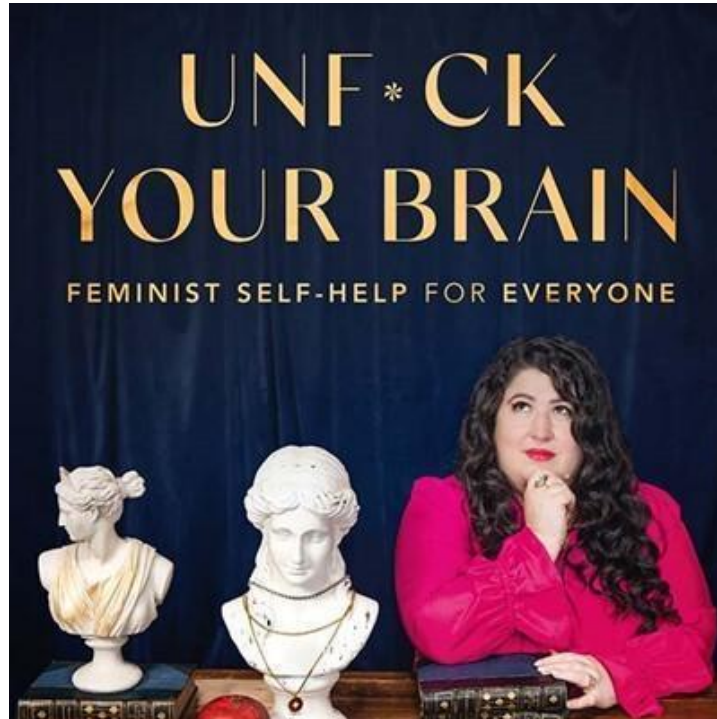


UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

Hello, my friends. Today I want to talk to you about a thought you almost certainly had this week. You probably had it more than once, and you probably don't know that it's a thought, because it sounds to us like a fact. It's three words long and it is quietly sabotaging every goal you have in your life that you care about. By the end of this episode, you're going to know exactly what that thought is, why it sounds so much like a fact when it's not, and what you can be practicing thinking instead. Because changing this one thought is truly the difference between achieving the things you actually want in your life and quitting before you ever really get to see the fruits of your labor. 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.

Alright, so if you have been listening to this podcast for more than 20 seconds, you know that some of the most destructive thoughts we have are the ones that we don't even recognize are thoughts. Our brain reports them like it's the weather. We say these thoughts to ourselves the way we would say, oh, it's going to be chilly, I should bring a jacket. We think we're just describing what's happening around us when actually we are interpreting, evaluating, and formulating a subjective opinion about what is happening. But then we are telling it to ourselves like it is a fact. And there is one thought that I see ruining more dreams than any other thought, and it is a thought that masquerades as reality when it is in fact an interpretation.

And that thought is, it's not working. It's not working, or its slightly more dramatic cousin, this isn't working. Either way, this thought, it's not working or this isn't working, it sounds like a fact. Whether something's working or not seems subjective, like is the car driving? It's working. Is the car stalled? It's not working. We think that we are just telling ourselves a fact. We think

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

we've done a objective analysis and our brain has been running that in the background and now it has the report ready to give us, and it's true, and it's just not working.

But this is a thought. And having this thought is not inherently a problem. This is just a thought that brings offer. But believing this thought and taking it to be a true circumstance about the world is an incredibly problematic mental habit that all of us share. And so I'm going to walk you through four examples of this, four types of women and clients with this problem who I have coached over the years, and I know that at least one of these is going to resonate with you.

So let's take example number one is the entrepreneur, but this also can be you if you are working on a creative project. It can be you if you are trying to do anything where there isn't like status reports submitted to a boss who gives you feedback, right? Anything that you're trying to like create or accomplish where you have to just figure it out yourself and keep going.

