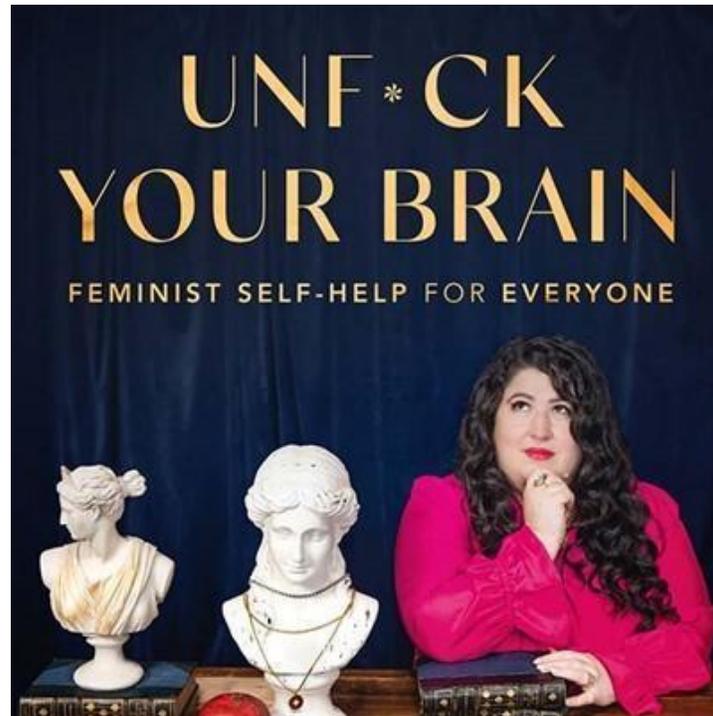


UFYB 476: Releasing Caretaking Guilt for the Sandwich Generation



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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

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Have you ever been taking care of someone you love, like a sick parent, a child, a spouse, anyone who needs you, and felt angry or resentful or just completely done? And then immediately felt like a terrible person for feeling that way? If you have, this episode is for you.

And before we dive in any further, as many of you know, I have stepchildren, my husband and I both have parents who are doing amazingly well, but are still aging. And I'm lucky enough to have a grandmother who's in her late 90s, and I run a business. So I know what it means to have people depending on you from multiple directions and to have real responsibilities in your life.

And I also work with and coach women in my programs every single day who are navigating similar obligations like caring for an aging parent, supporting a spouse through illness, raising kids, all while holding down a job and trying to have some semblance of a social life. They're doing it all.

So, if you're in this season of life, just know you're not alone. And this is one of the defining experiences of our generation and some of the generation before us. It's so common it actually has a name. It's called the Sandwich Generation because our parents are living longer and we're having kids later. So we're more likely to end up in a scenario where we're caring for generations on either side of us simultaneously. While we're also at the peak age for our careers, maybe going through the hormonal changes of perimenopause and menopause, there's just a lot going on.

And so here's what I hear from women in that Sandwich Generation on my coaching calls in my DMs, right? They say things like, I shouldn't feel angry. My sick parents didn't choose to be this way. I can't ask for a break. That's selfish. I love this person, so why do I resent them? If I were a better person, a better daughter, a better mom, a better spouse, I wouldn't feel this way. I can't fall apart. I'm the one holding everything together. Other

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people do this without complaining. What's wrong with me? Why can't I just get it together? Or, I chose this. I don't get to feel bad about it.

And underneath all of those thoughts is the same question that we don't even want to admit we're having. Am I a bad person for feeling this way? And that my friend is the question we're diving into today.

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.

So whether you fully identify with the phrase or the label of the Sandwich Generation, right, caring for kids and parents at the same time, I guarantee you love someone who's living this reality right now and you're taking care of something in your life that you are probably having conflicting thoughts about.

So I want to take one thought I hear all the time and break down what is going on with this typical thought around caregiving and how it's impacting you. So you can swap in whatever your specific circumstances are, right? But an example of the thought would be, I shouldn't feel angry that I have to take care of my mother with dementia. She didn't choose this. If I were a better person, if I were a better daughter, I wouldn't feel this way.

So it's so important to notice that your brain is immediately judging and evaluating your experience, right? Your brain is telling you should not feel the way you do. If you were better, you wouldn't feel this way. And your brain is offering you that thought because you've been socialized to think that. This thought was given to you by a system that has always depended on women's unpaid, under-supported, emotionally invisible labor as

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caregivers and then has praised women for being selfless while expecting them to really dissolve their own entire self.

So of course your brain thinks you're supposed to do all of this caregiving and it's supposed to come naturally and it's not supposed to be stressful or upsetting or make you angry or make you resentful, right? And if it does, then you are not fitting that standard norm, that social expectation, and so there must be something wrong with you. And you've been raised inside a system that really runs on making women believe that limits are selfish, that needing support makes you a burden. You've been taught that love means giving up anything you need to fulfill someone else's needs or anything you want, not even having wants.

