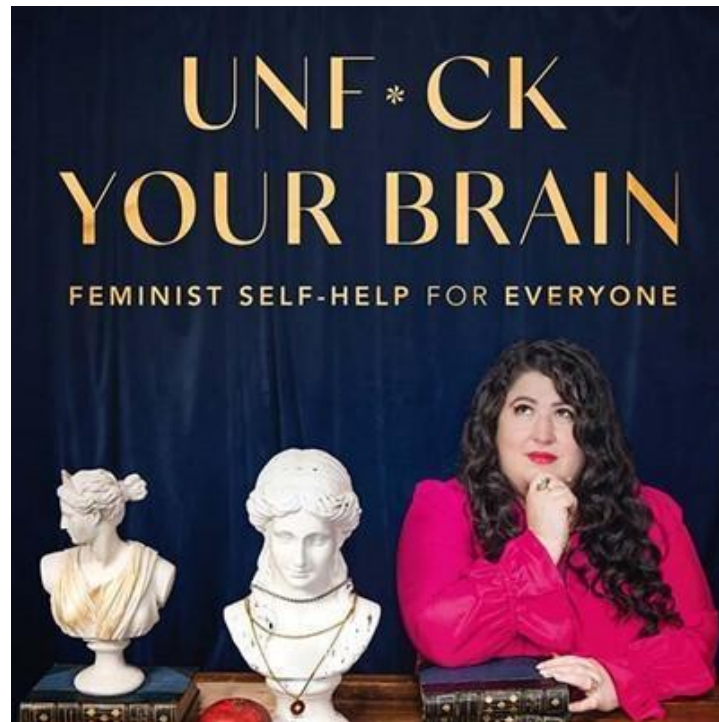


UFYB 506: How a Sandwich Can Rescue - or Ruin - Your Life



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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

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You've probably eaten a sandwich when you really would have preferred to go get dumplings. You've probably turned down help you badly needed because you didn't want to be a burden. You've probably sat in a meeting and bitten your tongue while Greg from sales monologued about a stupid idea that you knew would fail. Your brain tells you that it's safer to stay silent than to speak up. But that's because the part of your brain making that decision is only considering the short-term pain of asking for what you want and enduring the self-consciousness, anxiety, and shame that follow.

Today I want to talk about what avoiding those feelings costs you. When you really see it, it becomes harder to justify swallowing your words all the time. So today we are going to slow the whole thing down. We're going to play out how a single moment, from the smallest to the biggest, can impact your life when you don't speak up. By the end, you may feel called out, but that's a good thing.

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.

Let's start with the smallest example. It's lunchtime and your coworkers are sorting out where to order from. Everybody else is excited about the sandwich place. And you don't really want a sandwich. You know bread doesn't sit well with you. You know exactly how your afternoon goes after you eat a sandwich. So here's what runs through your head in about four seconds flat. "If I say something, they're going to think I'm being picky. They'll think I'm being difficult. I don't want to be that person who's always going on and on about what she could eat and what she can't eat. And I don't want to make everyone order from a place they like less just so that I can have something different, like I'm more important than they are. And I don't want to go just get my own lunch because then I'm not a team player or it looks like I'm making some big virtuous statement about how I eat."

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So you go along with it. You order the sandwich. You eat the sandwich. And then the totally predictable thing happens. You spend the whole afternoon bloated and foggy. You get almost nothing done. You feel so off that you skip dinner and then at 10 p.m., you're standing at the kitchen counter eating snacks you don't even want. You sleep badly. You wake up the next morning already dragging.

Watch what just happened there. This isn't about gluten being bad or bread being a problem. It's about you eating something you knew didn't agree with you. None of it surprised you. You could have called every minute of that in advance. You chose a guaranteed bad afternoon and a bad night's sleep over 10 seconds of feeling awkward at lunch. Because you're letting your amygdala, the part of your brain that exists to avoid current danger, win out over your longer-term thinking. Even when the danger is not all that dangerous.

Let's go up a size. And let's get out of the office because this pattern follows you home too. You're at home and you're exhausted. It's the bone-deep kind that a single good night's sleep does not touch. You and your partner haven't had two days alone together since your kids were born, and you can feel that your marriage is running on logistics and not much else. Your parents live 20 minutes away. They adore the kids. They've offered to babysit in kind of one of those general, "We'd love to take them sometime" kind of ways. More than once, though. All you would have to do is ask them to take the kids for a weekend so you could get away and actually rest.

