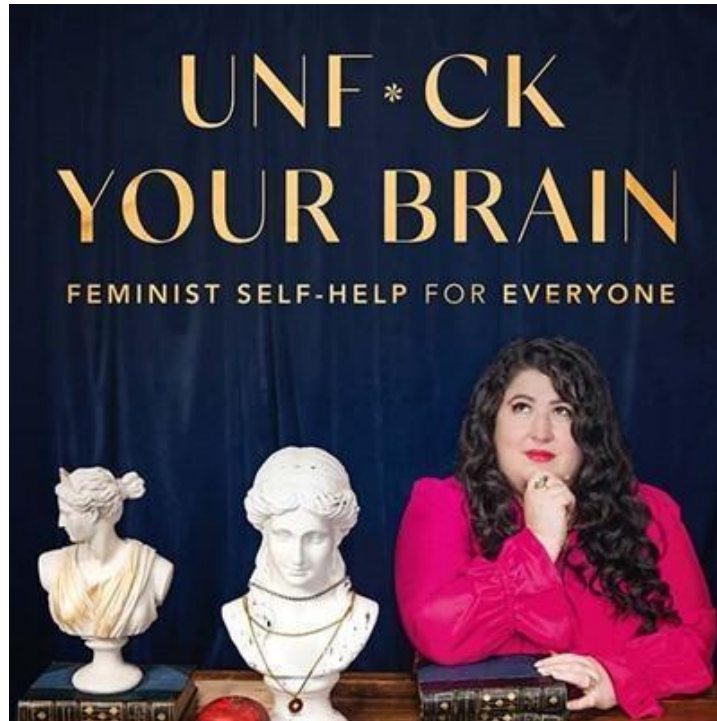


UFYB 498: Making Peace with the Human Void



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 498: Making Peace with the Human Void

Hello, my friends. I want you to think about something you really wanted, something you worked for or waited for, or told yourself for years would finally be the thing that changed how you felt about your life. Maybe it was a job title, a relationship, a business milestone, a certain number in your bank account, the finished book, the body you thought would finally make you feel good when you looked in the mirror.

And then I want you to remember the moment that you got it. There was probably some version of celebration, some version of relief, maybe even real joy, at least for a little while. And then if you're honest with yourself, at some point that feeling disappeared and you were left with this new set of circumstances, but the same brain still looking for the next thing and finding what wasn't quite right with your current new circumstances.

You probably noticed it first on an ordinary day. It's Tuesday afternoon, you're scrolling your phone, and you realize that you now have everything you thought you wanted, but you don't feel satisfied. And you assume that there must be something wrong with you if that's the case. But there isn't. And today I want to talk about what's actually going on there. It's not what you think. It's not that the accomplishment was hollow or that you can never be satisfied and that's a bad thing. I want to share with you something that I think will really change how you relate to your own human experience. And that's what I call the human void.

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.

There is a restlessness that lives at the center of the human experience. It's a persistent, low-grade dissatisfaction. For some people, it's a background hum, something they can mostly ignore unless they get too quiet. For others, it's a constant roar that follows them from achievement to

UFYB 498: Making Peace with the Human Void

achievement. But almost every person I've ever coached and pretty much every honest human being I've ever had a real conversation with has felt this at some point. The sense that they're not quite there yet, that something is missing, that if they could just arrange the right set of circumstances, they would finally feel settled.

The really cruel part of this is that it survives achievement. You get the thing and for a moment it feels good, and then your brain almost immediately starts identifying what is wrong with it. Why it wasn't the right thing after all, or you didn't do it right and that's why it doesn't count. Why the next version would be better. The goalpost move and the searching continues. And when we do that, we never conclude that the pattern might be telling us something. We just conclude that we chose wrong or we did it wrong. This particular thing wasn't the right thing. We somehow did it in a way that makes it not count. And we just look for the next thing to repeat the pattern with.

And sometimes we stop even trying. We go backwards, right? We start wondering if maybe the dissatisfaction we feel now is because we made the wrong choice five years ago or 10 years ago. If we'd taken that other job or stayed in that other city or pursued the thing we talked ourselves out of, maybe now we would feel satisfied. So we excavate our own history looking for the source of the problem and we never find it there either because that's not where it's coming from.

And so we end up walking around with this ambient sense that everyone else has figured something out that we haven't. That other people feel at ease or satisfied in a way that we don't. That there's some secret that we need to get and we're still looking for it.

