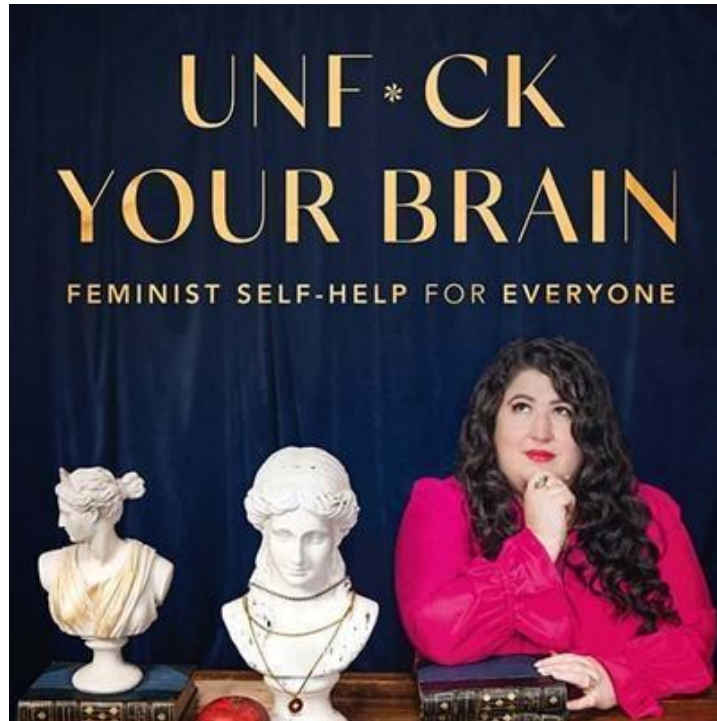


## UFYB 430: How to Embrace Friction and Grow From It



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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

## UFYB 430: How to Embrace Friction and Grow From It

Friction doesn't sound good, does it? Friction between people is stressful. Friction when it's fabric rubbing against your skin, that's annoying. Too much friction during sex. Ouch. But friction is actually an underappreciated part of life. And in our society, we're spending so much time and money to make our lives frictionless that we're in danger of removing one of the most fruitful experiences for growth, evolution, and connection. So today, my goal is to change your perspective on friction and teach you how to tolerate it, maybe welcome it, and maybe even seek it out on purpose. So 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.

Hello, my friends. So one of the biggest mistakes people make about confidence is thinking that it comes from knowing you are good at something you're doing. And yes, this does relate to friction, because, in fact, confidence comes from being willing to be bad at things. Confidence in yourself comes from your capacity and willingness to try and fail. And a crucial ingredient in that willingness is the ability to tolerate friction. I'm writing this at the tail end of a road trip that I took around France with my husband. And traveling is a great time to think about friction, because when you travel, you consciously choose to take yourself out of your routine, out of your comfort zone, and put yourself in surroundings that are unfamiliar, especially if you travel internationally to a place where you don't know the language.

As we were driving around, I was thinking about the difference between traveling now and traveling when I was younger. Before every phone was a smartphone. When I was in college, I had a flip phone, and I traveled through Asia and Europe. And I'm not even sure I brought that phone with me. Plans had to be made in advance. I carried guidebooks with me. I had

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to use paper maps. I occasionally called my parents from a hotel phone, but it was expensive and most of the hostels didn't have phones in the rooms at all. These were not five star resorts back then.

Now on this trip, we glided along in a rented Volvo with Google Maps to get us everywhere we needed to go. Every hotel we went to, someone spoke English or everyone spoke English. But travel is still never friction free. While we were driving through the French countryside, for instance, on this trip, we kept trying to stop at groceries or restaurants that were supposed to be open but were closed. It was the last week in August when, as it turns out, the businesses that stayed open for the French vacances period finally took their own short vacation. After all, the vacationers went back to work.

