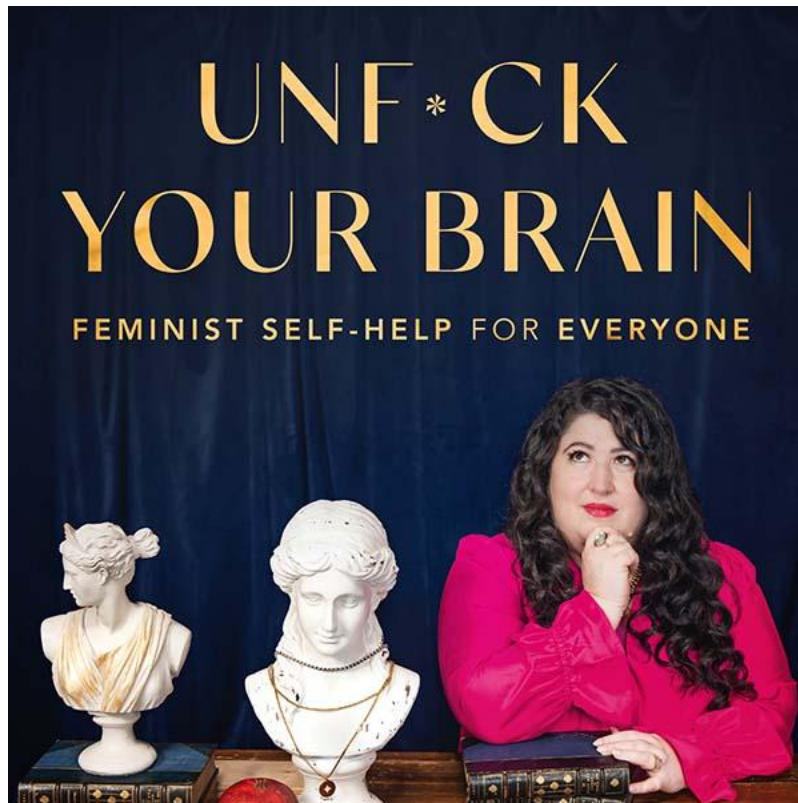


# UFYB 456: Better Boundaries & Instant Obligation Syndrome



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## UFYB 456: Better Boundaries & Instant Obligation Syndrome

There is so much on the internet about how to set boundaries, and almost all of it is ignoring one fundamental problem. Most people socialized as women are living with what I call Instant Obligation Syndrome. This is not something I've seen anyone else talk about, but it is foundational to understand. If you want to be able to set better boundaries, you have to understand Instant Obligation Syndrome and how it's showing up. Because if you don't know how to deal with your default assumption that you should do what other people ask you to do and you should give what other people ask for, you'll never be able to set and keep a boundary. So let's get into this undiscussed and crucial mindset problem this week.

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.

Okay, so that feeling you have when somebody asks you for something or asks you to do something or asks for some kind of access to you, and you don't want to do it, don't want to give that access, don't want to spend that time, don't want to have that kind of interaction, but you say yes anyway. And partly that is because of the way you feel if you don't, which is that you feel guilty, probably, and part of it is a premise or assumption that I don't think you're even aware of. And this pattern, which I see come up constantly, I don't think it even has a name yet. So we're going to name it, and I'm going to call it Instant Obligation Syndrome, or IOS.

Here's what happens. Someone asks you for something, could be small. Could I pick your brain about this? Could you bake something for this raffle? Could you be on this work committee? Or it could be huge, like, I want to have sex with you. I need you to take on this project at work. I need you to perform this acting role after we fired someone. I want you to have

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another baby. Literally, could be tiny, could be enormous. Doesn't matter. The moment the request is made, instead of starting from a neutral place of deciding if you want to do it, you immediately feel obligated to do it.

Like the scale has subtly or not so subtly already tipped in favor of this presumption that you should do it. If you imagine like a seesaw, it's like someone is already sitting on one side, and for some of you it's a little bit, and for some of you it's like they already sat it all the way down to the ground. Just by asking, a presumption of obligation gets created. It's like the default answer should be yes, is the way we're socialized, right? The default answer should be yes.

And if you want to say no, you feel like you have to have a good reason. There has to be a reason to say no, and it has to be justified. And ideally, the other person should agree that it's a good reason to say no, and you want them to agree for you to believe it's a good reason to say no.

This Instant Obligation Syndrome impacts all of our interactions pretty much, and we're not even really aware of it. So by the end of this episode, we're going to dismantle that. You're going to understand why you don't need a reason to say no. You don't owe anyone an explanation for your boundaries and how resolving this thought problem is actually what makes boundaries much easier.