But here's what I want you to understand. When this happens, your brain is not malfunctioning. It's doing exactly what it evolved to do. The human brain evolved to solve problems. That is its primary function, and it is extraordinarily good at it. The drive to see what's not working, to identify

UFYB 498: Making Peace with the Human Void

what can be improved, to notice what's missing, that's what allowed human beings to build fire and agriculture and medicine and the entire social and technological world we live in.

A brain that could fully settle into contentment and stay there from an evolutionary standpoint is a brain that's probably going to get eaten by something. That restless brain survived and that contented brain probably did not. Psychologists have a name for one piece of this, which is hedonic adaptation, and that is the documented human tendency to return to a relatively stable baseline of happiness, regardless of what positive things happen to us.

You get the raise, you feel great, and then the raise just becomes what you make and that's the floor. And your brain moves on to the next thing. It's not a character flaw. It doesn't mean you're ungrateful or impossible to satisfy. It's really baked into the machine.

And this is not a new discovery, right? Every major philosophical and religious tradition grapples with this. In Buddhist philosophy, the concept of Duka, often translated as unsatisfactoriness or suffering, describes this quality as fundamental to conscious experience, not as a problem you can solve, but as a condition of being alive. Augustine wrote in his confessions that our heart is restless until it rests in God, which is how he answered that question.

Blaise Pascal, a French philosopher, wrote extensively about what he called *divertissement*, which is usually translated as diversion. He said that humans fill their lives with pursuit and activity and busyness specifically to avoid sitting with the discomfort of the void. He thought this was the defining fact of human experience. The things we chase, the work, the pleasure, the achievement, they're not actually what we want. They're what we use to keep ourselves from having to be still with the restlessness. Pascal was writing in the 17th century, but he was describing your phone scrolling habit with pretty good accuracy.

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

UFYB 498: Making Peace with the Human Void

And yet, most of us live our entire lives treating the restlessness as a problem to be solved, as evidence that something is wrong with our circumstances or our choices or ourselves.

When you don't understand that this dissatisfaction is just a feature of being human, rather than a signal that something specific is wrong with your life, you spend an enormous amount of energy trying to cure something that cannot be cured. If we look at this at work, for instance, you always think you're one title away, one launch away, one revenue number away from finally feeling like enough. You build something and then you start immediately identifying the flaws. You discount what you've created because it didn't deliver the feeling that you expected it to. You leave jobs or scrap projects or you decide to pivot a 37th time, not because what you were doing wasn't working, but because it didn't make that feeling go away. It didn't make the void disappear. And since the void never disappears, you're always moving, always searching, and never quite landing anywhere.

This pattern can also really disrupt your relationships, right? You meet someone, it's good, but then the feeling starts to fade. You start to notice all the ways they're not quite right. You feel dissatisfied and your brain makes that their fault. Because your brain thinks, well, if you'd found the right person, you'd finally feel settled. And then you go through that over and over and over. Or if you're single, you tell yourself you just haven't found the one yet and you're judging everyone you meet by whether or not they make you feel fully satisfied and content.

And then the search for a relationship or the attempt to improve or fix the relationship becomes a container for managing the void with yourself, rather than an actual relationship between two people.

This shows up if you do creative work or run a business behind so many of the things that you work on and then give up. Let's say you finally do something big. You write the book, you build the business, whatever it is,

UFYB 498: Making Peace with the Human Void

but it doesn't feel the way you wanted it to feel. You don't feel content and satisfied. And so you decide it's not right or you didn't do it right or it's not good enough to put out there, and so you leave it on the shelf. And you talk yourself out of your own work and out of your own purpose or mission because it's not creating the emotion that you wanted it to create.

And I see this all the time too when it comes to how we treat our bodies, particularly when people are trying to work out or lose weight or get plastic surgery or all the different things we do, thinking that if we just change our physical form, we're finally going to feel settled and content in it. But of course, that doesn't happen. And so we have to do the next thing and try the next thing and stay on this treadmill on and on and on, always looking for the version of our body that's going to finally make us feel content.

The irony of all of this is that what we really want is just to feel present. That's what we're after. We want to be present in our own lives instead of always being half somewhere else. We want to be here in this moment, in this body, in this day. We want to have a conversation and actually be listening instead of running through to-dos and achievements we need to do and things that are wrong in the back of our minds. We want to sit down to dinner and actually be there. We want to accomplish something big and let ourselves feel that accomplishment. But we can't seem to do it and we keep chasing presence and we keep chasing more and more things or more and more achievements that are supposed to make us finally feel present.

