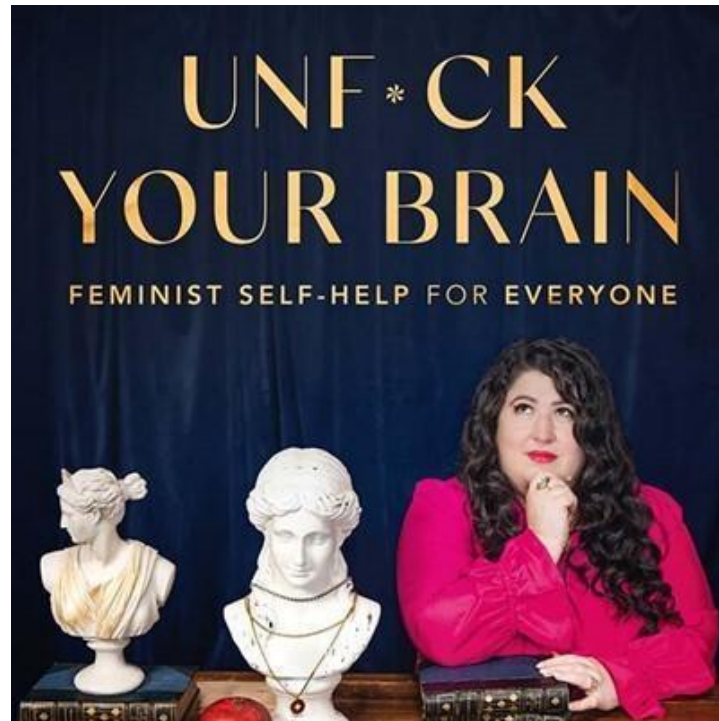


# UFYB 464: Why You Never “Deserve” or “Don't Deserve” Anything, Ever



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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

## **UFYB 464: Why You Never “Deserve” or “Don't Deserve” Anything, Ever**

There is one sneaky word that I hear clients use all the time in an attempt to feel validated, vindicated, or more confident. Sometimes it sounds empowering. I deserve this vacation. I deserve this kind of relationship. I deserve better treatment. Sometimes it's used to second guess themselves. Maybe I don't deserve success because I haven't worked hard enough. Maybe I don't deserve this good fortune.

The fact that it can be used in both these ways is exactly the problem with the word deserve. It's a Trojan horse that introduces an open question your brain can never answer because the question of whether or not you deserve what is happening to you can never be objective. In today's episode, I'm going to show you why using this concept of deserving is actually really counterproductive. It's not empowering you the way you think it is, and I'm going to suggest a reframe for how to think about what you want, need, or desire to experience. 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. How are all of you? I am writing this episode from inside a snow globe. We are upstate at our Creek house and it's snowing, and the world is on fire, as usual these days and maybe more so right now. But it's so grounding to look at the trees and the water and remember that this landscape has been here cycling through its natural paces as generations of humans have come and gone.

We're currently finalizing plans for a renovation of this house and I've talked about this on the podcast before as one of the things I've had to coach myself a lot on throughout the process because of the commitment required, because of the financial investment, because of all the decisions,

## **UFYB 464: Why You Never “Deserve” or “Don't Deserve” Anything, Ever**

and all of the socialization I have around being modest, staying small, and not trusting my own financial decisions.

And by the way, if you want to hear more of my self-coaching, I'm doing a 30 Days of Self-Coaching challenge on social media right now. You can find the videos on my Instagram account. It's @karaloewentheil. I'm doing a video every day or most days since we are recovering perfectionists here, just sharing something I had to coach myself about that day or the day before and how I worked through it. Really good way to get a sense of how coaching yourself helps on a daily basis.

Anyway, so the house renovation project has given me lots of opportunities to coach myself, and one of the thought patterns that has come up is discomfort with making the house basically too nice or too fancy or just too much somehow. I was talking to a friend about it and she said, yeah, it's so hard to feel like you deserve nice things sometimes. Which I actually loved because it reminded me how far I've come and all of the coaching I've done on this thought pattern before, and that really reconnected me to how I make decisions. But it also reminded me that so many of my clients and my listeners, like you, still have this thought pattern. So that's what I really want to get into with you all today.

I really want to radically deconstruct this concept of deserving. We're not just tweaking, okay? We're going to eradicate this from your mental vocabulary if I have any say in it. The dictionary definition of deserving is to be worthy of or have a right to something, a reward, punishment, or treatment, because of one's actions, qualities, or situation.

So if we think about what that means, there are a couple of premises embedded in it. One premise is that you have a moral status that is determined by who you are or what you've done or your circumstances. Another premise is that what you can or should experience in life has to line up, or at least should line up with that moral status. So if you've done

## **UFYB 464: Why You Never “Deserve” or “Don't Deserve” Anything, Ever**

good things or been a good person, you deserve something good. And if you've done bad things or been a bad person, you don't deserve good things, or you actually deserve actively bad things.