You think about it constantly, but you don't ask because of your thoughts. "They're busy. They have their own lives. I don't want to impose. They already do a lot and I don't want to be the grown woman who's forever asking her parents to bail her out. What if they think I can't handle my own kids? What if they think I'm selfish for wanting a weekend away from my own kids? I don't remember my mother ever taking a weekend away, so who am I to go asking for one? And honestly, prepping the house and the

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schedules so they can manage everything feels like more work than just staying home, so I'm just going to skip it."

So you don't ask. And what happens is you stay depleted month after month and it starts to feel permanent. And you and your partner keep trading logistics across the kitchen island like you're two managers of the same small tired company and the part of the relationship that was just the two of you kind of fades away. And you get shorter with your kids because you don't have a lot of resources left emotionally to be patient. And you start to resent your partner, and you even resent your parents a little for not pushing harder to help, even though you're the one who didn't ask them.

And meanwhile, even though you're not even considering this angle, your kids are watching you. Both your kids are learning right now what a mother is supposed to be. Someone who doesn't rest, someone whose own needs are one item on the list that never gets crossed off. You would never, ever teach your kids this explicitly on purpose, but that's what they learn because kids watch what we do, not what we say.

We can see the same kind of patterns show up at work. You're in your one-to-one with your manager and she asks you a generous question. She says, "Hey, is there anything I can do to take some stuff off your plate, clear some blocks for you, anything that would make your job easier?" And you know the answer right away. What you want is a part-time hire, someone to take the admin load off your plate so you can finally focus on the big client relationships and have some room in your week to actually think. So, it's sitting right there on your tongue, but you don't say it.

Because here are your thoughts: "I don't want her to think that I think I'm too good to do admin. I don't want her to think that I don't care about the budget and our expenses. I don't want her to think that I'm lazy or I'm not willing to work hard or I'm not a team player." So you smile and you say, "No, I think I'm good, thanks." And then you go back to your desk and you just keep doing all of it yourself, the paperwork, the calendar logistics,

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approving the team's receipts. You spend your days putting out tiny fires and you end every single day burnt out with nothing left in the tank.

And that means the more important part of your job, but the ones that aren't as urgent in the moment, don't get your attention. You don't have the bandwidth to come up with the thoughtful birthday gift for your most important client, so that relationship doesn't get any warmer. You skip the conference where you might have met a dozen new leads or made important connections because three days away with nobody to triage your inbox means two weeks digging back out and it's just not worth it to you in the moment.

And that means your career slows down in ways you may not even see. The partners don't see leadership material when they look at you because you've buried yourself under work that has nothing to do with leadership. You made yourself the most reliable administrator in the building and that's exactly how they think of you now. The same 10 seconds of awkward you skipped at the lunch table just turned into your career hitting a ceiling. It's the same habit, just a much bigger price.

And we do this in our most intimate relationships about the biggest decisions. Let's say you and your partner are taking the next step and your partner wants the two of you to move in together, into their apartment in their neighborhood. And you're so excited that they want to live with you. You just don't actually want their apartment. You love your own place and your own neighborhood. Or maybe you'd rather the two of you find somewhere new together so that it belongs to both of you in a neighborhood that you both actually really want to live in.

But you don't say any of that because you don't want your partner to get spooked and change their mind. You don't want your partner to feel insulted or rejected that you don't want to live in their place. You don't want your partner to think that you won't compromise or that you're frivolous with money right at the moment when you're taking this big step together.

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You know your partner believes that being thrifty is how a responsible person makes decisions and their apartment is cheaper than your apartment or anything new you would find. And the last thing you want is for them to look at you and think you're being foolish. So you don't say anything. You don't float the idea of maybe moving into your apartment instead. You don't float the idea of finding somewhere new. You definitely don't bring up a solution where you'd have to pay movers twice, for goodness sake.

You pack your boxes, you move into their place. And it's nice to live together, but eventually the novelty of that wears off and you start to resent the neighborhood. It's such a far walk to the train. There isn't a good coffee shop. You don't like the produce at the grocery store. All the things you knew because you'd been spending time there before you moved in. And then you start to resent your partner for making you live there, except they never made you do anything. You didn't give them a chance to compromise because you never asked.

And your partner has no idea why the temperature has dropped. You said yes, you seemed fine, but now your resentment is compounding. And you've now taught yourself with hard evidence that you created that your preferences don't count. Because if you're not going to speak up about where you're going to live, which is a huge decision, you're certainly not going to speak up about the small stuff, how you decorate, how much you spend on a couch or a vacation, who comes over for dinner on Friday. With each thing that you don't ask for, each time you don't speak up, you reinforce the lesson for yourself that your wants and needs don't matter.

That's the same pattern playing out from the lunch table all the way into the biggest decisions of your life. After this quick break, I'm going to help you understand why you keep doing this, even when you're aware of the consequences, and the first small step you can take to help you stop.