So all of that socialization is an issue, obviously. But before you can even work on that socialization, we have to deal with the shame that socialization creates for us around the very normal, complex human experience of caregiving. The real problem isn't actually the anger you might feel, the resentment, whatever. These are normal human emotions. The real initial problem is your belief that you shouldn't have those emotions. The thought that you shouldn't feel angry, that if you were a better person, you wouldn't feel that way.

It is okay to have these emotions. They're just feelings that come from your thoughts, right? And the thought is already happening. It's already there whether you want it to or not. You are probably having normal human thoughts like, this isn't fair. I didn't know it would be this hard. I need more support. I'm overwhelmed. Those thoughts don't make you a bad person or a bad caregiver or a bad spouse or a daughter or a parent or anything. They just mean you're human.

And the feelings they create are also not bad. They're just information about what you're thinking. But because of our socialization, we try to ignore that information or suppress it. We are socialized to believe that

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anger is bad and we shouldn't feel angry, that if we feel overwhelmed, there's something wrong with us. We should be able to handle everything with never a negative thought. We're socialized to believe we should always be able to lovingly give more and more forever, and if we can't, we're failing at what makes us worthy and valuable.

So when our experience doesn't match that expectation, we feel ashamed. And then when you pile shame on top of that normal human stress or anxiety or anger or resentment or whatever, the shame doesn't make it go away. It actually just magnifies it. You become more resentful. You become more depleted. You feel worse. So my goal for you is not to get rid of that anger or that resentment or whatever, not at first at least. What we have to do first is remove the shame so you can actually allow those emotions and understand where they're coming from. It's not actually caregiving that is making things so unbearable. It's the belief that you should be a caregiving robot who has no human limitations and beating yourself up when you can't meet that impossible standard.

And the worst part is that when we think this way, we actually make our own problems worse. And that is not to blame ourselves, it's just to understand what our thinking does and how it plays out in our lives. So let me give you an example. Let's say you're taking care of a parent and you're reaching the limits of your patience. You can feel how stressed out you are and you know that if you went for a walk and listened to your favorite podcast, maybe this one, it would probably help. But the moment you think about it, your brain offers you a series of thoughts like, well, but I can't go. I need to be available. That's why I'm here. What if they need something? I can't take time for myself.

So notice what just happened, right? The desire to go for the walk is not the problem and it's not actually true that you can't go for the walk in a lot of instances. Sometimes it is, but often you could. The problem is your thoughts. The problem is the immediate shame, blame, shutdown game.

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And even if you are in a scenario where you can't leave whoever you're caretaking alone, you not figuring out how to get coverage so you could take a half hour walk, you not planning your day differently to allow for a few minutes for yourself, it's all symptoms of the same thought problem. The problem isn't the walk and it's not the person you're caring for. The problem is that if you think taking time for myself is selfish or I can't do that or it's irresponsible to not be here every moment, then you're never going to create that time for yourself and then you're feeling guilty before you've even put your shoes on.

And so you don't go on that walk. You don't spend that time with yourself, which means you don't de-stress. And so you feel more exhausted, more burnt out, and you have even less capacity. And then you're more short tempered, and then you blame yourself more and criticize yourself more. So it's this vicious cycle where because you believe that you shouldn't need breaks or support or that it's not possible, you actually make yourself worse at those roles. You tell yourself, well, I'm a bad daughter for wanting to get out of here. And so you ignore that, and then you're actually more burned out and probably less patient with your parent. You resent them more, right? There's no such thing as really being a quote unquote bad daughter, but you make the whole experience worse for yourself and you like magnify the things that you're judging yourself for.

So we obviously we got to get out of this cycle, right, if we're going to change our experience of caregiving. So after this short break, I'm going to teach you a powerful thought technique you can use to get out of the cycle.

Okay, so how do we break out of this cycle where we have normal human emotions to the stress of caregiving, and then we shame ourselves, try to shut them down, try to ignore them, we burn ourselves out, and then we make our own experience even worse, and then we have less capacity for the people we're caring for. We have to get out of this either or thinking and try thinking with the word and. You can love your aging parent with

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dementia and you can feel sad about the loss of the life you had before they moved into your home.

You can love your spouse and know that it's an honor to care for them, and you can feel exhausted by their illness and grieve the trip to France that you now can't take with them. You can be a devoted parent and you can miss your old routines, your old freedom, your old life. None of those very human reactions mean that you are bad in your role or a bad person. Both things can be true at the same time. It's not either or, it's and. And acknowledges that you are having a complicated human experience and more than one thing can be true. I can love this person and still feel angry. My feelings about caregiving don't cancel out my love. I'm allowed to be human while I do this very hard thing.