So we had a day where I think we stopped at 10 places that were supposed to be open and everything was closed. We hadn't eaten in maybe eight or nine hours, and I was getting hungrier and hangrier and it was so fascinating to observe my brain and how frustrated it was that these places were supposed to be open because the Internet had told me they would be. And in this day and age, we just expect that everything should proceed smoothly, especially if we've used the Internet to prepare us for what we want to experience.

But that's not how life works or how French grocery stores work. Seems like a trivial example, but it's an important concept. I've thankfully been on Earth long enough to know that it's often the times that things go wrong in survivable ways that make the best memories and bonding experiences. My husband and I had a perfectly pleasant trip to Scotland once, and we don't really talk about it much, but the time we got caught in a freak snowstorm in Morocco and almost died in the Atlas Mountains. We tell that story all the time.

And it was good timing to experience some travel friction because at the same time I was reading an article about AI and the ways that people are using it to reduce their need to interact with other humans, research and

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think critically, or encounter ideas or people they don't like. We have this natural human tendency to want to seek pleasure and avoid pain, right? We talk about that on the podcast all the time. So it's very natural that we want to reduce friction. Why do something difficult when you can make it easy, is what your brain says. Why drive out to get food when it can come to your door and listen, I love delivery as much as the next person.

Why have an uncomfortable conversation when you can just try to ignore it and maybe it'll go away? Why interact with people you find stupid or frustrating when you could just read social media posts from people you already like and agree with? The problem is that friction is absolutely required for growth. It's not an accident that the term coined to describe the mental discomfort of learning something new is limbic friction. Friction is inherent in learning something new, trying and failing, or building real human intimacy.

Status is what the human brain finds comfortable. Whatever is familiar, whatever you already do, however you already live, that's what's comfortable. So that's what your brain associates with being safe. I'm not saying we need to be pushing ourselves into agony every minute on purpose, but this metaphor holds true even on a biological level. Think about how vaccines work. In order to grow immune protection that keeps us healthier, longer, our bodies have to have some friction happen by responding to the vaccine. That's why we can get side effects. Or think about building muscle.

We have to make these tiny tears and push our muscles past what they can do in order for them to get stronger and build more muscle mass. And the same is true mentally and emotionally. When we remove the friction from our lives, we think we're seeking more peace and ease. But this can backfire because we also lose our resilience and ability to cope with frustration, miscommunication, inefficiency, or even just the discomfort of having to make an effort. All of which are unfortunately required to live a full life here as a human on Earth. So when we use AI writing software to avoid

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the discomfort of a blank page, we save ourselves some time. But what's the opportunity cost? Less friction means less frustration and less time. But it also means less creativity, less practice with the skill of writing, less, fewer, really, neural connections being formed and reinforced.

And studies are starting to come out showing how the use of AI impacts our neural health and vitality. And as you would expect, at least if you're me, it reduces neural connections. You literally lose brain power. But this isn't just about AI. There are a lot of ways we try to avoid friction. We avoid having real conversations with people in our lives because we don't want to experience the unpleasantness of disagreement. But that means we don't get to experience real intimacy either. There's an opportunity cost of increased closeness that we pay in order to avoid conflict.

We don't try new things, new hobbies, new skills, because we don't want to experience the friction created by trying to learn, making mistakes, and feeling uncomfortable. Before our trip, I booked a French lesson to brush up on my French. And speaking in French for an hour was mentally exhausting. My brain hated it. I felt uncomfortable. I wanted to end the session many times, and it wasn't that long of a session. But you know what? My French got a lot better. Even in just that hour.

We let Netflix play the ninth episode in a row rather than face the friction of confronting how we actually feel. The more we avoid friction, the easier life feels on the surface. But the emptier it is on the inside, the more sanitized it becomes. And the more isolated we become. The more we substitute technology for human feeling, the less human we end up feeling. An AI companion won't ever have needs or desires that contradict yours. They won't ever hurt your feelings. They won't have inconvenient family or friends for you to deal with.

