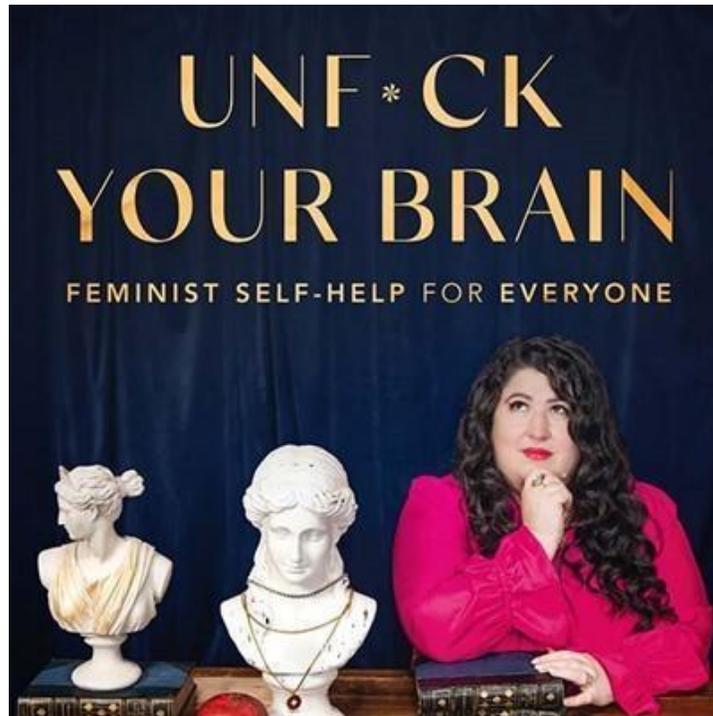


UFYB 470: Your Emotional Compass, Guilt & Shame (Greatest Hits)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Hello, my friends. We are keeping with our emotion theme this month. And I want to talk today about two of the core emotions that drive so much of our behavior and so many of our decisions, from the everyday decisions of whether to call your great-aunt back or what you're going to eat for lunch, to your huge lifelong decisions like whether to stay married or what kind of career to pursue. And those are the emotions of guilt and shame.

So in this episode, which originally came out a couple of years ago, I talk about how we use guilt and shame as the main driver in our decision-making and how that ends up playing out in our life. I talk about how to recalibrate your emotional compass and orient yourself in a different way towards your decisions so that you aren't being driven by guilt or shame and making decisions based on just trying to avoid those emotions. If you learn how to reduce those emotions overall, you can make better decisions and actually pursue the life that you want to have.

It's a really great episode. If you've already heard it, it really deserves another listen. It will hit you differently where you are now. And if you've never heard it, you are in for a mind-blowing episode. All right, past me, take it away.

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 chickens, how are you? I am enjoying the quiet of the last week before our summer travel bonanza/overschedule begins in July as it turns out. I'm going on four different trips. I'm going to upstate New York, I'm going to California, I'm going to Tennessee and I'm going to Scotland. And I didn't really set out to do that but that's what happened. Plus, hiring new

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employees, finishing a draft of my book, running a business, recording this podcast, all the things.

So when my schedule is this packed I have to be really careful about what I decide to add or take away and what kind of emotions are driving me. Because it's easy to look at everything I'm doing and start to think thoughts like, this is too much, I don't have time, I'm overwhelmed. I don't have any room for error. And then surprise, surprise, I feel super overwhelmed when I'm thinking that way. So really looking at my priorities requires me to know what are the values I'm trying to live by and navigate by, what's really important to me in this really busy time and what isn't.

I can't just reflexively say yes to everything. I can't say yes to every social invitation. I can't say yes to everything my team wants me to do. I can't say yes to everything the kids want me to do. I really have to think carefully about how I'm spending my time. And so I want to talk about this today and I want to kind of talk about how we make decisions from an emotional place and how we navigate in our decision making.

And I've been thinking about this ever since I coached one of my clients in my feminist business mastermind about how she was making decisions. So this client came from the social justice world like I did. She was a non-profit kind of human rights lawyer just like I had been although in a different field. And this thought pattern is definitely very prevalent among people who are mission driven or come from a social justice culture. But honestly, it's endemic among people socialized as women regardless of their politics or activism because it ties in to how women are socialized.

But I do think if you are kind of social justice oriented or come from a non-profit background, you have another extra dose of this. So what I coached her about was the way she was making decisions and navigating her life and her business because her main criteria for knowing what to do or not to do was whether she felt guilt or shame if she did or didn't do the thing. And

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this is specifically talking about coaching one person, I coached on this recently. But I have coached so many people about this. And I've coached myself about this.

And I know that most of us have this issue, which is that we decide what to do based on whether doing it or not doing it would make us feel worse. So our main criteria are whether we feel guilt or shame if we do or don't do something. So if we feel guilt or shame when we think about doing something then we don't do it because we want to avoid the guilt or shame. And we assume that if we're feeling guilt or shame about doing something it must be bad. And if we feel guilt or shame when we think about not doing something then we do it.

I'm going to give you some examples soon. And in general, this is like if we have something we want to do but then when we think about it we feel guilt and shame, then we don't do it. And we assume that we feel guilt and shame because it's a bad idea or we're a bad person for wanting to do it. Or if we think of something we could do that we don't really want to or someone asks us to do something. If we feel guilt or shame when we think about not doing it then we do it because we assume that it must be bad to not do it, that's why we're feeling the guilt or shame and that a good person would do it.

