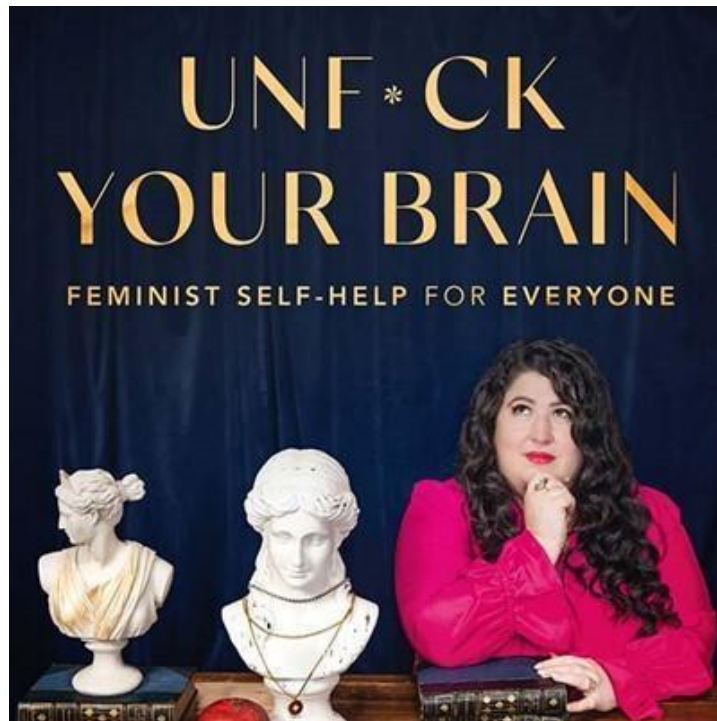


UFYB 508: “Fine”: Why Women Don’t Tell the Truth About How They Feel



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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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.

Hello, my friends. I want to start today with one word, and it's a word you've probably said five times already today, and I bet you didn't even notice you're saying it even once. The word is "fine." Someone asks how you're doing, and you say, "Fine," before they've even finished the question. Or maybe you say, "I'm good," but it really means the same thing. It's just automatic. Maybe you really are fine, or maybe you're furious or completely strung out or quietly heartbroken, but that word comes out anyway because "fine" is the word that keeps the conversation moving and keeps you from becoming somebody else's problem.

Most of us have said "fine" so many thousands of times that we genuinely don't even hear ourselves do it anymore. That's why today I want to talk about everything that's hiding inside that one small word, why women learn to say it so often, and what it costs you to keep saying it for 30 or 40 or 60 years instead of telling the truth.

Let's start with the fact that "fine" is almost never just one word doing one job. It's a misleadingly small tip of the iceberg that is hiding so much more underneath. There's the straight-up white lie. "No, really, it's fine," delivered in a fight with your partner when it's clear to anyone watching, including your partner, that you are not fine. There's the minimization, "I mean, it's fine. It's not a big deal," which you say about things that are, in fact, kind of a big deal to you. And there's the deflection when someone asks how you're doing, and you say, "Fine," quickly and jump right back into asking about them to avoid the vulnerability or awkwardness of talking about how you really feel right now.

UFYB 508: “Fine”: Why Women Don’t Tell the Truth About How They Feel

All of these are tools for the same job, which is to get through the moment without putting your actual emotional state on the table, where it might feel awkward or inconvenience someone.

There are actually two different layers to this, and one is deeper than the other. The deeper layer is that a lot of the time, you genuinely don't know how you feel. If someone stops you and asks, the most specific answer a lot of us can produce is tired, or stressed, or fine, just busy. Those have basically become your three settings for some of you, but tired is a status update. It's not really a feeling. You do still have feelings. They're down there, but you spent so long shoving them down that you've lost the radio signal. All you can pick up is the lowest-resolution version. It's like the emotional equivalent of one bar of cell service.