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So why don't we speak up? You may not have thought through the implications of these scenarios that I described in quite this depth before, but it's probably not a surprise to you that not asking for what you want impacts your life and your outcomes. And you may have even vowed before to stop swallowing these asks and just say what you think. So why do you keep not doing that?

Because you've been socialized to believe that asking for what you want makes you trouble. It makes you a burden. It makes you an imposition, a problem. You've been taught to believe that your value comes from going with the flow, being flexible, helping other people get to do what they want to do. And asking for what you want will just get you rejection or punishment. That's what your brain believes.

Socialization teaches girls that wanting things is selfish, demanding, or unattractive, and that the good woman is the one who needs the least. So when you have a desire or a need, your brain now identifies that as a danger, flashing red sign. It's something to talk yourself out of or suppress and shove down. Asking requires knowing what you want, which requires checking in with yourself and that's a habit that gets systematically interrupted when you're trained to read and manage other people's needs first.

If you think having needs or desires imperils your safety, your connecting, your belonging, you're going to train yourself right out of even noticing what those needs or desires might be. And even if one does manage to bubble to the surface of your awareness, it's tagged as a threat. For the part of your brain that's always scanning for danger, it's always going to feel safer in a given moment to not ask for what you want because the danger feels very immediate, whereas the repercussions are at least a few hours or even a few years away.

And then the pattern reinforces itself because you don't ask for what you want, you usually don't get what you want. And then your brain learns this

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belief that you're not someone who gets what you want or that your wants don't matter.

So what do we do about this? You know that just telling yourself that you're entitled to ask for things does not work. You've probably tried that. That is never going to be a match for your brain flashing the danger sign when you think about asking for what you want. The first part of the reframe we need is recognizing that an ask is not a demand. Women are socialized to think it is. We think that asking someone for something basically requires them to do it as if they were a hostage.

And we think that because that's how we feel when someone asks us to do something. But that's not actually what asking is. When you tell somebody what you want, you are just handing them a piece of information. You asking for something does not obligate them to give it to you. Asking is saying, "I'm a human with my own desires and preferences. You're a human with your desires and preferences. If we both share them, we can work through them both and see if we can find something that works for both of us."

And even if one of us in the end goes along with what the other one wants because they can't be combined or compromised, at least we've had an honest conversation and we've met each other with sincerity and authenticity. You may not get what you want every single time, but you won't have shoved down your desires and be simmering in resentment for the next decade either.

The second step is accepting that even though I just explained that logically, you're still going to feel like shit when you do it, okay? It's going to suck the first few times, most likely, or the first few dozen times. The problem is that when it feels bad to ask for something, your brain assumes that means it is bad to ask. But no, those things are correlated, but they don't have a causal relationship. You feel bad because of your

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socialization, your current thinking, not because asking is actually bad or dangerous.

There's no way to fix all your thoughts before you ever ask for something. So you have to reset your expectations and be willing to feel bad while asking. You have to decide ahead of time that you're willing to feel a little uncomfortable now in exchange for something much better later. It's just like working out when you don't want to or feeling uncomfortable when you get sweaty.

The good news on that front is you already know how to do this. There is some corner of your life, even if it's not exercise, where you tolerate short-term discomfort for a longer-term win all the time. Maybe it is working out, maybe it's brushing your teeth, maybe it's a hard conversation with your kid. Whatever it is, there's some place in your life already that you have this skill. So I want you to look for that, own it that you do have that skill, and borrow it in this arena.

That's what I want you to try this week. The next time you feel that quick little urge to delete your preference before anyone hears it, stop and notice what's happening. And be honest with yourself. Say to yourself plainly, "I'm about to not ask for something I want." Remind yourself that asking for what you want is not a demand, it's not an imposition, it's not a hostage situation. The other person has said what they want, now you say what you want. Then you see what's possible.

Start with a small version of this, please, so that you can start to teach your brain it will survive. Be willing to experience that discomfort, but keep the stakes small in the beginning. Start with the sandwich, right? Pick something where there's not a ton on the line and practice right there. Every time you interrupt the pattern, even over lunch, you hand yourself a fresh piece of evidence, a small one. Maybe my wants do matter and can be met.

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Because the skill you build saying, "I'd really rather go to a different restaurant" is the very same skill that asks your parents to take their kids for the weekend, that asks your boss for that hire you need, and asks your partner to consider your point of view or perspective in the really big decisions of your life. Where you're going to live, if they're going to take that new job, whether you're actually having a third kid, whatever it is. You practice it small so you have that skill on autopilot when the big decisions come. Give it a try this week. Tell me how it goes.