Sometimes we catch little glimpses of it. We're in the middle of something absorbing, we actually fully relax on a vacation, or the first flush of something new, but we can't ever hold on to it. And we get exhausted from constantly trying to find the thing that is going to allow us to actually be present. And meanwhile, we're always in our head instead of in our actual lives.

UFYB 498: Making Peace with the Human Void

You can't feel present because of this cycle. It's not because you're not like meditating enough. I hear from so many women who feel like they failed at meditation, they're not relaxing correctly. They just vow to be more present with a lot of stress around it. The reason you can't feel present is that the present moment brings you into contact with the void, with that restlessness, with that hum. And because you believe the void is a problem that needs to be solved, the present moment feels uncomfortable or even unbearable.

So your brain does what it always does with discomfort. It generates problems to work on. It churns, it plans, it replays conversations from three days ago. It projects forward into hypothetical problems that might not ever actually happen. It just keeps you busy inside your own brain so you never have to actually be still with what is underneath, which is the void.

Pascal said we use diversion to avoid sitting with the void. But he was writing about obvious diversions like gambling and hunting and parties, right? To be a 17th-century aristocrat. The subtler version that I see in the women I coach is that constant low-level mental activity. Constantly planning, replaying conversations, anticipating problems and solutions, right? That may or may not even happen. It actually feels productive or can feel even virtuous, like you're being responsible and staying on top of things. But it's often just a way of not being present with the one thing that makes the present uncomfortable.

And the problem with this avoidance strategy is that the thing you're trying to avoid isn't going anywhere. The void is not a problem you can eventually think your way out of. All of that churning is not getting you closer to the piece you're looking for. It's keeping you from it.

This is the difference between pain and suffering. Pain, including the existential restlessness we're talking about today, is part of what it means to be alive. It's baked in. But suffering is something we create on top of that with our thinking. Suffering is the story that we layer on to the pain that this

UFYB 498: Making Peace with the Human Void

void, this dissatisfaction means something's wrong with us. We chose wrong. Everyone else has figured out something we have not. Right? The pain is inevitable, but the suffering is optional. And most of us create a lot of unnecessary suffering by treating the void as a problem we were supposed to have already solved.

So we're going to take a quick break right now, but when we come back, I want to talk about what you actually do with the void, because the answer is probably not what you're expecting.

Welcome back. Let's talk about the solution. The solution to the human void is not to fill it. If I knew a way to fill it, I promise I would share it with you. But I haven't figured that out, and I don't think anyone has. The solution is to understand what the void actually is and to stop expecting it to go away. Because when you do that, it actually shifts how it feels. The path to feeling more present and more at ease and more genuinely settled in your own life is not getting rid of the void. It's learning to let it be there without running from it.

So I want to give you two distinctions that I think will help change how you relate to this feeling. The first is the distinction between being philosophically happy with your life and being happy in any given moment. These are two completely different things, but we talk about them like they're the same and confusingly, we use the same word for them, which is most of the problem.

Being philosophically happy with your life means your life is genuinely aligned with your values. Your relationships are real. The work you're doing matters to you. You're living on your own terms. You're making choices that reflect who you actually are and what you actually care about. That's something you can build and maintain. It's an orientation toward your life. It's a relationship with yourself that deepens over time.

UFYB 498: Making Peace with the Human Void

Being happy in any given moment is a feeling. And like all feelings, it's temporary. It will change. You can be deeply, genuinely satisfied with the life you've built and still have moments or stretches of restlessness and wanting and dissatisfaction. And those moments aren't evidence that your life is wrong. They're just evidence that you have a human brain.

So think about what this means practically if you understand this. You might have built a career you're genuinely proud of, work that aligns with your values and uses your real abilities, and you'll still have days where you feel restless at your desk. You catch yourself wondering if you should be doing something different. Under the old way of thinking, that feeling is a terrible, true signal to reexamine everything and try to either change everything in your life or tell yourself that you can never be happy until you do. But when you think about things this way, that's just a normal day. You can acknowledge the feeling without treating it as super significant.

Or you might be in a relationship you're genuinely glad to be in with a person you love, and you can still have stretches where you feel a low-grade desire for something else. That's not a sign the relationship is wrong. That's the void doing its void thing in the background of a life that's otherwise actually good and in line with your values. So you can hold and allow both those things at once.

This also means you can stop auditing your life every time the dissatisfaction shows up. You can hold your life as fundamentally aligned with who you are and what matters to you, assuming you are living that kind of life, and still feel that hum. That's just what being a human feels like from the inside, even when you're living a value-aligned life.

