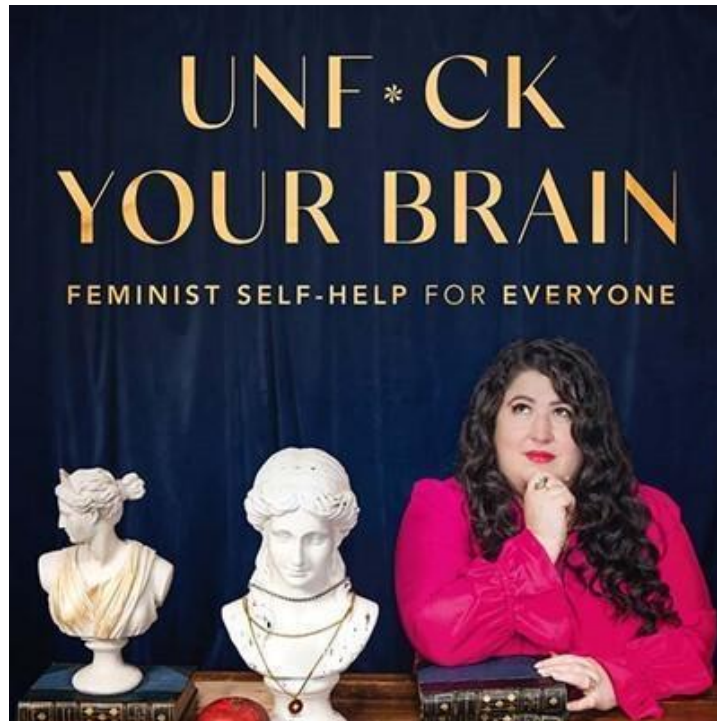


UFYB 502: Why You Don't Ask for What You Want (& How to Start to Change It)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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All right, my friends, I have a question for you today. It might sound like an easy one, but it's actually the portal to a pretty deep pattern.

Here's what I want to ask you. When is the last time you asked for exactly what you wanted when you were nervous about doing so? So I'm not talking when's the last time you hinted, not when's the last time you hoped someone would notice what you wanted, definitely not asking when's the last time you talked yourself out of asking for what you want, because I'm sure that was like five minutes ago. I want you to think about the last time you actually opened your mouth and asked. Take a minute. If you're having trouble remembering, or you just know you haven't for a very long time, this episode is for you.

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 let's talk about asking for what we want, which is something a lot of women are scared to do, at work, at home, anywhere else. And we think about the big high-stakes moments often. The salary negotiation you've been putting off, asking your partner to do more around the house, asking for what you want in bed. Those asks feel dramatic and we've labeled them as the big scary ones.

But the pattern runs much deeper than that. The same dynamic shows up in asks so small that most women don't even register them as asks at all. Asking for an hour to yourself on Saturday morning, telling your family you want something different for dinner, saying to a friend, I'd rather not do that, can we do something else? Saying to someone out loud, I'd love if you did that differently. These are the small daily surrenders that most women make without noticing that they're even happening.

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

UFYB 502: Why You Don't Ask for What You Want (& How to Start to Change It)

You're at a restaurant and the order comes out wrong and you eat it anyway. You agree to take a family trip you'd rather not really pay for and take time off from work for because you don't want to ask that you could just maybe get together in town instead. You've been carrying more than your fair share at work for months maybe, your colleague is slacking. But in the meeting where you could say something about being overloaded, you instead just say, sure, when someone asks if you can take on yet another thing.

What all of these have in common is not the stakes, it's what's happening in your brain. You register what you actually want, but immediately a counter argument appears and within seconds, sometimes unconsciously, you've suppressed the want and you've moved on. And you probably don't even clock that as a decision because it happens so fast and so automatically, it's almost invisible to you. That's exactly what makes it so hard to interrupt. The thought that's coming up is some version of the same few things. I shouldn't need this. I don't want to be difficult. It probably won't change anything anyway. They'll be upset. They won't understand. And so you don't ask.

So where does this come from? It's not a personality trait, it's not about being shy. It's not exactly even a self-esteem problem, certainly not one that like morning affirmations are going to fix. The roots are much deeper than that.

