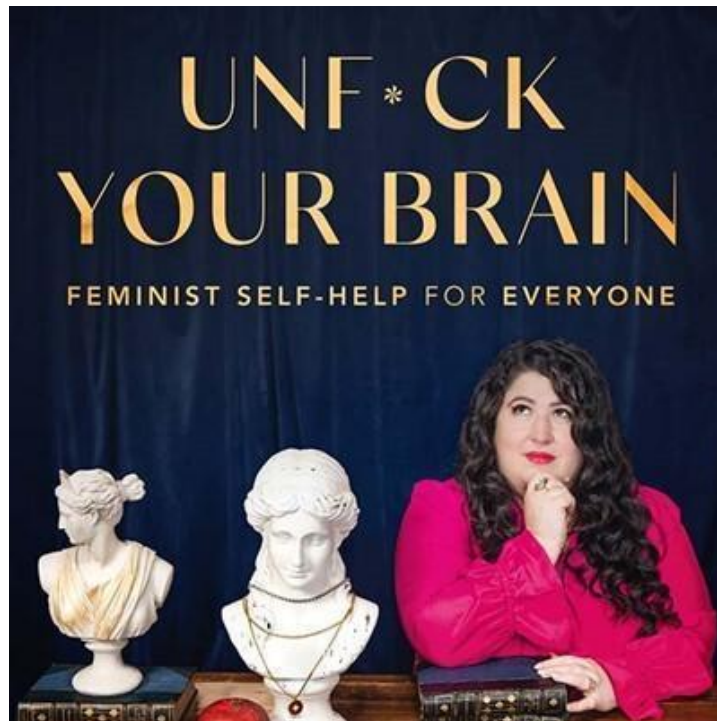


UFYB 510: How to Take Ownership of Your Happiness with Zerlina Maxwell



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.

All right, my friends. It is no secret to any of you who have ever spoken to me that if I did not have stepchildren in Brooklyn, I would have probably high-tailed it to the French Riviera by now or gone to my roots in Italy. I am always dreaming about what it will be like to live in Europe someday. And to be honest, I was doing that before the current administration, so it's not just a response to political anxiety. But I'm really excited to be here today with Zerlina Maxwell, who has made that transition and has a lot to offer, not just about what it's like to make that move, what it does and doesn't solve for you, but also about how it's changed her perspective on the kind of all-consuming feeling of the American political news cycle, which is something she is an expert in.

So, welcome to the show, Zerlina. Will you brag about yourself a little and tell people who you are?

Zerlina: Thank you so much for having me, Kara. I'm so happy to be here. To brag on myself a little bit, I am a national morning drivetime radio host for SiriusXM. I host a radio show every single morning at 7:00 Eastern time, 7 to 9 a.m. Eastern. I also have a newsletter on Substack, The Inner Work Dispatch, which I started at the beginning of 2025. It's inspired by my late mother. I have a law degree. I've worked two presidential campaigns, 2008 for Barack Obama, 2016 for Hillary Clinton, and I have a book that came out in the middle of the pandemic called *The End of White Politics*, where I feel like I predicted a lot of what's happening right now, even though it came out in 2021.

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Kara: Hey, that's Cassandra feeling. You're getting closer to ancient Greece and to the Oracle. We love a former recovered lawyer here. So you are now broadcasting both here and on your radio show from Sicily, which, first of all, that schedule must be much nicer than getting up at like 4:00 a.m. or whatever you used to have to do. You moved at the beginning of 2025. Can you just tell us about like, what led you to do that? Let's just start there.

Zerlina: Well, it started basically with, you know, I was on my calls every other week with my therapist. I was living in Washington, DC at the time. I'd gone through a prolonged period of my mom being very ill before she passed away through COVID. And I was living with my family for most of COVID in Virginia. I moved up to Washington, DC kind of to be close to them because I'm a longtime New Yorker, so that was like the in-between place. But I hated living in Washington, DC, like more than anything.

And I remember just being on a call every other week with my therapist, complaining about the same exact things. I just was so unhappy, and it was sort of like a loop. And she was like, you need to change something quite dramatically. You know, I think the question, when was the last time you were happy and what were you doing is a very profound one. Not enough of us ask ourselves. And for me, traveling and exploring and really, I have a wanderlust spirit, so just wandering is something that really restores me, walking around, moving throughout a new place is just really exciting for me and rewarding.

