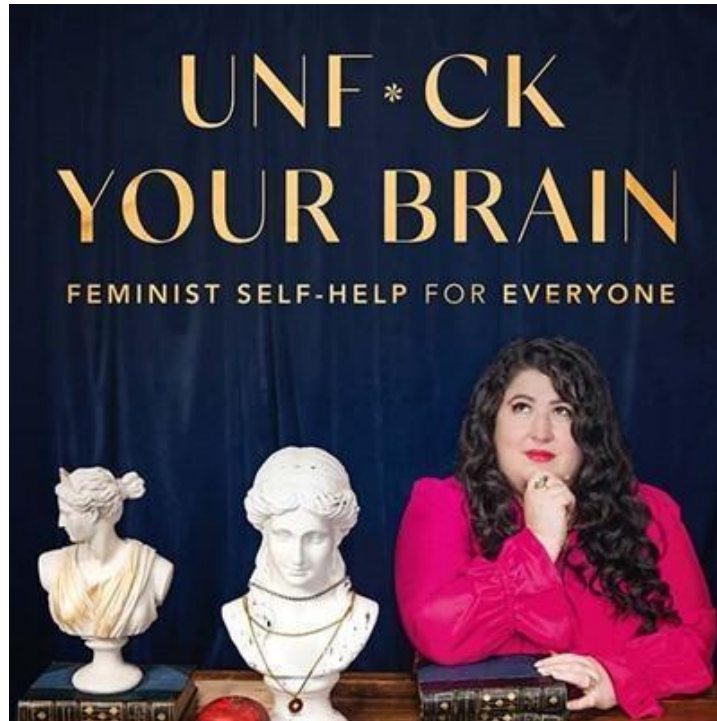


UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

How many times have you been doing the work, reading the books, listening to the podcast, going to therapy, journaling, doing the somatic practice, whatever the work is for you? And then you snap at your partner, or you say yes when you meant to say no, or you spend money you said you would not spend, and you use that moment as evidence that none of it is working and you should probably just give up.

We've all done this, which means we've all quit on change when actually we were already in the process of change, but we just couldn't see it. Because most of us have no idea what progress actually looks like. We have been sold or imagined a completely fake version of what change feels like and how we know if it's happening. So that's what I want to fix today.

Change is not a decision followed by an immediate result. Change is not snapping your fingers and just waking up a different person or vowing to try harder and then just magically changing. Change is the slow, awkward, often really uncomfortable process of building a new neural pathway in your brain while the old one, your old familiar friend, is still sitting right there, fully grooved, calling your name every single day.

Today, I'm going to walk you through what I have observed are the six stages of behavior change, so you can stop measuring your progress against a fantasy and start measuring it against reality. Because once you understand what the process of change actually looks like, three important things happen. Number one, you stop calling yourself a failure, which means number two, you stop quitting too early, which means number three, you actually start producing the change that you've been trying to produce for years. 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.

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

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

Here's the fantasy that most of us have in our heads about how we should be able to change. We decide I'm going to stop yelling at my kids, and then we just stop yelling at our kids. We decide I'm going to stop people-pleasing, and then we just stop people-pleasing. We decide I'm going to start charging what I'm worth, and then we just start charging what we're worth. We think it's just a decision and then an immediate result. That's what's supposed to happen.

But of course, even if we start off strong, real life happens. You yell at your kids two days later. You say yes to your mother-in-law five minutes later when you meant to say no. You quote your old prices when the next client asks. And then you look at what you've done and you say to yourself, well, I tried and it didn't work and apparently, I'm just the kind of person who yells at her kids, or I'm just the kind of person who can't say no, or I'm just someone who undercharges. And so you give up, you sink back into that identity. And you just stop trying because you believe that the fact that you haven't changed yet means that you can't.

And it gets worse because you feel ashamed about that and every subsequent time that you do the same thing, which is going to happen because you haven't changed anything, the shame is even bigger, right? It's even more evidence that you tried to change, you failed, and this must just be who you are. And this is the loop that so many women I coach are stuck in. And they think that it has to do with their capacity or capability to change, but it actually has nothing to do with that. It has to do with a fundamental misunderstanding of what change looks and feels like that causes them to give up too early.

The truth is that nobody, and I literally mean nobody, no human being who has ever lived has changed a long-standing behavior pattern by just deciding once that they were going to and then executing that perfectly. That is not how brains work. If that were how brains worked, the entire field of psychology, the entire industry of therapy, every coach, every self-help book, every 12-step program, every meditation tradition, none of that would

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

need to exist. All those things exist because changing how a human thinks and behaves is hard and takes time and requires a process, and in the beginning, it's hard to tell that anything is happening.

