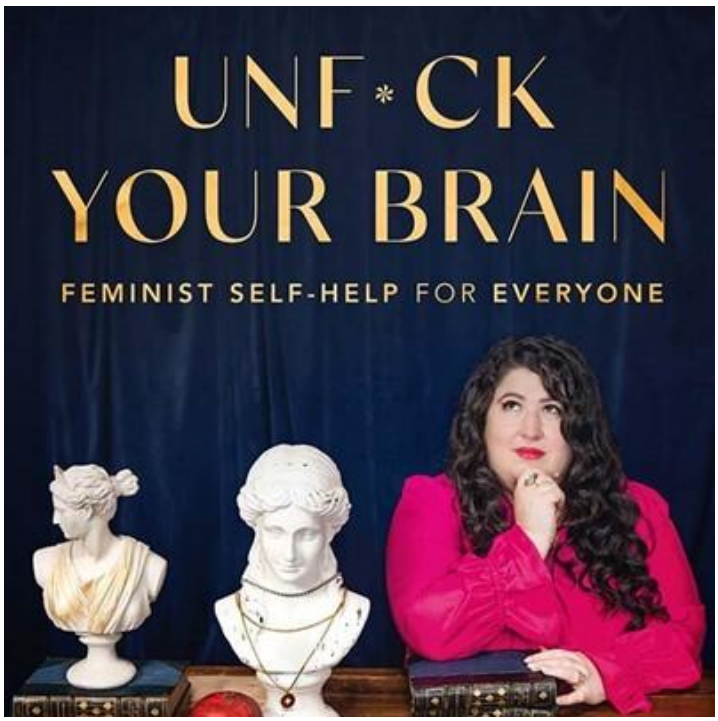
UFYB 432: Creating Self-Confidence (Greatest Hits)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

UnF*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil

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So I don't know if you guys have ever had the experience where let's say you're working on something. Maybe this is before everything was in Google Docs and auto Saved, but back in the day, you'd be working on something and, like, your computer would freeze, you would forget to save, you would lose the whole thing, your dog would eat your homework, whatever, and you'd have to do it all again. And you would be so mad because you had just done it. Now you have to do it again. And what if it's not as good and it would turn out just as good or better?

And I feel like I have this happen with concepts that I think can teach about where I'll think that I'm, like, coming up with something I've never talked about before. And then when I look back, I'm like, oh, I've been talking about this all along. This is like the next level of it. So I have been thinking and talking and developing a new body of work around confidence that I'm going to be starting to share on the podcast. And I'm really excited about it.

And when I was getting ready, I'm writing the new episodes now and recording them, and I was like, oh, I should go back and see. Like, I think I'd like to share some of my earlier episodes on confidence, but my thinking has evolved so much. I better go make sure that, like, I still stand by all of them. Like, what if they say something I don't agree with now? So I went back and looked at episode three of the podcast. Like, that is so early. That is 2017, and it's episode three is Creating Confidence, Creating Self Confidence. And I went and looked at it and I was like, oh, no, I stand by all of this. This is all actually true.

So I think that my teaching on confidence is evolving in, like, a more specific and detailed direction, which is going to be so valuable for you guys in terms of really breaking down. Like, what are the skills and thought patterns and emotional and regulation skills you need to build confidence. So I'm really excited to share that with you over the next couple of months here on the podcast.

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But we are going to start with this early episode with this Greatest Hits repeat because what this episode really focuses on that is so important is that confidence doesn't come from external accomplishments. And I talk about the kind of catch 22 that people get themselves in where they're like, well, how can I be confident that I can do it when I haven't done it yet? So you're going to hear me talk in this episode about confidence as a thought or a belief system. And that is part of the bigger picture of confidence I'll be sharing with you over the next few months.

But I think this episode is a really good place to start so that we are all on the same page in terms of our foundational beliefs and assumptions about what external accomplishments do and don't have to do with confidence. So we're going to start with this. Next week we'll be talking a little bit more about what is and isn't confidence. And then we're going to get into this new definition of confidence and this new tool that I've created to share with all of you about how to create more self-confidence. So it is going to be a really powerful next couple of months here on the podcast. Make sure you are subscribed or following whatever your podcast app requires and share the podcast with a friend if you would. Because I really want more and more people in the world to know how to create true self confidence.

So if you have friends who struggle with any insecurity or confidence or imposter syndrome or anything like that, send them the podcast. Let them know this exciting couple of months is coming. You and they are not going to want to miss 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.