So like let's say you are an entrepreneur just to pick one example to walk through for this. You spend four months building something you want to try to sell, like a new program let's say in your business. And you agonize over the name and you read the sales page out loud to your bestie and you review the emails over and over. And you launch on a Monday and by Friday, let's say four people have signed up and your goal was 20 or 12 or 50. And you close your laptop at the end of the week, you go into your weekend, you go into the kitchen, maybe to start dinner, and as you are turning on the stove and starting to chop an onion, you're thinking as if it's just fact, this isn't working. This program isn't working. Maybe my business isn't working. Maybe this whole career I want isn't working.

Or let me take an example from your interpersonal life. Let's say we imagine a woman who is dating with intention trying to find a partner. So she's finally done the work. She got clear on what she actually wanted in a

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

partner. She spent months doing coaching, journaling, thinking about it, reflecting on her values. She rewrote her dating profile three to four times. She went on a bunch of first dates, started out strong, went on eight first dates in the first two months. But none of those turned into a second date. And she's opening up the app, ready to swipe again, and her brain just says, this isn't working. So she puts it down and she gives up.

This can happen even with self-development. So imagine the woman doing thought work. Maybe you've been listening to this podcast for a while and you've been doing some thought downloads. You've been trying to change your thoughts about your body. You've been listening to what I say about body image. You've been trying to practice new thoughts. But then over the weekend, you go try on jeans and you end up crying in the dressing room. And so you walk out, you get in your car or the subway and what you're thinking in the back of your head without even realizing that it's an interpretation is, this isn't working. Thought work isn't working. I can't change my thoughts. It's not working.

Let me give you one more example because I see this come up a lot with parenting. Let's say you are a mom, your seven-year-old has been struggling with bedtime. And you've like read the books about it, you made the chart with the stickers, right? And you did the sing song for the routine. And you've been trying your fourth approach and you've been trying it for two weeks, but last night your daughter got out of bed eight different times. She wanted water, she wanted a hug, she wanted her window shade down and then up. She said she couldn't sleep, right? And then eventually you're so exhausted and so stressed out, you end up yelling at her to get back in bed and stay there. And then when you get in bed, you're already drowning in shame and you think to yourself, this isn't working.

So as I read each of those, it probably sounded to you like, yeah, that's right. That shit isn't working. Four sales when you wanted 50, it's not working. Eight dates with no second date isn't working. Crying in a dressing

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

room if you've been working on your thoughts about your body image shouldn't happen. That means it's not working. A kid getting up eight times at night means the bedtime routine isn't working. It seems so obvious. The thought that this isn't working sounds so real, right? It's so fact-shaped. It seems so neutral that your brain doesn't even pause on it. It really just reads it as like, yeah, this is reality. I'm just telling you the situation.

But it's not reality. It's a decision to think that way. And so that's what this episode is about, right? How to tell the difference and what to tell yourself instead. There are two layers running underneath this one thought. So the first is patriarchal socialization and the second is cognitive psychology and they intersect to form and reinforce this thought pattern and explains why smart, accomplished, self-aware people nevertheless have this thought constantly and don't even know that it is a thought.

So let's start with the patriarchy layer. Women are socialized from a very young age to expect a very specific version of what success looks like, right? It should happen quickly, it should be perfect, it should look impressive, it should be visible to other people. You should get external validation for it. Ideally, someone with authority approves it and anoints it, right? And there shouldn't be struggle, there shouldn't be mess, there shouldn't be failure. It's like okay to fail like once or twice a little bit in the beginning, just for seasoning. But mostly you should just succeed right away or in whatever amount of time your brain has randomly decided is the right amount of time. And so this leads to like very black and white thinking. It's okay to not have done it maybe before you start, but once you start, you should have done it pretty fast.

So there's real perfectionism here that we believe that falling short of a goal is not just disappointing, right? It's not just like an indication that we need to revamp our approach. We take it to be evidence that we're fundamentally not enough, that we're missing something, that there's something wrong with us and we can't do it. And so the territory between perfect, working

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

perfectly and it not working at all, that is a land that doesn't exist in our minds. There's just I did it or I didn't do it and there's nothing in between.