So when you measure yourself against the standard of, well, I decided I was going to change and so I should have changed and so if I didn't immediately change, I failed, you're not measuring yourself against any actual standard of how humans work. You're measuring yourself against a fantasy that no one could meet. And then you tell yourself that you are specifically broken because you can't meet it. This is the kind of thinking that keeps so many people from developing into the people they want to be and living the lives that they want to live. And so I am going to break down the six stages of actual change for you.

Before we dive in, I do want to take a second to tell you about something we are launching that is totally free and that is going even deeper into this exact territory. We have a new podcast coming out under the Socratic Coaching Academy called The Future Coach. This is a show where we go deep into the actual process of change, what it really takes for human beings to think and behave differently, the reality of being a coach, how coaching shows up across a wide variety of professions, everything else that the coach curious or the already established coach could possibly want to know about this work.

So if you are a coach, if you've ever thought about being a coach, if you've ever thought about bringing coaching into your current career or your role, if you manage people or work with people and want to understand how they think better, then you want to check out the Future Coach podcast. You can find it wherever you get your podcasts, whatever podcast app you're listening to now, or you can go to unfuckyourbrain.com/futurecoach, all one word, or you can text your email to +1 (347) 997-1784 and the code word is futurecoach, all one word.

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

Okay, so let's get into the six stages of how a behavior actually changes in real life. And this applies to literally any pattern: people-pleasing, saying yes when you mean no, money shame, self-criticism, apologizing constantly, putting yourself last, the aforementioned yelling at your kids, right? Anything you've been trying to shift. So I'm going to use an example, but you can pick whatever your pattern is and follow along.

I want to say upfront, this is not a six-stage theory based off academic research because these are the six stages that I have observed in the thousands of my own thought patterns I've changed and the thousands of women I've coached over the last decade. I've probably changed hundreds of my own thought patterns. I don't know if I've gotten to a thousand, but I've coached thousands of other women's brains.

Either way, this is based on my teaching and my lived experience. So if you're waiting for an academic citation, there isn't going to be one. But that's really because I'm breaking this down into very subtle stages of your relationship to the behavior change and your metacognition about the behavior change, meaning the way that you think about what you observe yourself doing, which is actually incredibly important in the process, but is often not discussed at all and is obviously even harder to study.

So I'm going to use the example of snapping at someone in your family: snapping at your kids, snapping at your partner, snapping at your parents, whoever. And I'm picking that one because I think almost all of us have done it if we broaden it to anyone in the family. And I want to take some of the shame out of it by just saying it out loud. People do this. It's a thing. It doesn't make you a monster. But it is one of the most common patterns that women come to me wanting to change in their relationships is losing their temper, snapping at kids, partner, family, whoever. So I'm going to be saying like yelling at your kids as the example, but again, your mileage may vary, right? Plug in whatever version of whatever you're working on.

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

Okay, so stage one is you're fully in this habit and you're yelling at your kids or snapping at your husband or whatever. And you don't even notice you're doing it until it's over. The whole thing is happening on autopilot. You're standing in the kitchen, your six-year-old asks you the same question for the 17th time, which you've already answered every time. And the words just come out of your mouth at a volume you didn't consciously choose and you don't even realize what just happened until you calm down an hour later.

As soon as you do realize it, then you start to feel shame. You tell yourself that you're a terrible parent. You start writing the script for the future therapy session that your kid's going to have at 35 about how you ruined their lives by yelling at them. You picture them describing you to a partner one day as the kind of mom who yelled, whatever it is, you feel awful. And of course, we know this doesn't help. The pile of shame makes you tense, it makes you irritable, it's tiring, emotionally, physically, you snap at them again 20 minutes later, then your shame gets even worse.

And your brain completely filters out from your consciousness all of the nice things you did that morning, the patience you had at breakfast, the books you read at bedtime, the compliments you gave them at lunch. None of that counts to your brain. It only focuses on the bad thing you're trying not to do. So this is where everybody starts, right? When we have a habit we want to change, this is where we start. We are completely in it. We don't really have awareness around it. We certainly don't know how to change it other than just vowing to do better, which never works. So this is where everyone starts. It is normal stage one. There is nothing wrong with you. Everyone trying to change a pattern is starting here. The question is what you do next.

