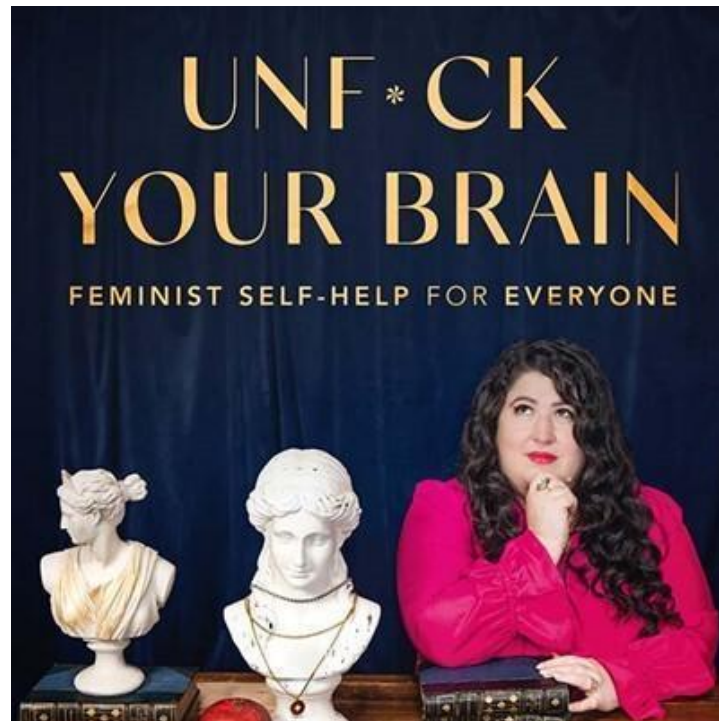


UFYB 419: Coaching Hotline: Am I Using Meditation to Escape My Feelings?



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.

Welcome to this week's Coaching Hotline episode where I answer real questions from real listeners and coach you from afar. If you want to submit your question for consideration, go to unfuckyourbrain.com/coachinghotline, all one word. Or text your email to 1-347-997-1784. And when you get prompted for the code word, it's CoachingHotline, all one word. Let's get into this week's questions.

Here is the first question. "I have three goals for my life: to cultivate a happy family and marriage, have a beach house, and stand for political office. I have two kids and I'm considering a third, despite it being hectic and stressful. I have a beach house which I find hard to keep on top of maintaining. And I'm part of a political leadership program but I don't give it my all. I can't tell if my life is a perfectionist fantasy gone wrong and now it's too stressful, or if I'm just going through the development required to live an extraordinary life. How can I have courage to see my goals through to the end despite the stress?"

So, here is the thing. Your life is not stressful. Your family's not stressful, the beach house isn't stressful, political office isn't stressful. Your thoughts are creating the stress. So even if you have a perfectionist fantasy that you've been trying to achieve, it's not the trying to achieve it. It's not the actions that cause the stress. It's not the circumstances that cause the stress, such as owning a beach house or how many children you have. And it's not the actions that cause the stress, such as parenting or trying to maintain the beach house or going to the political leadership program.

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The right way to frame the question is, what work do I need to do on my mind so that I don't keep stressing myself out? You're the one creating the stress. Stress is, you know, depending on what you mean when you say that, either a set of thoughts that cause anxiety, or you're using stress to describe the emotion, which usually means it's anxiety. Right? Sometimes when people say, I'm having a lot of stress, they're kind of referring to all the thoughts they're thinking. They think they're referring to circumstances, right? But really it's all the thoughts. Sometimes people say I feel stressed, they really mean anxiety. It's a thought or a feeling.

So, you can't really tell what you want to have in your life until you make sure you understand and resolve the stress, which is caused by your thoughts and your feelings. Then you can ask yourself, right, why do I have these goals? Do I really want them? Right? Sometimes we set goals when we don't know about mind management because we think, well, if I had those goals, then I would feel a certain way. We think that if I get that circumstance to the right place, then I'll have the feeling I want.