UFYB 432: Creating Self-Confidence (Greatest Hits)

Hello, hello. It is cold. Winter is here, you guys. I'm not ready for it. I'm upstate this weekend actually, where it's... I mean in New York City right now, it's maybe fall. Up here, it's like Game of Thrones. Like winter is coming. You can see the frost on the horizon. So this morning, I was kind of huddled on the blanket. No, I was settled on the porch, under a blanket. That would make more sense and I'm here with my partner and I was kind of thinking about how much has happened in the last five years since the first time we came up here. When I think back to that summer, it is just really crazy how far I have come.

So five years ago, I had just transitioned from being a women's rights litigator into academia and I was plagued with self-doubt about my ability to write my first law review article, which was just the first step, right? Much less, ultimately get a job as a law professor. And at the same time I had just started dating my partner and I was consumed with anxiety about the relationship and whether I was kind of good enough to keep him around.

I was just thinking about how back then, I had all of these theories about myself. I mean, they were basically all just insecurity, the bottom line, but because I am hyper-verbal and analytical and I'd been to a lot of therapy and I've read a lot of 19th century novels growing up, I had a lot of really complicated narratives about myself that I used to like smuggle my lack of self-confidence around and kind of make it seem fancier and more interesting.

So for instance, one of my theories about myself was that I was not "naturally an academic." I told people this all the time, like it made sense, like that was a coherent thing to say. Even though if you think about it, academia is like the opposite of any natural skillset. The whole point of being an academic is that it takes decades of education to become one, right? To train you into thinking and writing that way. You have to get a PhD, or at least in law, you have to get a law degree and clerk and do

fellowships. Nobody is naturally an academic. That logic did not deter me at all.

Another story I had at the time was that I was unlovable and this also was pretty vague, but I had this conviction that there was something mysterious that other women had that I didn't have. And this mysterious element, like maybe it was on the table of periodic elements; it was unclear. This mysterious element was what made other women lovable and not having it meant that men wouldn't fall in love with me.

I was totally not concerned about the fact that I'd had several long-term relationships and several men had fallen in love with me already. That was totally irrelevant. I had all sorts of reasons. They didn't count, of course. I had my theory that I was unlovable and I was sticking to it. I was going to play that song. That was my story and these stories I had, they were essentially just window dressing for the fact that I didn't think I was smart enough, or compelling enough, or alternatively that I was too much of something like maybe I was too loud or I was too intense or I was too annoying. Who knows. I was not enough of one thing or too much of something else. The rules were always kind of shifting in my brain but the outcome was the same. I felt insecure and I lacked the self-confidence that I really desperately wanted to feel and try to pretend that I did feel.

Even now that I'm a coach, my brain sometimes still does this to me. For the first six months I was working on my business and my coaching practice, my brain was telling me that I could not be a huge success as a coach because people didn't love me enough. Just generally speaking, the people, right? There was a coach I knew, who I really admired and I watched her online presence and she had a big tribe of people who seem to really adore her.

Now, she'd been a life coach for 10 years and she was a master coach and a very successful one. So of course she had built up a community but that

didn't matter. I still looked at her and compared myself to her and thought I couldn't get to where she was because I didn't have what she had and I believed for a while that there was something undefinable, but lacking in me, that meant that people wouldn't feel that way about me. So I couldn't be a success like she was.

So essentially I was just repeating. I'd had that same thought pattern about men and I had cleared that up. I had done a lot of work, coaching work on myself, about dating. But then it came right back up in a different form about my coaching business and I believed it for a while until I sort of realized that I was just repeating that old thought; like an old network, it kind of sparked back to life and was attaching itself to this new circumstance. Now ironically, now that woman is my coach and she cheers my successes and I totally have my own tribe and some of you, many of you, are part of my tribe but I had to work through those thoughts before I could get there.

So my story is my own particular weird one, but it's not really strange at all in the sense that so many of my clients have a fundamental lack of self-confidence. What it all boils down to is they don't believe that they're good enough to have what they want. They don't believe they're smart or talented enough, or thin enough or lovable enough.

So what can we do to try to fix this gap? What do we usually try? I mean, many of us know that we're lacking self-confidence. There's books and magazine articles and online quizzes and we try to fix it, but nothing we try works.