So to start with evolutionary biology. For most of human history, people didn't live in large anonymous societies. They lived in small, tight groups of roughly 100 to 150 people. In a group that small, your survival depends entirely on your social standing within the group. If the tribe decides you're a problem, then you are out and being out is a death sentence. You can't just like move to a different city and find a new social circle, right? People around you are your only option.

UFYB 502: Why You Don't Ask for What You Want (& How to Start to Change It)

So in that environment, the brain developed an exquisitely sensitive system for tracking social standing and for avoiding anything that might jeopardize it, which includes seeming to want more than your fair share or imposing your will on other people. So a person who seems greedy or demanding or like a burden was a liability on the group. And so brains evolved over thousands of years to treat any signal of social disapproval as a survival threat and to preemptively suppress anything that might trigger it.

That's why being afraid to ask for something that you want when you fear a consequence doesn't feel like kind of some logical decision. It feels immediate in your body, right? Your chest is contracting or your heart is pounding. It's an ancient response. And it's not designed to distinguish between something that's genuinely risky or a request about what to have for dinner.

And then on top of that, we get society and socialization. Because for most of human history, women's survival was literally contingent on the approval of men and particularly men in authority. So a woman who seemed to want too much or push too hard faced real material consequences, right? Shunning, poverty, violence, loss of the protection she needed to stay alive. That history may be gone in terms of our political context most of the time now, but our brains don't change that fast.

So for women in particular, the neural wiring around social disapproval and what we've been taught through the generations runs very deep. When you are afraid that asking for what you want will set off some kind of negative consequence for you, it registers to your primitive brain as a danger. And that's a survival adaptation that kept women alive for centuries. The problem is that our circumstances are different now, but because our brains haven't caught up, we're still responding to them in the same way. Our circumstances have changed, but society hasn't fully changed either because women are still taught from early on that their value comes from what they provide to other people.

UFYB 502: Why You Don't Ask for What You Want (& How to Start to Change It)

The good girl is helpful, she's not a burden, she doesn't make waves, right? She keeps everyone comfortable. She anticipates what people around her need and she provides it ideally before they even have to ask. Girls are praised for being compliant. Boys are called assertive and girls are called bossy for exactly the same behavior. Women are the ones who are called difficult when they insist on their preferences. You don't really hear about a difficult man that often.

The message that gets absorbed is that your desires are a problem, right? Your needs are an imposition, keep them to yourself. And so women have been socialized to treat wanting things or having needs or having desires as equivalent to opportunities for rejection and for being a burden. And that has been years of conditioning. So you're often not even aware of it, you just feel uncomfortable, you feel anxious, you feel guilty, you feel selfish, whatever it is, and so you don't actually ask for what you want.

The problem is those don't go away. Desires, preferences and needs are part of being a person. And trying to operate as though you don't have any doesn't actually make them disappear. It just drives them underground. And the cost is burnout and resentment towards the people around you who often don't even know what you want because you've never told them.

The thought driving this entire pattern boils down to, if I ask for what I want, something bad will happen. She'll be angry, he'll think I'm ungrateful, I'll be seen as difficult. And sometimes it's just a vague sense of this will create a problem, things will get worse, right? This costs more than it's worth. Those thoughts are running a lot of your life and they don't get examined because they just feel, quote unquote, true.

Now, look, asking for what you want does carry real risk in some situations, but your brain has generalized that response far beyond those situations and is applying it to circumstances that have almost nothing in common with the original conditions that made the threat response necessary.

UFYB 502: Why You Don't Ask for What You Want (& How to Start to Change It)

So after this break, I'm going to walk you through how this is showing up in your life and I'm going to give you something concrete to do to start to work on it. And I promise I'm not going to tell you to just ask. That advice has never helped anyone and it won't help you.

All right. So let's talk about what it actually costs you when you don't ask for what you want. The first and most obvious cost is you don't get what you want. If you're waiting for the people around you to just intuit your needs and meet them without prompting, you are waiting for something that's almost never going to happen. And every time it doesn't happen, you feel more invisible and more resentful. And you tell yourself this is just what your life is. Not getting what you want creates resentment and alienation from your relationships and your own life if you've never asked for it and are waiting for people to figure it out.