And sometimes when we learn to manage our mind, it turns out we don't really want to work on creating that new circumstance anymore, right? Because we're no longer depending on it to make us feel a certain way. And sometimes we realize we really do want it, now we can double down. But you can't really decide about the goals while you're telling yourself that the goals cause stress. Right? So yes, there is discomfort and development required in living an extraordinary life, but it's not because the elements of the extraordinary life are stressful. It's because you have a human brain and in order to live an extraordinary life, you have to go through so much bullshit you create for yourself. That's really what's happening.

So, you got to reframe this question. When you ask yourself a question like, is my life a perfectionist fantasy gone wrong, or is this just the development required to live an extraordinary life? You have no way of answering that

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question. I mean, I can answer the question because I understand how thought work works. But when you ask yourself a vague question like that, if I tried to answer your question, right, you notice I'm not answering your question. That question is meaningless because the premise of the question is wrong. Right? The premise of the question is, if I have a perfectionist fantasy about my life, then that might be causing my stress. And is it that or is it something else? And like that premise is wrong because that can't cause your stress.

Right? So the whole way you frame the question, which is of course, this is not a criticism in any way. This is why you hire a coach like me, why you get coaching. But my point is like when you ask yourself a question like that, it's so vague and the premise is wrong and so you just can't even answer it. So, don't ask yourself these big abstract questions with the wrong premises. Do some work on the thoughts that are causing stress. That's where the work is for you.

All right y'all, I know you're as tired as I am of having the top podcasts in wellness or health and fitness categories be a bunch of dudes who don't know anything about socialization and who are not taking women's lived experiences into account. So if you are looking for ways to support the show and more importantly, make sure the show gets to more people, please leave us a review on Apple Podcast or Spotify. And bonus points if you include a few lines about the way you use thought work and self-coaching or anything you've learned from the podcast in your daily life. Those reviews are what teach the algorithms to show us to more new people. It helps us get new listeners all over the world. And I'll be reading one story from a recent review in each of these question and answer episodes.

This week's review comes from user Yellowweeks, who says, "It's not an overstatement to say this podcast has changed my life. The first episode I

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listened to helped cause a major paradigm shift for me that has rippled out into every area of my world. I've listened to every episode and joined the society. I can't get enough." Two exclamation points. "Kara has a way of making this work based on ancient philosophy so accessible. Thank you for this work, Kara." Again, two exclamation points. We love a two exclamation point queen. I'm also a fan of the occasional two exclamation points.

All right, second question. "What do you think about the concept of detachment? I find that meditation helps me feel better in general, but is this just another way that I'm not allowing my feelings?"

This is a great question. I think there's a couple of different ways to think about it. When you're meditating, you're doing a couple of different things, right? And it can depend a lot on what kind of meditation you're doing. Some meditation actually involves quite a lot of experiencing your emotions and being in your body. Some meditation involves quite a lot of breathing. Some meditation involves watching thoughts, practicing non-attachment to them, etc. It sounds like that's kind of what you're doing.

One way to tell is to see whether your meditation practice reduces the frequency of the problem thoughts for you or not. So sometimes I think what happens when meditation only feels temporarily helpful is that when you sit down to meditate, you are regulating your nervous system in that moment. Right? If you are practicing on breathing, especially diaphragmatic breathing, and you are slowing and counting your breaths and you are concentrating on a mantra or on awareness, or you're somatically grounding in your body, right? Some meditative forms, you pay attention to how the body feels. You may be regulating your nervous system and so you do feel better.

But if that's all you're doing, then it's not really that different than a yoga class where you feel better afterwards, or some people exercise to release

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stress, or going to sleep, right, or having an orgasm. You're doing an activity that does change the state of your nervous system in that moment, but you aren't resolving the chronic thought patterns so it'll just come back.

So that's one way to tell. Is your meditative practice changing the quality and type of the thoughts you're having on a regular basis, or is it a momentary reprieve, a momentary reset, but then the same chronic thought patterns keep coming up? If that's what's happening, then you're not really practicing detachment. I think you're just soothing your nervous system in the moment.