So that's layer one. And then layer two is just how all human brains work, right? Our brains are built for efficiency and not accuracy. Efficiency, not accuracy. Your brain is not there trying to give you the truth. Your brain is in there trying to give you the fastest, cheapest, most cognitively efficient answer it can produce to conserve energy. And so your brain does three things that matter for this episode and this thought pattern.

The first is a binary categorization and this relates to that perfectionism, right? Your brain likes clean, clear categories, good and bad, working and not working, safe or dangerous. Understanding a gradient or nuance takes cognitive effort. You have to like think about it and see nuance and see different sides of things and see how you could see it different ways. And a binary takes no effort. So your brain will default to a binary every single time if you haven't trained it otherwise.

The second is confirmation bias. So your brain weighs evidence that fits the story it's already telling more heavily than evidence that does not fit. This is one of the most well replicated findings in cognitive psychology, going all the way back to research by a man named Peter Watson in the 60s. So that's now 60 years ago. Once you've decided this isn't working, whatever this is, your brain will just amplify the evidence that supports that conclusion, meaning literally bring it to your awareness and think about it more. And it will minimize the evidence that contradicts it, right? It will either not even bring it to your conscious awareness, or it will quickly explain it away and then never think about it again. You're not doing this consciously. You don't even know what's happening, but it is. So your brain is looking for binaries. Once it's decided on a binary, and it almost always decides it's not working because you haven't done it perfectly immediately, then confirmation bias kicks in, and so you believe that more and more.

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

And then the third brain pattern or tendency that makes this worse is something called motivated reasoning. Your brain is not just biased towards evidence that confirms what you already believe, it's biased toward evidence that confirms what is emotionally easier to believe. It is much emotionally easier to quit doing something hard than continue to keep going when something quote-unquote feels like it's not working. Now, sometimes this is kind of hard to understand because we feel kind of miserable about something not working. It doesn't seem to us like, oh, that's the emotionally easy way out. But it is because it's so comfortable and familiar and efficient. So it is easy for your brain to default to this isn't working, I can't change it, I can't do it. Whereas it's emotionally difficult for your brain to try to like hold the faith, keep motivation, keep building confidence even when you're not getting the results that you want right away.

So the second that you have a believable excuse to stop, your brain starts ranking the available evidence in a way that supports stopping. But you again think that your brain is just doing this like objectively clear analysis of it's not working. So when you put those three things together, right? You end up with a brain that is socialized into an impossibly narrow definition of what it means for something to work, right? It needs to be like immediate and perfect basically, running on a brain that prefers binaries to gradients, that filters evidence to match the story it already is telling itself, and that is quietly motivated to find an off ramp when things get hard.

So it's not about you not being able to succeed and it's not about what you're doing not working. You just have a very specific cognitive setup happening that you're not even aware of. So the next time you hear yourself thinking, this isn't working, I want you to flag for yourself that this is not an objective analysis. This is a predictable output of how your brain is programmed to think. It's not a fact about reality. It is just a thought error that your brain is already pre-wired to make and then gets even more socialization wiring to reinforce. We cannot run our lives letting that thought

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

control us. So next I want to talk a little bit about the cost of having this thought and then I'm going to tell you how to change it.

So let's talk about what this thought does in practice because it's not enough to just understand theoretically how thinking it's not working would kind of discourage you and make you give up. I really want to break down what happens so that you can start to see it happening in real time in your brain.

So first, you think the thought, this isn't working, it's not working. Immediately you feel overwhelmed, you feel defeated, maybe you feel hopeless. And your brain is now hunting for confirming evidence and so it ignores and deletes the signs of progress that you have and it amplifies the signs of struggle and so it basically says to you like, yes girl, you are right. This is not working. Here's all the things we could interpret as being evidence that it's not working, because of that motivated reasoning, your brain is quietly looking for permission to stop. From that emotional place, you stop taking the small things that actually would keep you moving forward.

So then step four, you do stall out. And now, step five, this is like the most fuckery part of how our brains are. You now have proof that your original thought was correct. This is why I'm always saying that our results prove our thoughts true. When you believe it's not working, you stop working. You stop doing it. It then becomes an impossibility for it to work. It becomes an inevitability that it doesn't. And then your brain is like, look ma, no hands. I didn't do any of that. I just correctly predicted that this wasn't going to work. And we end up in step six where it doesn't. It isn't working. It becomes an objective reality because you stopped doing it.