And here is what almost everyone tries to do at this stage and why it doesn't work. When we decide that we want to change a behavior that we feel ashamed about, what we have been taught socially is that feeling bad is what will change us. And so even though we kind of should know this

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

doesn't work because we're already shaming ourselves and that has not helped, we still somehow think that if we just shame ourselves more, then it'll work. If I just feel really bad about what I did, I will not want to do it again and therefore I won't do it again.

So this is what we're taught. This is what we're raised on. We're taught that being hard on yourself is what creates change, that discipline is about being mean to yourself, and that guilt and shame are productive emotions, and that if you ever stop punishing yourself and beating yourself up, you just become a lazy, entitled asshole. And women get a particularly heavy dose of this, right? We're socialized to monitor ourselves constantly, to be hypervigilant about our flaws and what might be wrong with us. And so we're constantly ashamed and we're constantly trying to hate ourselves into being better or changing.

So when you yell at your kids or snap at your partner or whatever, that deeply trained response you have is to just produce more and more shame hoping that's going to somehow motivate you to stop. But shame does not stop the behavior, especially long-term. Shame actually fuels the behavior. Shame keeps you focused on you and your supposed badness and it just makes you feel more depleted, more irritable, more guilty, all these negative emotions that give you less emotional resources for your family or for actually solving the problem. And because you feel ashamed, you don't want to be curious about what happened.

This is the real sabotage of shame, the self-sabotage of shame, is that we think it's going to motivate us to do better, to solve the problem. But the only way we actually do better and solve the problem is if we're able to be curious about and learn about the way we're thinking and feeling before we take the action that we're trying to change. And when we feel ashamed, we don't want to be curious. We don't want to spend any time with the thought and the feeling that led to the yelling. We think those are bad. That's a bad thing about us. That's what we're telling ourselves. So we don't want to get

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

to know that part of ourselves. We just want to run away from it and just vow to do better.

So when we try to motivate ourselves with shame, we actually make it much harder to change. Sometimes we can white knuckle it for a few days, but over time, you get farther from the event, the negative emotions associated with it get less and you're right back where you started.

So how do we actually move out of stage one? Because so many people just give up here. The answer is self-compassion. And listen, I can already hear half of you are rolling your eyes. So let me say what I know you're thinking. Self-compassion sounds soft. It sounds like an excuse. It sounds like you're letting yourself off the hook. It sounds like the thing you do if you've decided that you're just never going to change and you just want to feel better about being a person who yells at their kids. I have felt that resistance to self-compassion myself so many times, and I've heard it from every single woman I've ever coached on shame at all, really, because we've all been so deeply trained to believe that being kind to ourselves is the same thing as condoning bad behavior.

Self-compassion is not saying that yelling at your kids is fine and dandy and you should just never think about it again. Self-compassion is not saying, who cares, I'll just do this forever. Self-compassion is saying, I'm a human being, I have a human brain, I'm trying to change a pattern that has been on autopilot, and the fact that it just ran away from me again is just evidence that it's on autopilot. It's not evidence that I'm broken or that I couldn't be a different way. It's just evidence of how my brain has been trained to be right now. It's the difference between treating yourself like you're the defendant in a trial where every misstep is more evidence for the prosecution, and treating yourself like you're a person learning a new skill where every misstep is just information about where you still need to practice.

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

When you're able to make this shift, you stop pouring all your mental energy into hating yourself and you start pouring it into curiosity about what actually happened. Suddenly, you have access to your actual thinking and feeling, your actual motivations. You can understand why you snapped, what was the trigger? You can start to see the pattern. That is what moves you from stage one to stage two. It's not more discipline, it's not more self-flagellation, certainly. It's not just like deciding harder or something, right? Self-compassion is the bridge.

So in stage two, you're still doing the thing. People think that if they're going to change, they should stop doing it. That's how they'll know they've changed. But actually, in stage two, you are still doing the thing. In stage two, you're still yelling at your kids. And you still don't really notice till afterwards. But what's different is that you don't spiral. You catch yourself when you're starting to flog yourself with shame and you say, no, I'm not doing that anymore. That's not useful. That shame will sabotage me. And you are repeating something to yourself to provide a little self-compassion. So you're still doing the behavior. The behavior actually hasn't changed yet, but the reaction to the behavior is different.

Let me say that again. In the second stage of change, you are still doing the thing and from the outside, it may not look any different. But your reaction to yourself is different and that is the prerequisite for actually getting the behavior to change. Now, some of you are hearing this and you're thinking, well, that's not progress, me just feeling less bad about the same thing I did. Nothing's changed. No, that is enormous progress because shame is the thing that was keeping the cycle going. That shame, that shame sabotage is the thing that prevented you from ever learning anything about the pattern or ever changing it.