If you're practicing a form of meditation where you really do pay attention to watching the thoughts float through your brain, practicing detachment from them, that I think is totally fine. That is, I mean, a lot of what coaching is, is sort of an analytic way of helping you do exactly that, to see a thought as just something that goes through your mind and isn't true or doesn't have to be believed or doesn't mean anything about you or doesn't need to be like grappled with, right, can just be allowed to float through. So in that case, I totally think it's complementary.

Now, what usually meditation doesn't teach you to do and one of the reasons that I loved coaching when I found it was even if you do practice a form of meditation that allows you to practice detaching from ego, detaching from thoughts, detaching from interpretation and story, the goal, you know, meditation is created as this religious ritual tool where the goal is detachment in general. Right? And that's not my personal goal for my life. I want to detach from my ego investment in a lot of things, for sure. I certainly want to detach from believing other people have to be certain ways, like trying to control things I can't control. I want to detach from trying to control things I can't control and I want to detach from getting my ego involved in my own behavior or other people's behavior.

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But I don't actually want to completely detach from other areas of my life. I want to set big goals and move towards discomfort and be willing to feel negative emotions and accomplish and achieve big things in the world and take a lot of action. And so for me, that doesn't come from detachment. It's not antithetical to it. I think you could sort of do both, but it's just a different skill that's not going to arise organically out of meditation.

The other thing is for people who have a hard time meditating, which a lot of my clients do, thought work can be a more hands-on analytical approach to achieving some of the same goals. So, that's what I think about it.

There's for sure never anything wrong with it. Meditation's never going to hurt you and it always probably will help you in some way if you are able to do it. But I think if you're wondering whether you're practicing detachment in a way that's helping you or if it's just a kind of temporary fix, you got to look at whether those thoughts are coming back up.

The other thing you asked about is sort of is it a way I'm not allowing my feelings? My experience with meditation is that feelings totally come up and you can allow and have those feelings. You know, if you are meditating in a way that's like, oh no, a negative emotion is coming up, I better meditate my way out of it, then you're using it as a tool to escape yourself. If you're meditating in a way that's like this consistent practice of breathing and somatic grounding is helping my nervous system stay calmer on a regular basis and so I'm not experiencing as many emotional fluctuations, I think that's totally fine. I don't think that's avoiding emotion.

But you want to be just sort of conscious and pay attention. And the last thing I'll say is you can also try to figure this out, you know, depends on how you are using it. It's not like an answer about meditation in general, is to think about whether there's any particular emotions that you try to like meditate your way out of. I have been doing some work recently on noticing that I have not really been allowing anger. I have not been consciously

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telling myself it's bad or I'm not allowed to have it, but I just kind of coach myself out of it right away because I've learned how to do that. And that's a useful tool, but it was at the point I'm at in my work, I was like, well, I actually want to like not coach myself out of this right away and allow the emotion and see what it feels like and ride it through all the way to the end.

And so you can kind of pay attention with yourself like, well, are you going to meditate every time you feel a certain emotion coming on because you want to get rid of it? Like that would be a sign that you're not allowing your emotions. In terms of how to allow feelings into the practice, like you said, I think you can bring feelings up during meditation if you want. Meditation means so many different things. Right? And so depending on the kind you're practicing, I think you can incorporate it, you can try a different practice. But I think meditative practices that involve a lot of awareness of the body and bringing attention to the physical form, the kind of quote-unquote energetics, just like how does your body feel, how does this part of your body feel? What is that sensation like? All of those are really helpful processing tools for emotions and when we teach emotional processing, that's kind of what we're doing is teaching body awareness and sitting with discomfort.

So, that's the answer to that. There's not a hard and fast answer. I think meditation and coaching are kind of like a Venn diagram and there's overlap in some parts and then some parts of each are really different from each other. And you just kind of need to pay attention with yourself about whether you're feeling your feelings. I mean, the fact that you're concerned about this makes me think possibly you are using it to not feel your feelings. And so it might just be interesting to like, what if you did a meditation on your feelings and like completely allowed them to come up and have your experience of them be the meditation on them. If you're like, fuck no to that, then you're probably using it to avoid.

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Great question. I'm glad you asked that. I'll talk to you next week.