And then there's also kind of interestingly an implication that if your circumstances have been bad, you then deserve something good to happen. Right? Like if you've been a good person but a bad thing has happened to you, you then deserve a good thing to happen. I think this is because the assumption is that bad circumstances create emotional suffering and because that doesn't match your good moral status, the universe owes you something to balance it out.

So why do we use this concept or this term of deserving to talk about what we want or don't want or what we're experiencing? I think on the surface it can feel empowering, like, I deserve success. I deserve good things, or I don't deserve to be treated poorly. We're just trying to feel empowered. But I think the premises embedded are really insidious, especially for women, because women are socialized to always think that they're doing things wrong, aren't good enough, are lacking, need to prove themselves, and deserve anything bad that happens to them, and that they're to blame whenever anything bad does happen.

And women are systematically raised to see themselves as kind of constantly morally questionable, probably wrong, probably selfish, probably undeserving, to think other people are just as good or even better than us. Right? Why would we ever be picked for something? Why would we ever be good enough to deserve anything? So when we use this word deserving, we're trying to justify to ourselves, I think, that we're good enough, right? So we try to use it to claim and feel okay about good fortune or to justify why we don't want to or shouldn't have to endure mistreatment.

But there are a couple of problems with this idea, right? First of all, it's a very simplistic black-and-white idea of moral status and how it can be

## **UFYB 464: Why You Never “Deserve” or “Don't Deserve” Anything, Ever**

attained or lost. There's something very childlike about the idea that if you're good enough, you can have good things, but if you're bad, you should get bad things. And there is that like naivete to it, right? Because who's deciding if you're good enough? Who's deciding what things correspond to the kind of good you are and what things correspond to the kind of bad you are? And like, what even counts as good or bad? What if you have good intent, but then there's a bad outcome, right? Or vice versa? What if somebody has bad intent, but the outcome benefits you? Like, is it intent? Is it effect? How is this calculated or calibrated? Like the minute you dig beneath the surface, it all falls apart.

We're all people who have some good qualities and some less helpful ones. We all sometimes rise to the best of what humans can be, and we sometimes sink to the worst, or maybe not all the way to the worst, but not to the highest heights. None of us, almost none of us, at least, are truly wholly good or bad. And of course, people disagree about what good or bad even is. So we disagree about who deserves what, who's undeserving of what, what even counts as good or bad, and sometimes we disagree like really diametrically.

So the whole concept is really incoherent. And it is this appeal to some sort of external justification. I deserve this is like a way of substituting some universal judgment for your own. And so I think for people socialized as women especially, it's really powerful to reject the idea that you have to prove you're good enough or worthy enough to deserve something positive. It's powerful to reject the idea that you don't deserve empathy or compassion or help unless you can prove that you didn't cause something or do something bad to deserve it.

It's radical and powerful to step outside of this constant evaluation framework that women are socialized into, where we're always surveying ourselves and evaluating ourselves and we're always appealing to some kind of external authority, real or imagined, to adjudicate our goodness, our

## **UFYB 464: Why You Never “Deserve” or “Don't Deserve” Anything, Ever**

worth, our value, and what we're allowed to want or have or experience. So that is one fundamental reason I really recommend moving away from this way of thinking.

But it's even more problematic than this because the whole concept of deserving is so insidious because on a cognitive level, it doesn't even do what it promises to do. We use it because we think it's going to make us feel more secure, more validated, more vindicated, but it doesn't. The way it makes you think about yourself and your own life, it actually paralyzes you more often with confusion and second guessing and doubt and shame. It doesn't actually help you embrace good outcomes or get out of bad ones. So I'm going to explain why that happens because of how your brain operates and how to get out of that spin right after this quick break.

So let's recap briefly. We tell ourselves that we deserve or don't deserve things either when we want to feel bad and punish ourselves and confirm our negative thoughts about ourselves, or when we are trying to feel validated, vindicated, and deserving of what we want to have or experience. But in addition to all the problems I discussed in the first half of the episode, there's one final problem with this approach. The problem is that when you try to correlate what you deserve or don't deserve, you not only accept the premise that you have to prove you're good to be allowed to experience anything good or to get compassion or help when you experience something bad, you got to prove you don't deserve it.

You also open up a cognitive question loop that your brain can never answer. The problem with trying to tell yourself or others that you deserve something or don't deserve something is that you've admitted that there's this like open analytic question about whether or not that's true. If your brain believes that you have to deserve or not deserve things, then it has to double down on the self-evaluation and the self-surveillance and the self-policing and the second guessing and the questioning, right? Because it'll never feel sure that it's right.