And that was really what I said to her when she asked me that. You know, when I was in Rome, that was great. She said, Zerlina, because I had been considering maybe moving to LA for a couple of months, just to change something about my environment because I was so unhappy in DC. She was like, you don't need to move to LA. You need to move to Rome and work from there.

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I mean, what's stopping you from moving to Rome and working from there? I mean, she's like, the schedule will be better. It's the afternoon. Like, you don't have to wake up at 5:00 a.m. every morning. And I was like, that is actually a really good idea. But can I do that? I mean, that was like my immediate response was, am I allowed? Is that okay? Can I do that? And she was like, Zerlina, you can do anything that you want. We understand that there are consequences or things that can happen as a result of the choices that you make, but you can do anything you want. And for me, it was scary to ask.

But then when I realized the reaction wasn't like, oh my god, you can't do that. I was like, oh, well, I maybe should ask for more things. So I stayed the allowable 90, probably like 80. I left early. Like, I think I left like day 84 just because I want to be able to come back always. And then I went home. I was in America through the ticket switch from Biden to Kamala Harris, and I was at the convention. And then literally after the convention ended, I left the next day and went back to Rome for three more months. And in that time is when I visited because I just kept meeting people in Rome from Palermo. I visited Palermo to visit my friends and to see Sicily, and I fell in love.

Kara: Something you just said as almost an aside of like, I should be asking for more, that was so easy. Like I feel like I've been experiencing that. It's been reminding me just how women are so conditioned to just ask for like the bare minimum. We're renovating a house, and every time I try to negotiate on something, the other person immediately is like, yeah, we could do it for that. And I'm like, oh, the speed with which everyone is saying yes to the like small discount I ask for, it's almost like I don't even know how to calibrate because I'm so used to just being like, can I ask a tiny favor for a little bit? Right? Like I don't even, right, it doesn't even occur to me that I could be like, I want 40% off or whatever it is.

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So I'm curious how, like, I think especially those of us who live in like high-paced places like New York or are in kind of in the game, I totally feel you on DC. I feel like there's an asterisk to my circumstances don't cause your feelings, which is like, except for DC. DC might cause people's feelings. DC is the worst. But I feel like there's these competing thoughts of like, oh my god, I'm overwhelmed. I want to get away. I want to change something. But then the minute you do, there's like, am I being lazy? Am I giving up? Am I quitting or failing? Like, what do people think? So I'm curious if you had any of that brain drama and how you dealt with that.

Zerlina: I think for me, I felt a little defensive when other people said that. Right? So when other people would say, oh, you can't leave. It's the middle of an election year. What are you doing? You work in politics. You do a show about American politics. It's literally a presidential election year. Who do you think you are to move yourself to a place where you're happy, right? That was sort of like the subtext of everybody's comment. And then also some people now that Trump is back in the White House, they're like, oh, you ran away. You should stay and fight.

And I hear that a very specific way as a Black woman because my mom, my grandma, my ancestors literally all they did was fight. And my mom sacrificed. My grandmother sacrificed. My grandfather sacrificed. And my grandfather actually marched in Selma along with my aunt. So I have skin in the game. And they did not sacrifice all the things that they did so that I can stay in a place and be miserable just so that I can fight. I can fight from wherever.

There is a legacy of this, right? There are so many throughout the course of history, Black thinkers and writers that took time to go to Europe and actually what so many Black expats say is get rid of the haze that is really over our heads at all times. White supremacy and oppression, obviously, intersects with misogyny and misogynoir. So for me it was like, no, I actually, you can judge and you can say, you need to do these things, but I

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think the privilege of being able to do it and also the legacy my mom left behind, I watched my mom die up close.

My mom had two massive strokes. And there is something very profound and hard when you watch somebody who was larger than life, cease the ability to be able to move or speak for many years leading up to her death. And knowing that she had the hypertension, she had the high blood pressure, she had all of the physical manifestations of the systems that are oppressing Black women. And I was like, I'm not going out like that. I'm not going out like that. There's no job, there's no amount of money, there is no status in society that is worth all the criticism and feedback from people.

I kind of tune that out now because a lot of it is coming from jealousy. You know, like a lot of people are like, oh, I wish I could do that. I mean, you probably can. You just need to come up with your own plan. But anyways, I'm going to be over here trying to cultivate a life that I actually like living.