The first and most obvious thing we try to do is we try to fix it by accomplishing something external. If I just get the promotion. If I just get the clerkship. If I just lose the weight. If I just get a boyfriend. If I just get my boyfriend proposed to me. Of course we're making it harder to achieve

those things because of our thoughts but sometimes we're able to white knuckle it through and get there.

And then what do we find? We still feel exactly the same. External accomplishments do not create confidence. They can't because external circumstances don't create our feelings. Our thoughts create our feelings.

So if you tell yourself that you're not smart enough, you don't work hard enough and then you get a promotion, it's not going to change those thoughts. You're just going to start believing that you tricked everyone else, or it was luck, or they felt bad for you, or they had to promote you. You're going to keep your insecure based thoughts and you're not going to change them because of this additional information.

If you look at some of the really interesting studies around political arguments, it shows that, not just public arguments but sort of any belief that people hold strongly like about global warming or politics or anything else, when you give people evidence that contradicts their belief, it does not change their minds the way you think it should. It actually can make them cling harder to the original belief, which is craziness. But that's because you're not changing their underlying belief. You're not dealing with whatever their underlying premise is. You're just trying to argue them out of it and the same thing happens when you lack self-confidence and you feel insecure and then you try to sort of dissuade yourself with some facts. It doesn't work. You can dismiss the facts. If you don't change that underlying thought that causes the insecurity, it won't make a difference.

Another thing I think we'd like to try is we like to ask other people for validation. If I confess my insecurity to my friends, they'll tell me that I am silly and I'll feel better. If I ask my partner, if I look pretty today and he says, "Yes," then I'll feel better and that's what produces often us, especially in dating, trying to maneuver the conversation around to set it up for the person to say something complimentary. So if they do, I can feel okay

about myself and often they don't because you didn't give them the script to the whole situation of what they were supposed to say and then that just reinforces the insecurity that you were trying to cure by manipulating them into saying something you wanted to hear.

So here's what's happening when you try to get external validation from other people. You're basically asking them to offer you a thought that you can think and for a few minutes, you believe that thought because someone else said it. So you feel better but you haven't changed your underlying thoughts about yourself. Again, it's just like getting the promotion. You haven't changed the underlying thought about yourself, so it doesn't stick. Insecurity is like Teflon. Nothing anyone else says or does we'll stick to it. Ultimately, it will all slide off. External validation is like candy. The sugar high is pleasurable for a minute but then it wears off and you feel even worse.

Here's the thing I think is fascinating about self-confidence. We all have it exactly backwards. We think that accomplishments and what other people think of us are what produced confidence. If I get that raise, I'll feel good about myself. If that guy wants to sleep with me, I'll feel good about myself. If my parents praise me, I'll feel good about myself. But it's the opposite. You have to believe in your ability to succeed before you can accomplish something mind blowing. You have to develop the confidence first.

When I worked with the clients on this, the first step is creating confidence by reviewing the things that they've accomplished in life and that is totally a good place to start. You list your own accomplishments and you practice remembering that you have some. But the next level is thinking about what confidence really means.

I don't think that ultimately confidence is actually about the achievements you've already had. They're totally a good place to start in rewiring your brain for sure, because they are evidence that you can achieve and by

focusing on them, you can start to rewire your brain away from discounting them.

But they're still relying on evidence and evidence is not what produces confidence. After all, what about someone who hasn't got any achievements yet? How does that person achieve something huge and unthinkable? I think the answer has to be that confidence is the belief, not just that you've already done some things, but that you have the capability of doing something in the future. Confidence is the belief that you already have what you need, whether that's being confident that you're beautiful, confident that you're smart, confident that you can climb Mount Everest or knit a quilt or become a senator. Whatever it is, confidence is the belief that you are already in possession of the qualities you will need.

You may not have the knowledge yet or the skills or the experience for sure. There may be things you have to learn but you believe that you have the capability to get there. That is what actually produces confidence and that has to come from your thoughts. It can't come from external achievements because in order to do new things, you'll always be trying to do something you haven't done before, so it wouldn't be helpful when I wanted to become a coach to say to myself, "Well, look, I mean, you got a law fellowship." It's not related. But when I thought to myself, "Okay, well you did something that was really challenging that most people aren't able to do before. Now that was super inspiring."