But they also will not push you to grow. You will not have to become more self aware to improve the relationship. You will not get to experience the biological impact of human interaction. We are not brains in a jar. We are

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bodies in the world. And we have to interact with people and with things in a reciprocal way to learn and grow and evolve, but also just to continue functioning as a healthy biological entity.

Our upper level thinking cares about all this, but our primitive brain just says, easy, good, hard, bad. No thank you. So after the break, I want to share an exercise with you that you can use to encourage yourself to experience friction on purpose. Or at least not avoid it when it comes up.

Okay, so what do you do when your brain wants to choose the easy way out? When it doesn't want to try to learn that new skill because it seems hard? When it doesn't want to volunteer for a project at work because you're not an expert at that area yet. When it doesn't want to speak up that something hurt your feelings because it doesn't want to risk your partner being mad. When it doesn't want to go exploring because it's scared to take the subway in a foreign language.

When your brain is turning down opportunities for friction, there are kind of two implicit premises or thoughts behind it. One is this will feel bad. Two is this is not worth the bad feeling part. So you can work on challenging and reframing either or both of these thoughts. Obviously shifting both most effective. But you can start with one first. You can reframe that feeling of friction. I'm not talking about gaslighting yourself that you love being terrified.

I'm not going on a trapeze no matter what. I have no interest in that kind of growth. But I have reframed the skill of being bad at something or not skilled at it as a positive thing. I practice the thought this feeling in my brain means I'm learning something new. Or this frustration means I'm getting better at something our brain thinks that our frustration or discomfort means we're failing or we're in danger, but we can reframe it to believe that frustration or discomfort is actually a sign of improvement and growth. When I try something new or something I'm not good at, I prepare in advance to have that feeling. Just like if I were going to exercise, I'd be

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prepared to be out of breath. Deciding ahead of time that you want to do something and that the feeling of friction is a sign it's going the way it's supposed to is very powerful.

And it flips your brain's assumption on its head. If you're a visualizer, you can visualize that moment. I can't visualize. So I just imagine how it's going to feel. And I tell myself ahead of time this feeling is not a problem. This feeling is a good sign that I'm gaining resilience on something. The second thing you can do is ask yourself why the friction is worth it. It's very hard to convince the brain to do something uncomfortable with no payoff, which honestly makes sense.

Why stick your hand on a hot stove for no reason? You'd actually be kind of crazy to be willing to do that. But my brain going no friction, no thanks is not a considered evaluation. That's just a default judgment. It's my job to explain to myself why it's worth it. I'm willing to feel friction in order to get better at French because I want to be more fluent in the language. And one of my values is growth. I'm willing to feel friction in order to raise hurt feelings with my husband because I want us to have an open, honest relationship. And one of my values is honesty.

This exercise doesn't have to relate to a core value because it's not always a high stakes endeavor. But even when it doesn't, you can identify the positive result you'll get for the friction. Your primitive brain doesn't want to walk into a field of brambles for no reason. That makes sense. But for tasty blueberries, it might be more willing. So when you encounter something that may bring friction, you can ask yourself, what is the value that I will get on the other side of the friction? And you can see why both together works best, right? Both techniques. An ongoing practice of reframing friction as a positive sign of growth and a specific practice in specific instances of articulating for yourself what value is on the other side of the uncomfortable experience. And this can be done even when something's happening unexpectedly.



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So when we were on our road trip and I was at the fifth closed store or restaurant. With my blood sugar dropping, I decided, okay, this is going to be an opportunity for me to practice encountering friction without getting frustrated and mad about it. And that's valuable to me. I want to be someone with ever increasing resilience and equanimity when frustrations happen, and it works best to start with small things like stores being closed.

Ultimately, you can start to build an identity as someone who can tolerate bigger problems and who even seeks out friction. And the more you identify that way, the more opportunities for productive friction you'll find around you, and the more you will grow and learn as well. See you next week.