These are all the kinds of thoughts that you can try. And you know, swapping and for or can sound trite maybe, but I really encourage you to try it in your brain because your brain is not actually that sophisticated. And it's very different to intellectually understand that and actually say it to yourself. I'm showing up as best I can for my kid and I love them and day-to-day parenting can be really boring and annoying. And it's okay that I feel that way. I can love my mom and be really glad that she can come live with us and that I can support her in this time and I can accept that of course I'm having the human experience of being triggered by having another person living in my house who I'm taking care of and you know, whatever your dynamics with your mom might have been when you're growing up coming up, like these are all complicated situations. It's normal to have mixed feelings about.

I think sometimes what happens when we learn about thought work is we're like, oh, okay, I can change my thoughts, so I should just get rid of these bad thoughts. I feel guilty that I am resentful, so I need to change my thoughts making me resentful. But you're skipping a very important step. That's why when I teach the confidence compass, I teach that we need

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self-compassion before we change belief. We actually need to accept our human experience and stop stigmatizing our own emotions before we can change the thoughts creating them. So if when you think one of these thoughts or you do your own version of it, you start to feel relief, that's because you're moving out of black and white thinking and you're creating more nuance. And when you do that, you can actually find more balance in your life as a caregiver because you are no longer trying to be like a perfect inhuman robot.

Society really robs women of the right we all have to be complicated individuals having this human experience. It tries to force us into these perfect boxes. Like we're supposed to be dutiful and loving and supportive and have no complicated feelings or resentments or grief. But this not only makes us feel worse about our lives, it makes it harder for us to show up for others. That's why in that example, we know not taking the walk makes you more short tempered, more stressed, lowers your capacity. Taking that walk isn't just good for you, which is enough of a reason to do it. But the version of you who comes back from the walk has more patience, more presence, more capacity to actually show up. That's partly from the physical thing of the walk, but it's also actually a lot of it is from the self-acceptance that the walk symbolizes, the care for yourself that the walk symbolizes.

Believing you should be a perfect caregiver doesn't just make you miserable, it actually makes you worse at caregiving. And that's not just for other people. It makes you worse at caring for others, but it also makes you worse at caring for yourself. Whereas accepting that you are a human having a complex set of experiences and thoughts and feelings before you try to change anything is part of taking care of yourself.

Before we end this episode, there's one other piece I want to touch on because for many of us, it's not enough to beat ourselves up for how we feel about caregiving. We also want to beat ourselves up for how the

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person we're caring for feels about our caregiving. And this is such a good example of over-responsibility. We're taking responsibility for not only caring for someone, but managing how they feel about our caregiving and or their whole lives. And that's not something we can control. And it's also not our business.

Other people have autonomy to feel however they want about being cared for and how you're delivering that caring. It's particularly ironic when it comes to caring for parents or other adults in our lives because they're already struggling with the feelings that come with a loss of autonomy and independence and then we don't even want them to have the autonomy of thinking and feeling for themselves, right? We want to be in charge of how they think and feel too and we want to control that.

The more you try to take over-responsibility for those things you can't actually control, the less energy you have for the one thing you can, which is yourself and your thoughts. And that is the paradox of over-responsibility. It feels like you're doing everything and you kind of are, you're trying to, but the one thing you're not doing is actually managing your own mind, how you talk to yourself, managing your life, whether you let yourself rest, whether you ask for help, whether you allow yourself to want something for your own life, whether you try to dissolve into your role or whether you hold on to your own identity and allow yourself to be a complicated human. That's self-responsibility, right? Making space for your actual experience and taking responsibility for your own thoughts and feelings and not trying to manage everyone else's, that's what self-responsibility looks like. And it's not the opposite of being a good caregiver, it's actually what makes being a caregiver sustainable.

If this concept of over-responsibility versus self-responsibility is something you want to go deeper into, I did a two-part series on this in episodes 359 and 360. If you just search Kara and responsibility in your podcast app, they will come right up, and I'll also link them in the show notes for you.

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So with that said, I want to leave you with one last reflection. One day, this season of your life will end. And that might sound like a relief or it might sound scary. You might feel guilty for being excited about that day coming or you might be afraid for when it's going to arrive. But one day it will end. And when you look back at this time, I don't want you to only see a person who held everything together for everyone else but lost themselves in the process. I want you to see a person who was actually here, who did this beautiful work of caregiving, if that's what you've chosen to do, but who allowed it to be a messy human experience, who did not try to disappear completely inside of someone else's need and who did not sublimate her real human experience to try to live up to an impossible standard.

The people you're caring for don't need you to be a martyr. They want you to be a real human being. I want you to be a real human being, and I know you want you to be a real human being. Right? The version of you that's honest about her limits and allows for her emotions and does not burn herself out to conform with social expectations, that's the version of you that can show up better for yourself and the people you care for. You can give of yourself in a caregiving role and still hold on to yourself. It's both and at the same time. And that work is really worth doing so that at the end of this process, wherever it takes you, you have not abandoned yourself along the way in the name of saving someone else.

All right, my friends. That is the work. I will talk to you next week.