Confidence has to come from within, from believing that you're capable of getting what you want and that's why it's so much more effective to think about things that you found were challenging or difficult and where you persevered. That is way more effective than thinking about accomplishments that you didn't find difficult or challenging because it's not about the external accomplishment or the achieving of the specific goal. It's about believing in your own capabilities, in your own drive and

determination. That is where true confidence comes from; from believing that you are someone who can do hard things and succeed.

I will tell you what. When I think about the fact that I built this coaching business from scratch and that I now make a great living changing the world, which is what I feel like I'm doing, that fucking blows my mind. Nothing that I did in my legal career really blew my mind, to be honest. It was difficult in the sense that I was stressed out and I had to white knuckle through it and that was difficult, but I didn't really feel like I learned or grew in a lot of ways during that time in my career and so it didn't really feel inspiring. It didn't feel confident.

When I think about what I've accomplished in creating a coaching business and how much work I had to do on myself, how much work I had to do on my thoughts, the kind of person I had to become to make this change, that makes me feel like I am capable of anything. So, it's not about the external accomplishments. In fact, a lot of people in the world would think that my legal career was way more impressive. Plenty of people start successful small businesses. Plenty of people are life coaches. Not that many people go to Harvard Law School and clerk on a Federal Appeals Court and get the one reproductive rights fellowship in the country in their year, and then get academic fellowships. Fewer numbers of people do those things. They might look more impressive to other people. They don't feel more impressive to me because I didn't have to become a different person. I didn't have to grow in certain ways in order to do those things.

So, it's not about reflecting on like what brass rings you've gotten. That can help in the beginning if you're really hard on yourself but if you really want to develop that true internal self-confidence, it comes from looking at the things you've done that were hard. Places that you persevered. Places that you grew. Things that took kind of character from you and strength and determination. Looking at the places that you displayed those qualities and

practicing thinking about those accomplishments, that is what will create that true feeling of confidence for you.

This isn't just for kind of professional stuff. Even when you think about something like feeling confident in relationships, despite what I used to be very convinced of, that doesn't come from being convinced that other people can or will love you. Because while it's generally true, I mean most people are lovable, you really can't control or predict that. The day that I felt lovable to other people was the day I actually loved myself. Let me be really clear. I'm not saying that bullshit thing that you see on the internet all the time that's like, "Until you love yourself, no one else can love you." That's obviously not true. There are serial killers with people who love them and write to them in prison. That has nothing to do with it and we all know people who are super insecure who have a doting partner. That's not what it means. Other people can love you because that's about their thoughts.

What is true is that if you don't love yourself, you will not be able to accept that someone else loves you and actually experience that connection because you don't believe that it's really possible and you think there must be something wrong with them, or you are just so focused in your own lack of love for yourself that you can't experience it.

So, if you want to feel confident, that's where it starts. For me, feeling confident that I could find love didn't come from tallying up the men who had loved me in the past. That was helpful in the beginning. Just like thinking about your professional accomplishments, whether hard or not, can be helpful in the beginning. When my brain was saying, "No one will ever love you," it was helpful to be like, "Well, I don't know. These five guys have. Maybe there might be another one." That was a good first step. But when it came to really having that deep unalterable conviction that I was lovable, no matter what happened around me or outside of me, that could only be created by developing that love for myself.

Once I had that, it seemed only natural that other people would love me. It doesn't even seem like a question anymore. I knew that if I dedicated myself to finding a partner, I would be able to because I knew what actions I would have to take.

So if you want to feel confident, there's nothing wrong with starting by listing your accomplishments and achievements and reading those over and sometimes I assign that as a starting point but you'll be doing even deeper work if you think about the things you've overcome in your life that were challenging or difficult. What was hard? What was scary? What did you fear you could not do and then you did it? Those accomplishments can be the bedrock of your self-confidence.

I think about the people who go through terrible experiences and afterwards they say, "I'm glad that happened. It turned me into the person I am today." That's what they're talking about and you don't have to go to war or have gotten a terminal disease to be able to have that experience. You just have to focus on the things in your life that you went through, where you did reach deep down and you did persevere and you did get through them. Consistently practicing thinking about how you've overcome challenges in the past, is what will build the confidence you need to take them on in the future.

So with that, I leave you all to your weeks and I encourage you to think about something today that you know, deep down, was a time that you challenged yourself and succeeded. Just think about that experience. Let it marinate in your brain and see if you don't feel a little bit different tomorrow. I'll talk to you all soon.

All right. My loved ones, my lovely chickens. I will talk to you guys next week.