The problem is that guilt and shame are emotions that women in particular are socialized to equate with being a bad person and women in particular are socialized to believe it's our duty and responsibility to make other people happy and serve others. So we're taught to believe that if we don't do something someone else wants us to do or we don't do something for someone else or for someone else's benefit that we possibly could do, that makes us a bad person and then we feel guilt and shame about that.

And we're taught to believe that doing anything that we want to do just because we want to do it is also bad, that that's not a good enough reason.

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So what we end up doing is a lot of things we don't want to do and not doing the things we do want to do because we've been taught that to be a good person we need to not do what we want to do and focus on what other people want us to do. When you navigate by guilt and shame, what you're really navigating by is just your socialization.

I'm going to say that again because I think that we think that guilt and shame are like flashing red arrows to the moral truth, what's really good or bad, what kind of a person we are. But guilt and shame are not a moral truth of the universe. They are feelings caused by our thoughts and society teaches us which things we're supposed to feel guilty and ashamed of. That's why in some cultures people feel a lot of guilt and shame about sex and some cultures people don't.

In some cultures people feel a lot of guilt and shame about eating certain foods together and in some cultures people don't because it's not an inherent moral compass. It's just what society has taught you to feel guilt or shame about. And if you are socialized as a woman in our society, you are taught to feel guilt and shame about doing anything you'd want to do just for yourself just because you want to, basically doing anything you want to do at all or anything that would feel good or fun. Or not doing anything you possibly could do that would benefit someone else.

So when you navigate by guilt and shame you are just navigating by your socialization without even thinking about it because what you've been taught makes you good or bad or enough or not enough or worthy or unworthy is what is driving your compass. So let's look at a few examples.

Let's say that your mom asks you to drive three hours to your sister's house for a family gathering. You have a really busy week, that's the only night you have to relax. I'm assuming in this example that you're not someone who's excited to do this. If you're excited to do this then this is easy, you don't have a problem and there's no guilt or shame. But we're assuming

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here you prefer not to, that if you were going to feel okay either way you would prefer not to do this. So how do you make the decision?

If you're not aware of your emotional compass and the fact that it is being directed by guilt and shame then you make it without any intentional process. You don't want to go but you think about saying no and then you feel shame or guilt. And you think okay, well, if I feel guilty then I need to do it. I'm feeling guilty because that means I'm a bad daughter if I don't go. That guilt is telling me that this is wrong for me to not do it.

So you make the decision based on navigating by trying to get away from your guilt or shame without ever really interrogating those thoughts or deciding on purpose how to think about the situation.

Or let's say you're thinking about leaving your job because you want to do something else or you got a better offer for doing the same thing somewhere else. But when you think about leaving, you feel guilt about leaving your colleagues, your clients or you feel ashamed of yourself for wanting more money or for caring about having a shorter commute. Because you've been socialized to think that wanting anything for yourself or caring about your own desires or needs is selfish so you don't change your job.

This is what happens when you don't know how your emotional compass is working and that you don't know that it's always just spinning around from the pull of guilt and shame. That that's the way that your emotional compass is navigating. When you use guilt and shame to decide how to operate in the world, you may feel like that's how to be a good person. But you haven't actually decided for yourself what it means to you to be a good person or if a good person is even a concept that you believe in.

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You're just operating based on what society taught you about being a good person and really about being a good woman. And that may not actually match your true values or how you want to live your life. And the same is true of the things you do to feel like a good person or even things that feel positive where you kind of give yourself a pat on the back. If you haven't calibrated your emotional compass yourself and decided what to navigate by, you're just navigating by whatever you've been taught to feel.

So even when you feel good, like you're a good person, you're a good daughter, you're a good employee, you're a good wife, you're a good boss, you're a good mom, whatever it is. It may not be based on what you actually believe. It may be based on stereotypes and beliefs about women that you don't even want to agree with. You may feel like a good person when you put yourself last. You may feel like a good person when you deny your own needs or pleasure. You may feel like a good person when you ignore what you want to make someone else happy.

That's not serving you, that's serving society and the patriarchy. And many of us don't know how else we would ever make a decision. My client that I started this episode talking about had been doing this her whole life. And when we coached about it she had no idea what else she could do. If she wasn't making all her decisions based on avoiding guilt and shame, and calling that doing the right thing, how was she supposed to make decisions? What was supposed to navigate her?

And so what I told her and what I recommend for you is that you do the work to calibrate your emotional compass so to speak, rather than just having your preset compass that society gave you that just spins around following guilt and shame. And that just spins around based on what society taught you. You decide for yourself what values matter, how you want to navigate your life, what values do you want to use to make decisions.

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So let's go back to our family example. For instance if one of your top values is self-care and enough rest then maybe you would decide not to go and you would feel rooted and grounded in that because you know that you chose that value on purpose and why it matters to you. Maybe rest and self-care matter to you because that's how you show up to do well in your job and take care of your family and those things matter to you and you know you can't show up that way if you're exhausted.

Or maybe one of your top values is family and then you would decide to go to the event depending on what family means to you. But even if you decide to go, it would feel very different to go from a positive value, following your compass on purpose, compared to going when you don't want to and you feel obligated and you feel resentful. And you're just trying to avoid guilt and shame and then you're exhausted.

So you have to calibrate your emotional compass based on the values that matter to you, not just what you were taught or unconsciously acting out, not just trying to avoid guilt and shame.