The more insidious damage is subtler. It's what happens when you've convinced yourself that what you actually want is off the table, because that desire doesn't go anywhere. That desire is not logical, right? It doesn't respond to you telling it can't be met. But because you've pre-rejected it or told yourself you're not allowed to want it, you then can't connect to anything else. So when someone asks you what you want, you come up blank because you've already told yourself that the thing you really want is unavailable.

It's like going to a restaurant when you have your heart set on a particular dish you get there and the server tells you that they're out of it. Suddenly, nothing else on the menu is appealing, right? You keep looking, but nothing really sounds right. And someone asks what you want and you say you just can't figure it out. But that's not really true. You know exactly what you want. In this scenario, you just can't have it. And since that option's off the table, nothing else rises to fill the space. In our lives though, we're telling ourselves that things are not available to us or are impossible that actually are possible or could be available to us.

UFYB 502: Why You Don't Ask for What You Want (& How to Start to Change It)

So when we say we don't know or we're just flexible or whatever works is fine, we're not really telling the truth. There's almost always a real desire underneath that has been dismissed so quickly we've barely registered it or we've decided to not entertain it.

And so when we are just asking ourselves, well, what do I want that I'm actually allowed to have or think is already plausible, we can't come up with anything that sounds good. So maybe you're doing this at work. Maybe you've been in the same role for three years. You know you're ready for more responsibility, more money, and you've been waiting for someone to notice, but nobody has. But you don't bring it up. You tell yourself the timing isn't right, you don't want to seem entitled, you'll ask after the next project is done.

And the next project is always coming. And you have been building a case for your own promotion in your own head and you think that everyone else should see that and act accordingly, but you've never actually told anyone about it. You keep wanting it to be so obvious that you won't have to ask so that you won't then later tell yourself, oh, I only got it because I asked, right? You think you'll feel more worthy if it just descends on you, but that won't happen.

Or maybe you're in a long-term relationship, right? You're exhausted from the mental and logistical load. You want more help, but every time you think about starting that conversation, you talk yourself out of it because you imagine it's going to turn into a fight, it won't help anyway, so I'll just deal with it. But then you resent your partner even though you've never actually tried to solve the problem. And this inability or unwillingness to ask for what we want is part of why women burn out so much.

We are running on empty, trying to do it all, and we won't ask for time to ourselves. Maybe what you want is just a Saturday morning with no agenda and no responsibilities and you haven't had one in years. But because you

UFYB 502: Why You Don't Ask for What You Want (& How to Start to Change It)

aren't willing to ask for it and you fear conflict around it or hearing no, you just tell yourself that it's not even worth it, it won't even help. When the truth is, you just don't believe you're allowed to want it or can get it. And so you keep running yourself into the ground.

There's a perfectionism that runs through all of this, which is like, if I can't solve everything, it's not worth asking for anything. The problem is systemic and a few hours on a Saturday won't totally fix it, so there's no point in even trying. I need the whole thing fixed or nothing's worth asking for.

I agree. Of course, structural change in patriarchy and how domestic and emotional labor gets distributed would be very helpful. That also might take decades, assuming it happens in our lifetime at all. And in the meantime, you're still here, you're still burnt out, still not asking for even a little bit of time for yourself and never finding out how much difference that might actually make. Waiting for the perfect solution is just a way of getting out of having the hard conversations.

Now, before we get to how you can work on this week, I want to acknowledge the reality that sometimes when you ask, the answer is no. And asking for what you want, it's not a guarantee of getting it. Of course, your partner might not be willing to change the dynamic. Your boss might not be ready to promote you. Your friend might push back on changing your plans. But avoiding the ask keeps you in limbo. When you don't ask your partner for more because you're afraid of hearing no, you're not actually escaping the no, you're actually living as if you already got the no indefinitely without knowing if that's actually true. So the answer is functionally already no. You've arranged it so that's a no, and you never have to actually hear the no, but you're living the same life you'd live if you got the no.