## **UFYB 464: Why You Never “Deserve” or “Don't Deserve” Anything, Ever**

I want you to think about it honestly, like when you think to yourself, I deserve this good thing. Does that really alleviate your anxiety or discomfort you're having around the good thing? And if something quote-unquote bad happens and you think I don't deserve this, does that actually make you feel better? Not in your brain, but in your body. Now, I'm not denying that sometimes occasionally this thought is really helpful for people, especially if they have told themselves that like they're worthless and then they eventually are able to go up a ladder to think that maybe they don't deserve bad treatment.

As always in my work, it's like this is why we check in with the body. If the thought feels good to you and it's motivating actions you want, then keep it. Who cares what I say, right? But in my experience, a lot of the time, if not most of the time, when you try to use this language of deserving, all it does for your brain is open the question of whether you do or don't deserve what you're experiencing. And then that's a question your brain can never answer. And it buys into that underlying premise that I talked about in the first half of the episode that you have to justify yourself.

So I want to suggest that you reject this premise, like completely. You don't need justification for being allowed to enjoy good fortune, happy emotions, or anything else that happens to you, especially since your enjoyment of those things comes from your thoughts about them. It's not from the thing themselves in the first place. And you don't need to prove that you're a good person who is experiencing unfair suffering in order to deserve help, empathy, or support from other people or yourself. Suffering is part of the human experience and it happens to everyone, often caused by our thoughts. There's no logical correlation to who the person is or what they've done or not done.

You can just claim what you want to experience. You don't have to deserve it. If you're in a relationship where someone is treating you in a way you don't want to be treated, you can just leave that relationship because you

## **UFYB 464: Why You Never “Deserve” or “Don't Deserve” Anything, Ever**

don't want to be in it. It has nothing to do with deserving or not deserving it. When you think in the terms of deserving or not deserving, you unintentionally make yourself kind of a passive victim, right? Whether it's good or bad fortune, you're sort of telling yourself the story that like you're just existing and then something outside of you is like evaluating your moral worth and then assigning you a bonus or a penalty.

Something outside of you is happening to you and you have to justify having it or changing it. That is really self-infantilizing. You don't need justification. I don't want you to spend a moment of your life debating with yourself whether you deserve good treatment, happiness, success, enjoyment, love, or anything else. There is no such thing as deserving or not deserving. You are in charge of your experience of the world and you don't have to justify it to anyone, including yourself. You don't need to appeal to some kind of external cosmic or moral authority to justify what you want to experience or do and what you don't want to experience or do or be part of.

You don't have to earn those things and you can't lose your ability or your right to go after them based on your character or behavior. And conversely, shit happens to everyone. Suffering is a part of human life. When you talk to yourself about challenges, about grief, about loss as something you don't deserve, you're kind of missing the point. Life doesn't happen to you based on your moral character or some universal accounting system. Life happens to everyone. Some of it we can control, some of it we can't. But I don't deserve this can veer very quickly into self-pity in a way that is not helpful.

You can have self-compassion about how hard something is without turning yourself into a passive victim who's being treated unfairly by life as if life owes you a balanced ledger at every moment. That's because when you think of it that way, very often what that means is you're just sort of like appealing to the universe about how you don't deserve this thing, but still

## **UFYB 464: Why You Never “Deserve” or “Don't Deserve” Anything, Ever**

kind of in that passive mindset. And that's why I said like you have to check with your body, how does it feel, how do you act. If thinking I don't deserve this gets you out of an abusive situation because it makes you feel like powerful and you take action, then again, awesome. That matters more than whatever my opinion is.

I really want you to check in with yourself if this is a term you use a lot because I very often see I don't deserve this turn into self-pity, not into empowerment. Before I wrap this up, there's one more way of using deserving that I want to address, which is that I think sometimes people use this language when they feel guilt about their luck or privilege compared to what other people in the world have or experience. And that is a beautiful impulse in some way to recognize that we all have unearned luck in some areas of our lives.

But that's what it is. It's luck. It's not earned or justified and it's not deserved or undeserved. I did nothing to deserve, quote-unquote, being born into a family that could afford to feed and clothe and educate and house me. I do not deserve those advantages more than a child who was born into a life without them. But when we wallow in guilt about not deserving our luck, whatever it may be, we're failing to make use of what we have been given and we're failing to use it to create better conditions and outcomes for people who have not been as lucky as we have.

You don't deserve your luck. You don't deserve your privilege. You also don't deserve your misfortunes, your suffering, your betrayals, or your unhappiness. None of it is about deserving. Your emotional experience is created by your thoughts. Your circumstances are created by a combination of forces beyond your control and what you do about them. But none of it is about what you do or don't deserve.

So set yourself free from this way of thinking. You don't deserve anything and you don't not deserve anything. You're a human in the world with

## **UFYB 464: Why You Never “Deserve” or “Don't Deserve” Anything, Ever**

agency and with constraints, with luck and unluck, with power to change some of your circumstances and all of your thoughts and feelings. You get to do whatever you want with your life, and none of it has anything to do with what you deserve.