And then the second layer, right on top, is that even on occasions when you do know exactly how you feel, when it is crystal clear, you still don't say it. You feel the anger or the hurt quite clearly, but you look at it and you decide that saying it out loud would be more trouble than it's worth, so you say "fine" again anyway.

So we've got two problems stacked on each other. Often you can't read the signal, and even when you can read the signal, you still keep it to yourself. I'm going to give you three examples, and I just want you to notice if any of these sound familiar. A friend cancels on you for the third time in a row, and you feel sad and disappointed and hurt, but you text back, "Totally fine, no worries!" with that exclamation point doing some truly heroic lifting. Or someone says something in a meeting that you think is stupid, and you can see the problems coming, but when your boss asks for your opinion, you say, "No objections here," because you don't want to seem difficult. Or your partner asks what's wrong, and you say, "Nothing," because you've already calculated that explaining it would be more exhausting than just continuing to try to bury those feelings.

UFYB 508: “Fine”: Why Women Don’t Tell the Truth About How They Feel

If you've done any of these, then keep listening. So where does this come from? Because I promise you, you were not born saying "fine." Toddlers famously do not say "fine" when they don't feel fine. A two-year-old who's angry will let the entire grocery store know about it. Defaulting to "fine" is a learned behavior, and to understand it, we have to look at both our wiring and our training. So let's start with the wiring.

The human brain is already exquisitely tuned to detect social rejection because for a social species, being cast out of the group used to be a death sentence, right? There's research from a team led by Naomi Eisenberger showing that social rejection lights up some of the same brain regions as physical pain. And then socialization layers right on top of that wiring. For almost all of human history, a woman's physical safety depended on staying in good standing with the people around her, and especially with whoever held power in her world.

Being seen as difficult, demanding, or disruptive carried real material risk. We're talking about loss of protection, loss of resources, sometimes loss of your life. So given a few thousand years where the consequences of disapproval landed harder on women, you get people with nervous systems that treat "someone might not like how I feel" as a genuine alarm, not a minor social wrinkle.

And these days it's more subtle, but girls still get trained early to monitor the emotional temperature of a room and to keep it pleasant, to be accommodating, to be easy to be around. A girl's feelings get treated as something she's supposed to manage quietly so they don't trouble anybody else. The good girl isn't angry. She's not a downer. She doesn't make it weird or awkward by telling the truth. Anger gets the harshest treatment of the whole bunch.

There's a well-known study by Victoria Brescoll and Eric Uhlmann where people watched a man and a woman express the exact same anger in a

UFYB 508: “Fine”: Why Women Don’t Tell the Truth About How They Feel

workplace setting. The man who got angry was given higher status and seen as more competent. People assumed he was angry because the situation called for it. But the woman who expressed the identical anger was rated as less competent and offered lower status, and people explained her anger by deciding that she was just an angry person. Same behavior, two different interpretations, and the only thing that changed was who was doing the feeling. His anger is read as a reasonable response, and hers gets read as a flaw in character.

These are the kinds of interactions that we all absorb growing up. So we learn that the whole menu of consequences is different for women. We're going to be called dramatic or difficult or too sensitive or too much or hysterical or crazy. And so you learn very sensibly to round your anger down to mild disappointment and then to round your disappointment down to "it's fine," and then to round even "it's fine" down to laughing like nothing's wrong because every step down that ladder feels like it's making you safer and easier to be around. And if you do that for 20 or 30 or 50 years, it stops being a conscious choice. It becomes an unconscious behavior, and it feels like it's simply who you are, which is the surest sign that socialization has really done its job all the way because the most effective conditioning is the kind that you don't even see.

Now, let's talk about what this actually costs you because I want to be fair about the benefits. We say "fine" because it's doing some work for us, and that's why it's hard to give up. In the short term, it does a job beautifully, right? The conversation stays smooth. Nobody gets defensive. Dinner doesn't turn into a whole thing, and you get to be the easy one, the low-maintenance one, the one who doesn't need managing. Or at least you think you get to be that person. And that payoff is completely real. I'm not going to pretend it isn't. It makes things feel easier in the moment for you.