The shame was the fuel that was driving the cycle. So when you get to stage two and you're still doing it, but when you notice you did it, you are able to bring in some self-compassion, you cut that shame cycle short. And you are able much more quickly to start to get curious about what's actually

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

going on for you. So you haven't changed the behavior, but you've stopped putting fuel into the engine that was driving the cycle. So that's the first real shift.

Here's stage three. In stage three, you still do the thing. I'm telling you, you do the thing for a while. We all think there's no change if we don't stop doing the thing immediately. We think change should mean, okay, I'm yelling 50% less of the time immediately. No, even in stage three, you're still doing the thing. But in stage three, you notice it while it's happening. So you're not just blacking out and coming to later and beating yourself up, and you're not just blacking out and coming to later and being a little nicer to yourself. Now you aren't blacked out. You actually notice while it's happening.

You are in the middle of yelling and some calm little part of your brain is watching the whole thing unfold like a documentary and it's thinking, oh, interesting, we're doing this again right now, in real time. Look at us go. Look what we're doing. You can't stop it yet in this stage. You can see it, but you can't interrupt it yet. The momentum is still too strong. Your awareness is brand new. You still don't totally understand what sets you off and what the thoughts and feelings are. So you're not quite in charge. You're not driving the car quite yet. This stage sometimes feels the worst because now you can see it and you know exactly what you're doing while you're doing it, but you still can't stop.

And so women in this stage are often convinced that this is worse than stage one. At least in stage one, I just blacked out and now I'm just watching myself do this thing. But stage three is actually the most important stage. This is where the change really starts. You can't change something that you can't see. Awareness has to come before behavior change. And what we all want is to just be like, oh, I'm aware ahead of time and that will prevent me from ever doing it again. But that's not how it works. There's no version of this where you skip the part where you're still doing the behavior,

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

but you're able to observe yourself. You have to be able to watch it without judgment before you can interrupt it.

So this part, where it's still happening, you're watching it happening, you can't interrupt it yet, but you can observe it with self-compassion. This is actually the bridge to really starting to change the external behavior. But so many people who, if they even make it to this stage, they quit here. So a lot of people never get out of stage one, some people quit at stage two, and then some people quit at stage three because it feels the worst. But this stage is closest to everything actually shifting if you can just keep going.

Okay, we're going to take a quick break, but stick around when we come back. I'm going to walk you through stages four, five, and six, and I'm going to give you some thoughts you can start practicing today at these various stages depending on where you are to help you actually change your behavior.

Okay, welcome back my friends. So before the break, I walked you through stages one, two, and three of behavior change and I told you stage three is where a lot of people quit, but it's actually the bridge to things changing. So what comes next is stage four. In stage four, you notice that this is happening and you can start to slow it down. So you can't necessarily stop it cold and turn on a dime, right? You can't turn around mid-yell and become Mary Poppins, but you can take it down a notch. You can hear your own voice and lower the volume. You can catch yourself halfway through the sentence and decide to take a minute and walk away. You can pause. You can't magically make the feeling leave your body immediately, but you have enough presence of mind while it's happening to be calm enough to be able to stop.

This is massive, right? This is the first time the behavior itself is actually shifting in a way that someone outside of you would be able to see. The behavior's not gone, it's not over, but you are starting to be able to interrupt the pattern. And that is crucial because it's just not realistic to think that if

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

you just do enough thinking, you can go from always doing it to never doing it. We have to go through the phase where you start doing it and you can stop yourself.

So then we get to stage five. In stage five, this is what everybody thinks should be stage one. Stage five is you notice that it's about to happen right before it happens. So you can feel the tightening in your chest, you can feel your impatience rising, you hear your kid ask the question for the 17th time, and there's this small window where the old you would have already yelled and the new you sees that pause and can choose to do something else, can choose to take a deep breath, can choose to walk away, can choose to say something in a more calm tone.

This is what everyone thinks change looks like from the outside. This is what you've been imagining the whole time, that you decide not to do the thing and then you don't do it. But I want you to think about how long the path was to get here in reality. There were four whole stages before this one. So the part that you imagined was the entirety of change is actually the fifth stage of a six-stage process. We're almost at the end. We're 80, 90% of the way there is when you actually see this happen. And so most people never get here because they quit somewhere between stage one and four, convinced that nothing is happening or it's getting worse because they're conscious of it, but they're still doing it, when in fact they were right before the moment when it was going to change.