What's so sad about it is you think you're being realistic. You think that you're just reading the room, reading the report that your brain puts out, but actually you are the one who wrote the report. You ran that whole

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

production. You cast all the characters, and then you took it to be reality. Again, nothing shameful about this. This is just how brains work, but it is so powerful when you start to see it playing out in your own life.

So if we talk about those four case studies I talked about earlier, if we look at those, we can see this process playing out. So for instance, that entrepreneur who had four women buy her program, right? But her brain is like, this isn't working. So her brain ignores that 400 new people joined her email list during this launch that she could now sell the program to again and do a little differently next time. It ignores that 12 people reply to her email and said like not this cohort but I'd love to do the next one. It deletes the fact that she for the first time put herself out there on video talking about the program even though she was really scared to do that. It also ignores all of the opportunities that she could have spotted to actually make it better next time and iterate on it. It ignores the feedback she got that would have helped her make the offer more enticing. All she sees is the number in her bank account and the thought, it's not working.

So she doesn't ever try the program again, and she'll have forgotten all about this. And then she will come up with another idea and do the same thing. And eventually she'll just tell herself the whole thing isn't working.

Or let's think about our dating example. That woman tells herself, it's not working. And she ignores, her brain deletes the fact that she's clear on what she wants, that she went on more first dates in those two months than she went on in the entire previous year, that she didn't cancel last minute like she used to do, that she showed up as herself instead of trying to please people and perform on the dates. It ignores that she actually turned down two of the people for second dates because they weren't the right fit for her, something she never would have done in the past. She ignores all that evidence that she is making progress on this goal and becoming the person who can have the relationship she wants and putting herself out there to meet the person. And instead, she deletes the app, she tells her

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

sister she's giving up on dating forever, and her brain just says to her, see, it wasn't working.

Or we think about the woman who's doing that body image work and then she still feels like shit about herself trying on jeans and she tells herself like, it's not working, I can't change this. Maybe I need to get on a GLP1. Maybe I need to get back on a diet. I can't love my body the way it is. Because what she thought she was supposed to experience was this perfection of loving her body and never having those moments again. And her brain deletes the evidence that she's been wearing other stuff that's a little more outside her comfort zone, that she was even willing to go to the store to try on jeans, which she hasn't done for five years, that she was willing to wear a bathing suit at the pool party the week before, that she was willing to have sex with the lights on. It deletes and ignores all those little pieces of evidence that she is actually making progress. And so instead, she just stops doing her thought work practice, stops trying to love her body, just goes back to starting to try to change it instead.

Or finally, let's think about our mother with the bedtime routine and the kid who gets out of bed eight times. Her brain ignores the fact that even though she did lose her temper at the end of the night, she kept her cool for two and a half hours. It deletes the fact that the chart she made has actually been working for the first three steps of the routine, like toothbrushing and showering and book time have been going great. And it's actually just this last little part they're still having trouble with. She doesn't see any of that. She just sees I'm not getting the exact result I wanted right away. It's not working. She gives up on the whole thing and bedtime is back to chaos very quickly. But she just tells herself, see, it didn't work for me.

In all of these examples, there was real progress that change was happening, right? There was real proof that change was happening, that progress was being made. But the brain deletes it because it is just trying to confirm the thought that something isn't working. And so you can see

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

how this thought would sabotage literally anything you're trying to do in your life. So we need to know how to think about things instead. Now you know how to spot this pattern, but how do we disrupt it? So I'm going to take a quick break here, but stick around because after the break, I'm going to tell you how to actually change that pattern. And I'm going to give you a question to ask yourself the next time this thought shows up and a three-step practice that you can run on yourself for the next week to actually rewire this pattern. So don't tell yourself it can't work. We'll be right back.