But the problem is the interest rate on that payment, because every single time you override a feeling before you're even aware of it, you're teaching

UFYB 508: “Fine”: Why Women Don’t Tell the Truth About How They Feel

your own system that your feelings don't count and aren't worth registering. And it turns out suppressing your emotions is expensive. There's research from James Gross and Robert Levenson showing that when people hide what they're feeling, the outward expression goes down, but the internal arousal on your nervous system doesn't. You still feel it just as much. It just costs you more to carry it while pretending you're not. So you're paying that interest. You're paying that extra every time to pretend to be fine.

And that's even assuming that your pretending is working. When it comes to our personal lives, especially, the people around us are also wired to be socially sensitive. They can usually tell we're faking it a lot of the time. So when you move through your life like this for long enough, you're not having authentic relationships, and the emotional signal itself starts to degrade. And that's how you end up in that kind of really disorienting place where someone asks what you want for dinner, whether you're happy in your job, or how you felt about the way somebody just spoke to you, and you stop and think about it and you honestly can't really find any reaction. That performance of "fine" that started out as protection has slowly turned you into a stranger to your own inner life. That's the deeper cost. You didn't just hide your feelings from other people; you hid them so well, you can't find them yourself now.

So let me show you how this plays out because it looks different depending on where you are in your life. Let's say at work, a colleague takes credit for your idea in a meeting, and you feel the heat go straight up your neck. You do know you're mad, but you say nothing. You tell yourself it's not worth the friction. Then you spend the rest of the afternoon replaying it, second-guessing yourself, thinking about what you should have said, and you spend the rest of the quarter kind of checking out because now you feel alienated from yourself at work. And you just call that being professional and not holding grudges, but now there's a flatness to your experience and you no longer like a job that you used to actually love.

UFYB 508: “Fine”: Why Women Don’t Tell the Truth About How They Feel

Or imagine you're in the early stages of dating. Something that your partner does bugs you in month three, but you decide it's too small, it's too soon, you're not going to bring it up. You tell yourself you're being chill and easygoing. But now by month 10, that small thing has happened dozens of more times, and now you're even more irritated, but now the reaction feels way out of proportion to the thing itself because you've been shoving it down for so long, so you keep shoving it down, and the gap between what you feel and what you say just keeps getting wider. And that pattern is going to play out over and over for however long the relationship lasts, possibly even until you get divorced because you've never truly built an intimacy that can last by being honest.

Or picture every holiday with your family where you slip right back into a role that you don't want to be in and don't enjoy, the one who handles everyone, who absorbs the tension, who never says when something stung or upset you. And you leave every single visit feeling drained and resentful, but you just tell everybody it was fine. It's fine. You know, it's family. It's fine.

This performance, by the way, is not just for other people. Sometimes we perform this for ourselves. You can be single and living alone with nobody in your apartment to perform being fine for, but you still do it to yourself. You won't even let yourself admit to yourself that you're lonely or restless or sad because you don't think you're allowed to be, or you don't want to have that emotion. That's how deep this goes. You'll lie about your feelings to yourself when you're the only one there. And the bill for all of it comes due in the same few ways: as burnout, as disassociation and alienation from yourself, as a low background hum of resentment towards people who genuinely may not know anything's wrong because you never told them, and as this slow loss of access to the part of you that can tell you who you actually are.

UFYB 508: “Fine”: Why Women Don’t Tell the Truth About How They Feel

So I know that sounds bleak, but after the break, I'm going to tell you where the truth-telling actually starts and how to do it. And I promise it is not just going to be, "Hey, just be honest about your feelings with other people." You're not necessarily going to have to confront anyone or have the big conversation or announce anything at the dinner table. The very first step happens inside your own mind, and it can create a bigger change than you would expect.