So stage five, you notice you're about to yell, you're about to do the thing, and you are able to make a different choice. In stage six, the thing just stops coming as often. It's not like you get riled up and about to yell as much and then have to stop, you just don't get as riled up as much. You don't even want to yell as much. You don't get as annoyed as easily. Because you've retrained your brain to process the experience differently with all the whatever thought work you've had to do about what your thought and feelings are around this behavior to help shift it.

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

This is just the stages of change. The way we actually create change is changing our thoughts and feelings and actions, right? That's a whole separate topic. Most of the podcast is about that. But in this podcast episode, we're just talking about the stages of change. And so by stage six, you have been changing your thoughts, feelings, and actions. And so this scenario just doesn't come up as often. You aren't tempted to do the thing as much. Your brain doesn't default to wanting to do the thing as much. And it's not from white-knuckling or gritting your teeth, right?

The pattern simply doesn't show up as much because you've done enough reps of the new thing that you have a new neural pathway, a new way of reacting, and that is what your brain is defaulting to. You're still you and the trigger is still there, but you have a different automatic response. And that is when you actually forget what it even used to feel like to have this problem or who that person was who used to have this problem.

So really what I want you to take away, right, is that most people quit at stage two, three, four. They look at their behavior and they say, I'm still yelling. This isn't working. I'm giving up. But each stage is progress from the one before and a lot of the times you're not going to see any external change until you're almost at the end of the process. And that changes how you think about changing anything in your life, right? Because you have a different understanding of what it's supposed to look and feel like, so you will not give up.

The cruelest joke of the whole process is that the stage that feels like the most failure where you're totally awake and aware of what you're doing and can't stop is actually the stage that is the most important bridge to finally being able to change it.

So let me give you a few practical suggestions. I want to give you some specific thoughts that you can use as is or modify to practice depending on where you are in the process. So a lot of you are going to be, whatever you're working on, you are in like stage one or stage two. So if you don't

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

know what stage you're in, just assume you're in stage one or stage two, and the most important work for you to do right now is practice awareness and self-compassion.

So if you're in stage one or stage two, here are some thoughts to try on. I am trying to change a pattern and I'm going to do it imperfectly. Imperfection is how learning happens. Right now, all I need to do is notice and not shame myself. Of course I did this again. How human of me. I can't change something I don't understand. Self-compassion is what will allow me to understand this and actually change it.

If you're in stages three or four, you can practice something like these thoughts to keep going when it feels bad because you're aware of it but can't change it. So first you can notice your progress. A year ago, I couldn't even see this happening. The fact that I can notice it now means I am progressing even if it doesn't feel like it. Or this discomfort I'm feeling right now is the exact discomfort that's going to help me change. Or right now, my job is just to stay aware and present and be kind to myself. I don't have to stop the whole thing today. Or you can practice something like, even though this feels worse, I'm actually becoming more aware and that's what's going to allow me to change it and feel better.

And if you're in stages five or six, you can practice thoughts to just recognize how far you've come and reinforce this new version of yourself and celebrate yourself, right? So you can practice thoughts like, I'm a fundamentally different person now than the one who started this work. Or I'm not going to let my brain skip this. I'm going to look at how far I've come and celebrate it. I'm becoming someone or I've become someone who doesn't do this behavior automatically anymore.

Anything that kind of celebrates that identity shift that you've made. Because that is really the reward of being willing to go through these six stages and stick with the process even when it feels like nothing is happening. You get to become a person who you didn't imagine you could

UFYB 494: The Six Stages of Change

be, who does things you didn't imagine you could do. But it all requires you to be with the real, inconsistent, messy, slow process of change instead of constantly vowing to become a different person overnight, which is a fantasy that you can never fulfill.

Before I let you go, one quick reminder, if anything in this episode landed for you and you want to go deeper on what it's like to be a coach or how to bring coaching into your current work, I want to point you towards our new podcast, The Future Coach. That's the show where we're going to go deep into the reality of being a coach, how you can help people change, how coaching is used across a range of professions, what actually helps people change, everything else the coach curious or already established coach could want to know. If you liked today's episode, this show is going to be your new favorite thing. You can find it anywhere you get your podcasts. You can go to unfuckyourbrain.com/futurecoach, all one word, or you can text your email to +1 (347) 997-1784 and the code word is futurecoach, all one word. I'll see you there.