Okay, welcome back, my friends. So here's how we're going to shift this. It's not working is just a thought, which means that it's optional. So your brain has been running this whole scheme based on a kind of seesaw. It's like an either or, black and white. It's working or it's not working, pass or fail. It's done or it's not. I'm success or I'm broken.

But real things in real life aren't on a switch. They're not black and white. They are on a gradient. A business starts working in pieces. A relationship starts improving little bit by little bit and there's lots of the old dysfunctional pattern in between those little bits of progress still. A thought pattern changes in bits here and there and you still have plenty of your old thoughts along the way. A parenting strategy succeeds and fails and succeeds and fails. The repetition has to be built. The habit has to be built. The kid has to learn it. A creative practice starts producing in pieces. So we have to move out of this black and white thinking and we have to stop constantly evaluating whether something is working or not. It's a binary question with a binary answer. So up until the minute it changes for good, the answer could always be it's not working.

So here is the question you're going to ask yourself instead. What is the best case I can make that this is already starting to work? Now, that's not saying is it perfect? Is it done? Do I have the result yet? This is saying if I were hired as an attorney to represent the case that this is starting to work, that there is some sign this is working, that there has been some progress,

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

that it's possible this is beginning to work, what is all the evidence that I could marshal? Right? Your brain has not been asking this question because of that confirmation bias, because of that motivated reasoning, because of that perfectionism, your brain has not been asking this. Your brain has been asking, is it working or not? And then it has been looking for all the evidence that it's not working. And what we need to do is look for the evidence that it is working.

So if we imagine that entrepreneur who's making dinner and thinking that launch flopped, it failed, it's not working, if she knows this, then at that moment, she stops, she opens her phone or she grabs her pad of paper in the kitchen, and she starts writing, okay, what's the best case I can make this is starting to work? And then she writes down everything we talked about. Okay, well four people bought it. So obviously there is something here that people want. 10 people or 15 people said they were interested in the next time. 400 people joined my email list. So I'm definitely saying something that resonates with people and it's just a matter of, right, helping them understand the program better and show that value better. So she is looking for all the evidence she can marshal for the case that it is starting to work.

Or our single woman in the parking lot, right? She goes through all those things that I said earlier. She says to herself, okay, but I came on all these dates and I didn't cancel. So I am getting braver and more willing to put myself out there. And I was willing to turn down dates with two of these guys, even though in the past I would have gone anyway just because I was desperate for a partner. She says I told the truth when that controversial topic came up and I didn't people please. So she's like marshaling all the evidence that her work to change who she is and how she shows up in the world to find a real partner is starting to work.

The woman in the dressing room, she writes down all that evidence we talked about. Well, I wore a swimsuit the other week and I was willing to go

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

try on jeans. She looks for the bravery she's already, she's already displaying and the resilience she's already building. And the same thing with the mom with the routine. She's like, okay, but shower, toothbrushing, that stuff's all going great. I'm making it longer before I lose it. Right? This is all evidence that something is working.

The circumstances in these examples did not change, right? Circumstances are exactly the same. But the thoughts changed. And because the thought that gives the brain direction was consciously set to look for evidence this is working, then the brain was able to deliver all that evidence. Now, it doesn't always feel super smooth. Your brain might say, no, there isn't any. Fuck you. But we can't let our brain run the show. We have to say like, okay, but what if there was evidence that this was working? What microscopic bits could I find? We have to tell our brains what to look for or they're just going to bring us trash.

So the reason this works is because confirmation bias and motivated reasoning can work both ways, right? It's just like driving. You can drive left or drive right, you just got to decide on purpose which way to drive. If your brain's hunting for proof that something's failing, then that's what you're going to get. But if you train your brain to hunt for the best case that something's starting to build, to look for evidence that is helpful, it will surface that data instead of deleting it, right? It will give you what it has, the information that it's gleaned and the evidence it has to help you improve and iterate and keep going. So it's not like manifesting, it's not gaslighting yourself. It is telling your brain like, okay, you've been arguing for the prosecution this whole time that this isn't working, and now I need you to argue for our side that this is starting to work and that it is worth keeping going.