Kara: I think that's so, first of all, it seems so both race-coded and gender-coded, right? That's sort of like, well, no, how dare you or like, you should be suffering for the cause. Like I feel like if a white male radio host decided to go live in Sicily for a year, like nobody would bat an eye, right? And probably there would be like glowing features about how, and then he would write a book about like my year in Sicily and what it taught me about American politics or whatever.

For everybody listening, I think what is relevant even if you are not, for instance, a nationally known political commenter, is that like the way in which women get guilted into continuing to exhaust themselves and like burn out because of the suggestion, you know, it's sort of there's almost a how dare you for like, how dare you want to live a life that you want or like do something that would make you happy or make a different choice. There's just automatically a kind of like, no, no, your allegiance needs to be

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to all these other things first. And so looking at like how that, that shows up in everybody's life even in different circumstances.

Zerlina: Well, I think for Black women, it takes audacity to want to be happy because there's every reason to not be, if you live in the world and you know what's going on, you know history. But I also think that our ancestors, there were plenty of moments where they were feeling joy and happiness. And I think that their sacrifice allowed for the next generation to cultivate more happiness while also fighting for the same rights and protections that they fought for. It just means that I have the privilege to be able to do it in a set of conditions that they didn't, perhaps. And some of them did, actually. Right?

Like I mean, I think for people confused about what I'm doing in this moment, they probably have never heard of James Baldwin. I mean, right? James Baldwin lived in Paris, Turkey, Josephine Baker, there's so many others, Eldridge Cleaver, like there's a long list of Black thinkers and writers that have taken time to move outside of the United States because there is a psychological difference between living in the United States and dealing with racism and microaggressions every day in the form that they come in the United States. And then also, I always respond to people who say that. I'm like, so you as an American are telling me that you don't want to go to Italy because Italy is racist. Just sit with that for one second. America is also racist. We're living through the manifestations of that in every way at the moment.

Kara: So, I you know, you're living there, but you're still hosting your job. So you're still mentally, you got to be keeping up and very immersed with American politics. So I'd love to talk a little bit about that because I know this is something we talked about when I came on your show also is like the constant work of being a politically engaged but not mentally deranged person.

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Zerlina: That's a perfect way to describe it.

Kara: Not letting it derange you, the like constant, you know, and I've been really thinking about this a week because it's insane that we have gotten to a point where there's like a shooting at the White House and we're all kind of like, even educated liberal people being like, well, I don't know, is it even really news? Was it a setup? It's like we're all down the rabbit hole. So I think a lot of my listeners are politically engaged women who feel like they can't look away, right? And like that checking out at all means you don't care. I'm like, anytime I see somebody with like who has New York Times breaking alerts still set up on their phone, I'm like, what are you doing?

Zerlina: No. And I feel like that, we don't talk enough about burnout in media, in journalism, and in the Trump era. There's this weird sport that happens in media and journalism where people actually pride themselves on burning themselves out. They pride themselves out on just how much they're sacrificing for the job. And if you don't sacrifice everything, including your health for the important job of the fourth estate, which is important and essential, but also not worth, you know, making yourself physically sick or impacting your mental health. And I think that for me, it was prioritizing how I feel, both physically, spiritually, and mentally, and intentionally consuming the news when I have to do it.

That's what I'm choosing to do every day is to host the show. That's how I'm giving back. That's how I'm engaged. I don't need to be engaged 24 hours a day. I am engaged because my employment is to inform all of the people who tune in every day on Channel 127 at 7 a.m. so that they know what's going on, but they also aren't losing their minds. So we do a lot on the show that doesn't have anything to do with politics. Like I interview mental health people every Monday. You were on for our Feminist Friday segment. We have a well segment, tech segment, we have entertainers, actors, actresses, singers, like I don't want people to be harmed by the content I'm putting out, the way that so many of us are harmed by the

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content that we're consuming, and we're not being intentional about when and how we're doing that. We're just like opening up Instagram and hoping there's no bad news at the top of the feed.

And the algorithm literally functions to always put that at the top. And so I think for me, it's like I am doing what I can to, you know, inform the folks who listen and do the best job I can in a moment that's very difficult for journalists in this Trump 2.0 era. And I think that it's important for everyone living through this era to be intentional just like I am because otherwise you're going to burn out real quick, and you're also going to lose your mind.