So why do we have this? Why is there this like automatic belief that if someone else has some kind of desire for you to do something, you are already kind of in debt and have to pay that back. You already have a presumption that you should do it. That's because people who are socialized as women are socialized to believe that if somebody wants something from us, it's kind of our obligation to give it. And if we're not going to give it, we better have a really good reason.

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Right? And that's because women are socialized to believe that their purpose is to serve other people. And listen, being of service to our loved ones, to our communities, to our world, that's a beautiful thing. I have 456 episodes of this podcast because I want to be in service to all of you. But the idea that just because someone else wants something from us, we are automatically halfway to obligated to give it to them, creates this massive imbalance for us because then we are already halfway down the road of doing it. We're not starting from considering whether we have any interest in doing the thing, whether the relationship is meaningful to us, whether there would be something useful for us in it. We are not making any kind of clear decision. We're just already feeling off balance, already feeling indebted, already feeling like we're obliged, and then it would take so much effort to like back ourselves out of that.

And this can be on a real spectrum, right? Like, I have coached women and I've used the example of saying, well, if someone on the street or a stranger says they want to have sex with you, you don't feel like you have to do it, right? And someone will be like, "Oh, yeah, right. Okay, I get it. Like, I wouldn't feel obligated to do that." I see this pattern. And then some people are like, I don't know, I would feel like it was rude of me to say no. Right? That's how deep it can go. This socialization can be really profound. So it can be really obvious, or it can be the subtlety of like, do you feel like you need a good reason to say no to sex, not with a stranger, but with your partner? Do you feel like you need some sort of valid excuse to decline to go to a networking coffee or a family gathering?

It's this like constant pervasive sense that if you don't give people what they want, you're doing something wrong unless you have a good enough excuse. And we often talk about this to each other in this way where we're trying to get like validation for our reason to not go. And we want to be feel vindicated, feel validated, have someone else tell us, yes, it's okay to say no. Ideally, we'd love the person who's asking to be that person, but we'll

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take backup from friends, family, whoever. The reason we like crowdsource like that is because we feel so uncomfortable saying no, because we were socialized to believe that the default should be saying yes.

And we twist ourselves into knots trying to find some excuse or reason to give that will make sure the other person doesn't feel rejected, doesn't feel disappointed, right? Because we're taught that managing other people's emotions is our job.

There's a huge cost to saying yes when you don't want to do it. Just think about the sheer amount of time, energy, emotion, money you spend on things that you have no independent desire to do. This is not about community or generosity. I'm going to talk about that in a minute, okay? This is about this reality where women feel they owe the world access to themselves by default at all times.

I see this pattern come up in my own brain, right? I get like a DM on Facebook from a third connection friend who's like, I'm thinking of becoming a coach. I'd love to take you out to coffee and pick your brain. And I have no desire to do this, but I feel like I have to give a reason for not wanting to do it. And I see this in my clients with everything you can imagine. People wanting something from them, they have no desire to give it authentically, but they either do it or they feel like they have to have a good reason not to, and then they still feel guilty anyway.

And there are so many costs to this. There's the resource drain I just talked about. There's the internal cost, right? Even if you do say no, if you haven't rewired this, you're still feeling guilty, which is like this kind of drain on your emotions, right? You feel bad about having boundaries. Maybe you spend a bunch of time talking to other people, trying to get validation for your decision. You spend time worrying about what the other person thinks of you who you said no to and whether they think you're stuck up or whether

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they think you're selfish or whether you've ruined the relationship. Those costs we're more aware of. Then there's also an opportunity cost, and I think this is the part we often miss. There is a real cost when we do this to the relationships that we do care about.

So if you, for instance, are saying yes to a bunch of shit that you don't want to do, and then you're burnt out because on top of all the things you do want to do and do need to do, you're also letting random people pick your brain three times a week, or you're doing work tasks that aren't yours, or you are serving on a committee that you don't want to serve on, or you're maintaining multiple friendships that you are not even interested in, then you actually have very little left for the people who you do want to have good relationships with. You don't have patience for your kids. You don't have energy to connect with your partner. You don't have creativity left for your own hobbies or pursuits. You don't have energy left for your own goals. Living in this like Instant Obligation Syndrome, it steals the best of you from the people and the projects that actually matter to you.

It's like having all of your resources drained by whoever happens to ask for them, and then your and even your loved ones end up at the bottom of the list. So there are enormous costs to living this way, and it's so important that we reframe how we think about it when someone is asking us to do something and how we think about authentic desire to contribute, connect, and serve versus Instant Obligation Syndrome. So that's what I'm going to get into right after this quick break.

Okay, so if we are not going to live in Instant Obligation Syndrome, if we are not going to immediately feel obligated and have to have a good excuse not to do something just because someone else wants it, how are we going to think about what we choose to do that other people might want?