The second distinction is where this gets more nuanced. Your feelings are being created by your thoughts, right? That is foundational to everything I teach. If you're feeling dissatisfied, that feeling is not coming from your circumstances. It's coming from a specific thought that you're having.

UFYB 498: Making Peace with the Human Void

So the question worth asking when you notice that dissatisfaction is not what's wrong with my life. The question is what thought is creating this feeling right now. Sometimes when you actually look, you will find the underlying thought is pointing to something real. Maybe the thought is that you are not living in alignment with what you actually value. Your work has drifted from what matters to you. You're in a relationship where you're not being honest. You've been playing it safe in ways that don't reflect who you want to be. Those thoughts are worth taking seriously. Those are evidence or indications that you're not living a value-aligned life and you're not philosophically happy.

But here's what's critical. Even if those thoughts are accurate, even if there's a genuine misalignment, changing your circumstances will not make dissatisfaction disappear. Because you still have a human brain on the other side of whatever change you make. You're still going to have the human void. That's not going to go away even when you do live a values-aligned life. It just has different surroundings.

So when you're considering whether to make a change, the honest question to ask yourself is, am I imagining a version of my life where once I make this change, I'm never dissatisfied again? Because that's not an option that's available to you. Or do you genuinely understand that you're going to feel dissatisfied either way, but on a values and life philosophy level, the change matters to you, makes sense to you, seems right for you?

The reason to make a change is not to cure restlessness. The reason to make a change is that with clear eyes about what you're actually getting, it aligns more closely with the life you want to build. That's a completely legitimate reason to make a change, but it's very different than hoping that this change will finally be the one that makes you feel content 24/7. Because in that case, you're bound to be disappointed.

So here's what I want you to actually do with this. The next time you notice that low-grade restlessness, you notice the void humming away, instead of

UFYB 498: Making Peace with the Human Void

immediately running to figure out what's wrong with your life or ruminating about blaming your circumstances, I want you to get curious about what you're thinking and ask yourself, what thought is creating this feeling right now? Specifically, find that thought. And then ask yourself, is this thought pointing to a real values misalignment in my life, or is this just my brain doing what human brains do?

If it's the second one, if it's just that ambient hum of being a human with a human brain and a human void, you don't have to do anything about it. You don't need to fix it, you don't need to resolve it, you don't need to figure out what it means. You can just let it be there. You can notice it. You can even say to yourself, "Hello void, here you are again, right on schedule." And then you can redirect your attention to the actual life you are living. You can come back to the room you're in, the conversation you're having, the work you're doing, the meal you're about to eat, whatever it is. This doesn't have to be a grand spiritual practice. It's just the decision to stop chasing your own brain around and come back to where your body is in space, which is how you actually can create more presence in your life.

This is actually how you create presence. It's not by eliminating the discomfort that comes with the present moment, but learning to stop running from it and allowing the void to be there. When you stop treating the void as an emergency, you will have a lot less mental drama about it. The void can just be there with you even while you are able to be more present. That way, you're not spending your cognitive energy trying to think your way out of something that you cannot think your way out of. And that freed-up energy and quieter mind is what allows you to be more present.

Now, if when you look carefully at that thought, you find it really is pointing to something real, like a genuine misalignment that's worth addressing, then that's a different story and then it's time to sit with that truth, right? But always make sure that you are thinking clearly about what a change would actually give you. Don't make the change for the fantasy version of your life where you never feel dissatisfied. You have to understand you're trading

UFYB 498: Making Peace with the Human Void

one set of circumstances for another and the void is going with you. And if the change still is compelling with that understanding, then it's worth making.

The goal of this practice is not to never feel the void. You're going to have the void for the rest of your life. The goal is to stop being afraid of the void, to stop treating the void like it's evidence something has gone wrong, to stop rejecting the void, to develop a relationship with the void so that you can let it be there without letting it run your life.

So much of what this podcast has done over the last almost 10 years has been about two things working together. Giving you concrete tools to change your thinking, build your confidence, and create a life that actually reflects who you are and what you want, and helping you make peace with what it means to be a human while you're doing that work.

This episode is very much that second part. You are not broken because you feel the void. You are not behind because you achieve something and it didn't fix it. You're not doing it wrong because you still want things. You're a person with a brain living a human life. That's always been true of you and it will always be true of you. And you can make peace with that in a way that will give you so much more energy for the life you're actually building.