When you ask and get a real answer, when you actually get a no, now you have information. You know what's actually on offer and you can make a

UFYB 502: Why You Don't Ask for What You Want (& How to Start to Change It)

real decision about what to do with that. Maybe the answer reveals that this relationship or this job doesn't have what you need and now you can decide what to do with clarity. Maybe it's a yes and that's great. But either way, you're no longer organizing your life around protecting yourself from finding out, right? You're not the one saying no to yourself. Staying silent has its own cost. You spend years in situations that might have been changeable or should have ended or that would have revealed themselves in a different way if you had actually made the ask. And you can't get those years back.

So none of this is easy or comfortable to reckon with, but it's better than going your whole life without ever finding out what actually would have been possible. So knowing all this intellectually is a start, but understanding where a fear comes from and what the costs of obeying it are does not make it disappear. You can know with full clarity that the fear of asking is old wiring overlaid with decades of social conditioning and you're still going to feel the fear the next time you open your mouth. That's just how the brain works. Insight is necessary, but it's not sufficient for cognitive change.

And the reason that the just ask, what's the worst that can happen kind of advice fails, it's not that it's wrong in principle. Asking is a good idea, but it skips a step, which is actually changing the thinking behind the behavior. Your brain's generating a prediction, if I ask for this, something bad is going to happen. And it's presenting that prediction to you like it's a fact. And you aren't questioning that.

The specific content of your fear, the exact version of the bad thing you think will happen, might even have a logic that made sense at some point in your personal history, right? Maybe you grew up in a family where your needs were met with irritation and asking for things was risky. Maybe you learned early that wanting things got you labeled difficult or selfish or ungrateful. Your brain was predisposed to think that because of how you were socialized and so if you got feedback like that, your brain grabbed

UFYB 502: Why You Don't Ask for What You Want (& How to Start to Change It)

onto that evidence and has ignored all the evidence that the world can offer you of getting what you want when you ask.

So the first step of the work is learning to see these thoughts when they're running through your brain and to recognize them as a forecast your brain is generating, not an actual prediction of what is definitely going to happen. Once you can see the thought, you can get curious about it. You don't have to immediately argue with it or talk yourself out of it. You don't have to perform confidence you don't feel. You just have to slow down enough to notice that you're having a thought and to ask yourself, can I know this is actually true or is it just my brain running this old program? That curiosity is where all of cognitive change starts. It starts with being able to identify what that thought is specifically, which many of us can't even do yet because we've been suppressing the wants for so long, we're not even aware of how often we are not asking for what we want and why we aren't doing it.

So the practice I want to recommend to you this week is just observation. Every time you want something and you don't ask for it, write it down. It does not have to be elaborate. Just what did I want? Why didn't I ask? What was the specific thought that stopped me? I wanted to ask my partner to take over dinner tonight. But I didn't because I thought he's had a long day and it would seem unfair. I wanted to say no to my friend's plan, but I didn't because I thought she'd be hurt and I should be more flexible. I wanted to ask my boss about the timeline on that promotion conversation, but I didn't because I thought it'll seem like I'm being pushy.

We're not taking action, we are just collecting data right now. You don't have to push through the feeling. I'm just asking you to start noticing, start looking for the pattern. Start reintroducing yourself to the part of you that knows what she wants even when she doesn't say it. Some of you are very in touch with that part of you and for some of you, you're not even sure where she is. But when you start doing this exercise, even just noticing for a few days, you're going to find that there are way more times this is

UFYB 502: Why You Don't Ask for What You Want (& How to Start to Change It)

happening than you thought, that this pattern is running constantly. The suppression is happening at the restaurant, in the group text, in the meeting, in the bedroom, in the grocery store, like dozens of times a day.

And you're going to start to reconnect to the part of yourself that does have a want or a desire and is suppressing it before it can come out. That can feel overwhelming, but I promise that next week, I'm going to help you take this list and start doing something with it. Having desires, needs, wants, it's a feature of being a person who is alive. You can't get away from them. Treating your own desires as at least as legitimate as everyone else's is the work that will help you start asking for and advocating for yourself. But for right now, we're just going to start with noticing.