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So I want to propose an idea for you that may seem radical, but I think that life should mostly be an exchange of desirable connection, an exchange of desirable reciprocity. It's not a fair exchange if one person wants something and the other one feels forced to do it for any reason, for coercion, because of socialization, people pleasing, whatever it is. I am not preaching hyper independence, okay? Community is vital, but community is built on mutual investment, and it's coming from a desire to help your neighbor, your friend, whatever, because it's one moment of helping them in a mutual back and forth over time. That's different than feeling obligated to say yes to something anyone asks of you, no matter what it is, and no matter how often they ask, and no matter whether they are also reciprocal with you.

Right? It's a very important difference. Like I'm not saying don't ever do a thing that you don't in the moment feel excited to do. But I'm saying that when we think about where we put our time and energy, I want you to be starting from, I'm starting at neutral. I get to decide whether this is something I want to do, either because it genuinely sounds like fun in the moment, or because it's an investment in a relationship that's important to me, or because it is repaying, being reciprocal for someone who's helped me before, like whatever it is.

You might say yes to pick my brain coffee because you feel like that's a way you give back that really feels good to you. The way you know the difference is if you feel guilty and bad for saying no. And so when we are examining this, we're not just looking at what is fun in the moment, right? Like helping a friend move. On the superficial level, do I want to carry boxes in the slush and the cold? No, I don't. But on a deeper level, I love this person. Helping them aligns with my values of friendship, so I might have a genuine desire to be of support in their time of need, and that would make it a yes for me. So I would say yes to do it.



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That is different than this person asked me to, and so I immediately feel guilty if I say no, and I think if I say no, I'm a bad person and I'm a bad friend, and I need to do it because I have to because either they'll be upset or I have to prove to myself that I'm a good person. If you are coming from a place of true like neutrality and choice, then if someone asked you to move, but you feel like I don't really know you, we're not that close, this isn't a friendship that I'm interested in, I have chronic pain and that's not really possible for me without being on the couch for a week afterwards, then I'm going to say no.

And when we are making this decision from a more neutral place, we can make more authentic acceptances or counter offers, right? So like if it is a friend who I love and they want help moving, but I know that because of my chronic pain, if I help them move, I'm going to be on the couch for a week. But I do want to help and support them, then I would think of something else I could offer. Like I can't help you move, but I'd love to order pizza so you can ask the neighbor kids to come help and give them pizza, right? Or I'd love to chip in for the neighbor kids to help you. Or, for a pick your brain request, like I can't meet you for coffee, but here's a link to a resource that's really helped me or someone I really recommend you follow in our field.

You're being generous and offering what feels good to you to offer. And in the best case scenario, there's a matching there and that's great and it's reciprocal and everyone feels good. Sometimes the other person wants more than you want to give, but that doesn't mean that you're obligated to meet them at the level that they want because relationships should be reciprocal, not always in every moment, but over time.

And so when you start from a place of I get truly to choose how I want to respond to this request, that's when you will feel like you have autonomy, right? And that is when you will feel like you are in charge of your own life. Again, if you want to do the thing, by all means. I'm not telling you don't

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ever mentor an up and coming person who can't give you something back right away. But when you mentor because you really feel that's aligned with your values, it's an important part of your role as a professional, you enjoy the process, then you are getting something out of that process. You're not just doing that out of obligation.

But if you agree to mentor someone who you don't like, don't think is suited to the career, don't want to spend time with, and you don't have really have the energy to do it and you want to put that energy somewhere else, that's not an empowered choice, right? It is not coming from a true meeting of authentic desire. When I say reciprocal, it doesn't mean that the other person has to be able to give you something quote unquote, right? I mean there's reciprocal desire for the thing. The person wants to be mentored and you genuinely want to mentor them. That's when you should say yes. That's a genuine reciprocal exchange of desire, a meeting of genuine reciprocal desires. It is when someone wants something from us and we do not want to give it to them, and we do it anyway, that is when we are living in that Instant Obligation Syndrome where we're giving just because someone asked and we think that means we have to.

People think that the way to have better boundaries is to like be firmer, be more disciplined in them, like be more clear, be better at controlling other people. But that's not what boundaries are, right? A boundary is actually you just telling the truth about what you're available for. And boundaries become really easy when you believe you have the right to say no. So part of the problem with like how people try to set boundaries, especially people socialized as women, is that, God, there's so much self-help content around setting boundaries and none of it addresses the fact that if you're living in Instant Obligation Syndrome, you don't have a prayer in hell of setting a boundary and keeping it.