So that by itself is the one sentence way of working on this, right? What is the evidence I can find that this is working? And if that feels too strong, you can sub in like that it's starting to work, that it might be working, that there's

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

some evidence of progress. If you want to take it to the next level, you can spend the next week doing this three-step practice.

So step one is name the thought. For the next seven days, every time you catch yourself thinking or saying this isn't working, it's not working, right? Or I'm not getting anywhere, any variation of that, you name it to yourself, that's a thought. You interrupt that autopilot and you signal to your brain, hey, I know that's not just reality. I know you're giving me an interpretation right now. This is not objective reality. This is a thought I am currently having.

Step two, you can ask yourself these three questions to really dig into this phenomenon. So question one is, do I even know what working is supposed to look like here? Do I even have an idea of what that is? Sometimes when you even ask that, your brain gives you such a perfectionist fantasy that you can immediately be like, oh, right, okay. That's not realistic. That cannot be my standard. You can also ask yourself, where did this idea of what it working is supposed to look like come from? Did I absorb it? Like where did this timeline come from? Where did this number come from? How did I come up with it? Why is it so important? Start to question those kind of benchmarks your brain is giving you that it's claiming you have to reach to be able to believe that anything is working.

Question two is what timeline am I measuring this against and where did I get it? So what is it I think I'm supposed to do and how fast is it I think it's supposed to happen? And then we come to that question three, what's the best case I can make that this has already started to work? So like I said, if you want to just take one thing away from this episode, just practice what's the best case I can make that this is already starting to work? If you know this is a big pattern for you and you really want to dig into it, then come to it as a real practice for the next week of noticing all the time when you're thinking this isn't working, asking yourself, what is it I think working is

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

supposed to look like? which means like how much of it on what timeline, and then what is the best case I can make it's already starting to work?

And then step three is continue to build that case. So once you've gone through that little self-inquiry process, keep a note on your phone or on a pad of paper, whatever, and keep adding to the list. So write down like the case that this is starting to work and then just like you were a lawyer doing discovery, finding evidence, like keep adding to that list. You got a reply from somebody who said they'd love to work from you with you in the future. Your kid only got out of bed six times the next night. You tried on a pair of jeans at home and you didn't cry. You were willing to go on a blind date with someone your coworker wanted to set you up with even though it made you nervous, right? Whatever it is, look for those little bits of evidence.

This is not like a manifestation list or a gratitude journal. This is we are being really concrete and logical building the case because again, your brain has been the prosecution for your entire life and it has been admitting evidence unopposed. Nobody has been objecting because you didn't even know you were supposed to be objecting and you didn't even know your brain was doing this. Your job now is to start objecting. Start objecting when your brain says, this isn't working. Objection, speculation, that's what they say in court, right? That's not a truth. That's not a fact. That can't be admitted as evidence. That's just an argument. And then start to build the argument on the other side. What is the best case I can make that this is working or that this is starting to work or that there are signs of progress that this might be working?

So, listen, this was a half-hour episode on one thought and that should tell you how important that thought is. Every single pursuit in your life is going to have a point at which it doesn't seem like it's working. Sometimes it's a long stretch in which it feels that way. Every business, every relationship, every time you're trying to build new habits, every creative project, every

UFYB 496: The 3 Words Sabotaging Your Goals & How to Change Them

healing process, every friendship, all of it. If your default interpretation is this isn't working, you are going to quit on yourself so many times and you will never find out what is on the other side of that. You will never find out the business you would have had if you'd kept going, the relationship you would have had if you'd kept going. The creative project you would have had, the peaceful bedtime routine, like there's nothing too big or too small that the thought, it's not working can't derail it. And that can happen thousands of times over your life.

So the more work you do now to make your default thought pattern be, let me make the best case I can for myself that this is already starting to work, the more you're going to be able to accomplish and achieve in your life. Changing this one thought can be the difference between achieving your wildest dreams and quitting before you get anywhere close. It's that big. Don't underestimate the power of working on and changing this thought. So go make a case that something you're working on is working for you. And I'll see you next week.