Okay, so here's the big shift I want you to try on. Your feelings are information. They're data. They are the smoke signal about what is going on in your brain. Your thinking creates your feelings. So when you feel something and you shove it down, you miss an opportunity to learn more about your preferences, desires, values, and beliefs. It doesn't mean every feeling is a guide to an eternal truth, but it is a guide to something that's happening inside you and in your brain that's worth trying to understand. And this is the foundation, but most people try to skip it.

When we talk about telling the truth about how you feel, we immediately picture some kind of interpersonal interactive experience, right? The hard conversation, the confrontation, texting your mother how you actually feel about her comments, telling your boss you're drowning, telling your partner you're angry. So if you're not ready for that, and let's be honest, you're obviously not ready for that or you wouldn't be swallowing your feelings, then the whole project feels completely impossible, and that's how we end up right back at just saying we're fine.

The process of learning to pay attention to our own internal landscape actually has to happen way before we are ready for things like having that hard conversation with your spouse or speaking up in a high-stakes business negotiation when someone makes a sexist joke. That's the advanced level. You are your first and most important audience well before it ever reaches anybody else. So before you decide whether you're going to

UFYB 508: “Fine”: Why Women Don’t Tell the Truth About How They Feel

say a single word out loud, there's a prior step where you tell yourself the truth about how you feel.

"I'm angry about that." "That hurt my feelings." "I'm lonely." "I don't want to go to this party." Whatever it is, you don't say it to anyone else. You just say it to yourself. And I know that sounds almost too small to bother with, but it's the opposite of small. When you tell yourself the truth, you reconnect the exact signal you've been training yourself to ignore, and that's what slowly restores your ability to live your own life authentically again.

You stop gaslighting yourself, and that low-grade fog of not knowing what you feel starts to lift, and you build a little baseline of self-trust because you become a person who will at least be honest with herself. Every future conversation you might eventually decide to have is built on top of that because you cannot possibly tell another human the truth about a feeling you won't even admit you're having. So telling yourself first is the foundation that makes speaking up possible later. It's not just a consolation prize.

And I promise you that even if you never tell the truth to anyone else, telling yourself the truth changes how you live your life. It means you can't operate in a fog, checked out from who you really are. Bit by bit, you start making choices that align with who you actually want to be just because you are finally being honest with yourself.

So here's your actual practice for this week, and I designed it so that nothing has to leave your own head. Nobody else is involved. This is just for you. Every time you catch yourself reaching for "fine" or any of its equivalents, the minimizing, the deflecting, the little laugh you don't mean, let that be your cue to do two quick things. First, drop into your body for a few seconds. Where is the feeling physically? Maybe it's a tight jaw or a hot face or a heaviness sitting in your chest or a knot in your stomach or a

UFYB 508: “Fine”: Why Women Don’t Tell the Truth About How They Feel

breath you're holding. You're not trying to fix it or even fully understand it yet. You're just noticing that there is a physical event happening because your body will usually register the feeling even if your mind is not willing to admit to it.

Second, you're just going to name it to yourself in one plain sentence. "I'm feeling anger." "I'm feeling hurt." "I feel that I'm disappointed." "I don't want to do this thing." Just tell yourself the truth. That's the entire practice. You don't have to act on it. You don't have to say it to anyone else. You don't honestly have to do a single thing about it. And if the most honest answer you can find is, "I don't know what I feel right now," that's normal, but don't give up. Keep trying to locate some physical sensation somewhere in your body that you can notice and describe. The neural pathways that interpret those physical signals may be out of practice and out of use. If you have been disconnecting from your own feelings for a long time, they may be weak or withered, but they will be rebuilt if you keep directing your brain to pay attention to them. You can learn to find those signals again.

The word "fine" kept you safe, and it kept you easy to be around, but it also turned down the volume on your own life until you can barely hear it. That doesn't mean the solution is to start shouting every feeling you have at everyone at every moment. It's enough to just start to tell yourself the truth one ordinary moment at a time. So that's what I want to invite you to do this week. Give it a try and come back next week.