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Because you don't believe that you are allowed to say no, remove yourself from a situation, not be in a relationship you don't want to be in, not be available for certain kinds of interaction you don't want to have. Right? So if you don't believe that you have the right to those things, how the fuck are you going to set and keep a boundary? There's no magic incantation. There's no mad libs for boundaries that's going to solve that problem.

But when you drop this belief, or really you rewire this belief that everyone has entitlement to access to you, that you have to have a good reason not to be in a certain kind of relationship or have a certain kind of interaction, when you don't believe that and you believe that interactions and relationships should be reciprocal and desired by both parties, then boundaries become really easy. There's not all this guilt to overcome, you're not trying to control the other person. You are really able to show up as your empowered, autonomous self who's just only available for certain kinds of interactions and relationships without any drama.

So I know that is a big bite to take off, and so here's how you can start to work on this on a more like immediate level. So first, always, we just want to start with awareness. Like start paying attention, where does this kind of Instant Obligation Syndrome show up for you? How do you feel when someone asks you for something? Do you start to feel anxious? Do you feel a sinking sense of dread? How do you feel if you think about saying no? Do you immediately feel anxious or guilty or worried that they'll be upset or start thinking that you're a bad person, right? Pay attention to how often that Instant Obligation Syndrome is showing up. You're going to be shocked for some of you how frequent it is.

Step two, right, we want to get a little deeper into self-knowledge, like start to ask yourself, do I have any independent desire to do this? Is this aligned with my values in some way? Does this further a goal that I want for myself? And again, it's not like, hey, is this tit for tat? Is this person going to

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buy me coffee next week if I buy them coffee this week? That's not the question, right? But it's just, is there any genuine desire in me to do this? Do I actually want to do this at all?

And if the answer's no, then the next step is practicing no without all of that justification. Just, no, I'm sorry, I can't help with that. No, I'm sorry, I'm not available for that. I mean, you don't even have to say you're sorry. But just right, I'm not available. I can't help with that. I think it's actually fine if you say, I'm sorry, I can't help you with that. Like when someone's asking for something, I don't think that's people pleasing to say, I'm sorry, I can't help you with that. You may genuinely feel that.

When someone wants my help and I don't want to have coffee with the third degree Facebook connection, right, I do wish I had on some level infinite energy, so I feel totally genuine saying like, you know, I'm really sorry that I'm not available for that. You wanted that, I can imagine you might be disappointed. I totally get that. I am sorry that's not a possibility. To me, that's not like people pleasing or fawning. I'm not apologizing for it, really. I know it's funny because "I'm sorry" sounds like an apology, but on an emotional level, I'm not apologizing for my decision. I'm just sort of saying like, yeah, it's a bummer that I can't give you what you want. It's a bummer for you. For me, this is good that I'm saying no. So practice saying no and just paying attention to that guilt and reminding yourself exchanges are supposed to be reciprocal.

Relationships are supposed to be reciprocal, or I don't have an obligation to give of my time, energy, money, whatever, in ways that don't align with my values or aren't investments in relationships that matter to me or aren't contributing to my community in a way that matter to me, whatever it is. What's that? Connect that value and then practice saying no. And then, like I said earlier with my examples, if you do care about the person or the relationship or the cause or whatever, and you would like to contribute in a

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different way, you can always offer that, right? Offer what you can give freely.

Everything's not black and white. It doesn't have to be yes, I'll do exactly what you want or no, I'm not doing anything. This is a good practice in helping you see how relationships can be reciprocal. The person asked for what they want, and you offer what you want to give, and then you see if there can be a meeting. The overlap in the Venn diagram of what they want you to give them and what you actually want to give them is where we can find that mutual reciprocity.

And for extra credit, you can use this as a way to think about it when you ask for something and you don't get it. How can you respect other people's autonomy to say no, if they're not interested in giving you something, and to look for those places that your Venn diagram can overlap with them when you are the one asking, without taking it personally or making it mean anything bad about them.

If you practice these steps, you will dramatically decrease the impact of Instant Obligation Syndrome on your life, and you will free up so much time and emotional energy and sometimes even like financial resources by not just saying yes to everything everyone asks you for and actually starting to make sure that you give only when you want to for reasons that align with your values and when you have the space and capacity to do so. And that is really what it means to take yourself as seriously and as valuable as whoever happens to ask you for something that they want.

All right, my friends. If this is something you want help with in 2026, make sure you check out A Confident Life. We are only open for a few more days. You can join us by going to [unfuckyourbrain.com/life](https://unfuckyourbrain.com/life) or text your email to +1 (347) 997-1784 and then the code word is life. It is a year-long deep dive with me into how to improve your confidence in the five core

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areas of your life, and you will learn how to embrace who you are, show up fully as yourself, and reap all the rewards that follow. I'll see you there.