I mean, I don't think that the reaction to what happened at the White House Correspondents' Dinner is a reflection of people becoming more callous or less compassionate, particularly for the journalists who were in the room and did experience real trauma. But I do think that there's so much gaslighting and lying in this moment of history that if you are lied to enough, you are a lot less likely to believe the next thing that whatever that person, whoever it is, it could be Trump, it could be your partner, whatever, you're less likely to believe them the next time if they're always lying.

And so I think that's actually something that we should really unpack. It's not shaming people for being skeptical. It's questioning why they defaulted to that because we're living in a time with so much gaslighting that it's mentally really draining for people to lie, and you know they're lying, and they know they're lying, and everybody knows, and we're just like supposed to pretend that it's the truth. And that really has some mental health impacts. So for me, it's intentional consumption. I am not scrolling and scrolling and scrolling. When I'm not working, I'm not working. And that works for me because I live in the future.

Kara: Well, I think that's actually, I love the idea of thinking about it. So for you, you're like, well, this is my job. So I have to cap it because and I do it when I'm at work. But I think we can all do that. Like if you think about, if

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you want to think about one of my jobs is being an informed citizen, okay, we'll pick a time that you do that job of being an informed citizen. Like I am a part-time role informed citizen, and I do that job one hour a day or whatever it is. Like thinking about it as if you had a job, you wouldn't do it constantly. You don't want to work constantly, and the same is true here.

So I actually really like that as a mental kind of hack or trick for helping people who are listening think like, okay, yes, I can make space for this in my life, but how can I do it intentionally? Right? It feels like the through line in your stories today is like taking that ownership of your own life. Like if I want to make a change, I'm going to make the change. I'm going to do something even if everybody else isn't. Even if everyone around me is like, oh, I'm glued to my phone. I just can't stop looking at it. I'm going to have all the alerts set up to show how much I care. You're allowed to define that differently for yourself.

Zerlina: Absolutely. And everybody is different. I think that some people, they doomscroll and then they're like, okay, I'm fed up. I'm going to sign up to do something. And then some people just doomscroll. And then they think that because they're consuming, like consumption and action are not the same thing.

Kara: But our brains think they are. So it's really important for everyone to understand. Like no, I know, of course, you know, but just for our listeners, like your brain actually can't tell the difference. That's why like you watch someone else's workout video and your brain is like, great, we worked out. But like you didn't, you didn't get any of the benefits in your body from that workout. So you watch all this political content, you feel like you're doing something, but you're actually just sitting in your house.

And if you put your phone away and went and did set up a free food pantry on your block, like a little free food library or went to a soup kitchen or made four calls to fundraise, whatever, you'd be doing way more in the

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world than 12 hours of, I almost feel like some people think they're not doomscrolling because they don't feel terrible, but you almost have to watch out for like, I don't know what to call it, like fantasy participation. Like your brain thinks what you're watching happens to you. And that's why you can get online and then lose three hours. And like you've burnt out your synapses and your brain now is like, you've used brain activity. And so your brain is like, great, I did some things. I'm done now. And it's like, oh, no, I actually didn't do anything.

Zerlina: You're not supposed to have this much bad news in the palm of your hand at all times. I mean, I think if there are people that need to reach you, put them in your favorites, have the special ringtone. But try to use it less, and then use it when you've scheduled the time to engage, and then limit that time because you're not just endlessly doing the scrolling. You want to do it like, okay, 10-minute news check-in.

But do not check it the first thing in the morning. That's what every single mental health expert says. Every mental health expert that I've had on my show has said the same thing.

Kara: You'll never find anybody who's like, go ahead and do it, no problem.

Zerlina: Yeah, no, absolutely not. And then that is part of why, you know, for me having a different schedule because I live in Europe, it really allowed me to create a morning routine where my nervous system is basically regulated when I'm starting the show because I have so much time to be really methodical and intentional about each part of the morning routine and also not checking it until a certain time when it's time to start working.

Kara: And those of you who don't live in Europe, she had to check early when she lived in the US because that's her job. You don't need to be checking the news. We're not, unless you are hosting a political show at 7 a.m. on the radio, you don't need to check it first thing in the morning. I

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have my phone bricked till 8 a.m. so that I have at least an hour, hour and a half when I get up without it. And I will say, I've played around with different things, like turning my phone totally off wasn't great because now my stepdaughter can like take the subway by herself. And like yesterday, she got the subway stopped and she had to like climb out, and then we had to go get her. So it's like we I have to be available. But just bricking the social media makes a huge difference. The truth is you're just not going to scroll your own email that much. