loss of control.

Elise: So I think just even being conscious of like that story that I have, I'm the only one who can do things right, therefore I need to do it all is actually at its core attached to fear. And it gets into this fear of loss of approval and the way that I've structured my whole life. And as you do this process, it can be actually quite emotionally devastating. We recommend doing it with friends because then you can maybe laugh and get some support.

Kara: And not feel like I'm so broken.

Elise: Yes, so as you go through this, this lack of delegation, extreme productivity, like all these hallmarks of my personality that have gotten me really far in the world and this like self-reliance, etc. Again, lots of good things about these stories, but at its core, this story is tied to my fear of loss of approval and this idea that I have that if I am not useful to the people in my life, my husband, when I used to have a job, my boss and my coworkers, what value would I have? I would be cast out. I would be lost. Why would my husband possibly stay married to me if I'm not incredibly useful to him.

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

And as I did this work, I realized like, oh, that's the, that's actually what I'm running on. There's no version where my husband said to me, babe, I'll be your husband as long as you like take care of everything in life, right? But that's what I've been believing. So it's important to connect these stories to fear because they are gestures at how we have learned to survive and sometimes thrive. So there's always fear. And I think getting comfortable with that and learning to breathe through it and just acknowledge it is really important.

Now, fear, to get to the drama triangle, Courtney has this concept, which is part of Conscious Leadership Group, about living your life above and below the line. And most of us spend our lives below the line, most of our days, it's just very human. And when you are below the line, you are in fear. Fear drives you right below the line, and it is this feeling that you are the victim of the world. It is happening to you, right? You are at its effects, you have no control, it's not a place of empowerment. When you are above the line, you see yourself as the creator of your own reality. The world is happening through you and by you. And so obviously, you want to try and be conscious, oh, I'm feeling very below the line right now. Can I get myself above the line? And the drama triangle is rampant below the line. And all we do in this current culture is get examples of the drama triangle.

It's a Stephen Karpman concept from the 70s, and in the triangle, there is the victim villain hero. It's like a marketing 101 concept, right? You create a product, you're the hero, you're going to save the consumer, the victim, from this villainous product out there, right? It's just we love the drama triangle. And that's our tendency when we're searching for certainty and we're below the line. Who is to blame? Who's being hurt? How can I get out of this situation? How can I fix this and get out of my discomfort?

The thing about hero-ing, which is a role that I like to play is that it's always the temporary fix, right? You're still below the line. So often, and one of the

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

tools, this is a big tool in the book, it's like when you get into your stories, you can start working the drama triangle and you actually put yourself on the drama triangle and you're playing all of the roles when you're sort of switching your language from, oh, it's always this way. I'm always in this situation. Like, why does this happen to me? That's victim. When you get into like, it's that person's fault, blame, blame, blame, that's villain. Oh, I'm the only one who can fix this, that's hero. You get to start to see how your stories animate in the culture and in your life and the way that you are working so hard to make them true.

And it's just helpful because the minute you find yourself doing it with Trump or doing it with culture and you're like, he's the villain, you're in the drama triangle. And it's not saying that there's not validity to it, but it's like, okay, then then what? How do we get above the line out of this dynamic to create something different? Which is hard when many of us feel powerless.

Kara: Right. Yeah, and I think listeners to this podcast will recognize being above the line as like really the intentional model when you are choosing how you want to think so that you get a different feeling and action, create different outcomes in your life, whereas below the line is all of your unintentional models when you are sort of just believing whatever comes up in your brain, believing whatever the culture told you.

And it is so tempting, as you and I are talking before we got on here of like watching what's going on to feel so powerless or helpless. And I don't think it's accurate that like each of, I don't think I have the power to change our entire political system, but I do have the power to show up differently in my life, in my community, in politics, however I can impact them and believing that, you know, nothing I do makes a difference, which I feel like there's like a real fatalism going around on the left right now, like believing that nothing I do makes a difference leads to the return of not making any difference, right?

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

Elise: We are so deeply below the line and for good reason because it's like the stoking of fear is incessant and part of it is designed as to drive us below the line so that we just stay here blaming and identifying oppressor and oppressed and whatnot, which we definitely love to do, rather than saying like, okay, let's like get our arms around our fear, recognize what's happening and get above the line. So part of it is like recognizing, okay, this is happening to me and if I stay here, I can't do shit. This is not a productive place to be. I need to get out of it.

Kara: So I think one of the fears I see when I'm trying to coach women to think differently, get a different outcome in return is that you touched on this a little bit earlier, but I just love to hear you talk about it a little bit more. There's like a lot of different versions of lack of self-trust, but I think a big one that comes up is like, I made a bad decision in the past. I made a mistake. I can't trust myself now because I made that investment that didn't work out. I was in that relationship and I didn't see that it was going to be bad, whatever it is, right? It's like women are like, of course I could trust myself if I had always made perfect decisions and everything had worked out perfectly, then I would be able to trust myself. So I know you talk about how those past stories like fuck with us basically, in my language, not your language, but like how do you, how do you think people can let go of some of those stories about past mistakes to move forward with a new perspective?

Elise: Yeah. I think part of it is and again, you're the coach and I'm not the coach, but watching coaches work, part of it is challenging, okay, you are really attached to this story, right? And I've seen this happen actually at retreats where someone comes in and they've got a really big story about something that's happened, and we've all been there, right? Like in the maze where we've been wronged or betrayed and we have a really big story about what happened to us, whether we're being the villain and taking the blame ourselves or blaming someone else, right? And those stories, I

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

think are incredibly intoxicating because then we get to drama triangle the story. This story is to blame for everything that's happening in my life, right?

And so I feel like part of the disruption is, okay, you can stay committed to this story. Let's see how that keeps working out for you. Or are you ready to acknowledge the way you're letting it run your life and put it down? And in workshops that Courtney and I have done, I've watched her challenge people on stories that are hard that have become part of people's identities. I think that's also really important to state. And I get it. If you're a widow, like you have been changed, right, by life. And for some people, that becomes like core, that is their identifying factor, right? Or the loss of a child or something like that.

But when you find that that's your defense or your armor against life or doing things differently and you feel like I want to work with Kara, I'm ready for something different. Like you have to be willing to say, I acknowledge what this story has done for me. I acknowledge the way it has been a structuring pole for my personality and I'm willing to risk thinking it. It's sort of like a Marie Kondo process. Like thank you for your service.

Kara: Right, totally. See what you did for me there.

Elise: And I'm ready to put it down. Your worn out socks. I love you. Thank you, but no more. Good bye.

Kara: One of the things that came to me is you're talking about the like the villain, the victim, the hero victim, the drama triangle is I think for a lot of the kind of women I coach, what they think is taking self-responsibility as the solution to that is actually just making themselves the villain, right? So they like come in and they're like, okay, yeah, no, I get that. Like I'm going to take responsibility for this. I'm not going to be a victim and I'm not, you

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

know, I'm going to take self-responsibility and that's the solution to this. And actually, it's just self-disguised making themselves the villain.

It's like, I take responsibility for everything. So if I had just been better, then this person wouldn't have behaved that way. Or if I had just been better, then I wouldn't have gotten harassed or I wouldn't have gotten fired unfairly, or I wouldn't have, the stock market wouldn't have crashed, like whatever things are outside of their control that they are like trying to take responsibility for. And I think it totally goes back to that fear of loss of control because that's an attempt to control, right? It's like a fear of grappling with the fact that life is out of our control all the time. And then so what we do is like ignore the part we can control, which is our own reaction, and focus on trying to control the circumstances.

Elise: Yes. No, I think that's so well put and so important that the assigning of villain often, particularly I think for women, we assign ourselves that role and give ourselves to be fair, like superhuman powers in this weird way, you know, where it's like, look how much power I have to fuck things up.

Kara: Right, that's the only thing we're allowed to have a lot of power about. It's never look how much power I had to succeed, but look at what a big mistake I made. That's really...

Elise: Yes, yes. Yeah. No. But I again, I think once, the only way to, as you know, this is your work, the only way to really start to change your life and change your behavior and change what you're thinking is to be conscious of what you are currently thinking, right?

And so part of the process is just like, how do we bring this shadow material, whatever you want to call it, into our awareness? See what we're up to. And like those are big transformational moments where you're like,

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

oh my God, look what I'm doing. I see what I'm doing. And I see what this gets me. I see why I think it keeps me safe.

And you know, in the case going back to this idea of like the self-blame, when I stay attached to that story, it keeps me armored and safe from all the things that I could potentially accomplish in my life because I can't possibly accomplish them because of this what I did earlier in my career or whatever it is. So once we see what we're up to, though, we can choose differently. And that's a relief.

Kara: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, I mean when I first learned that you could change your life by changing the way you're thinking about things, I was like, well, thank fuck. I really wish someone had told me this earlier. I mean we've talked about so many things, but if we just to sum up, is there's like one core insight you wish people would take away from the workbook, *Choosing Wholeness Over Goodness*, what would it be? Like what is the one deathbed message you want women to get from this?

Elise: Yeah. I think that these stories make sense and that they are an armament against fear and that if we can actually do the work to get more comfortable with fear without trying to make it go away, but just being comfortable with discomfort, with anxiety, with uncertainty. Unfortunately, those are the bedrocks of reality, right?

Kara: Unfortunately, that's the human experience. So might as well get comfortable with them.

Elise: Yeah. So like think of your life as a training ground for getting more comfortable with the uncomfortable and able to be more present. And I think if we all build our capacity for that, well, we're going to need it for this dark time. And I think it's a great solve for other people too in your community because if you can stay grounded and resourced and present

UFYB 418: Undoing Your "Goodness" Programming: A Conversation with Elise Loehnen

even when things start getting scary as they have been, you can help keep sort of the collective vibration a few notches calmer and a bit more above the line, where I think we need to be if we're going to take the action that we need.

Kara: All right, everyone. So you need to go pre-order *Choosing Wholeness Over Goodness*. And Elise, where can people find you if they want to follow you and learn more from you?

Elise: So my podcast is called *Pulling the Thread*, and I have a Substack, eliselunan.substack.com, or Instagram @eliselunan.

Kara: Thanks so much for coming on and sharing your work. I'm excited to get my hands on the workbook.

Elise: You're the best.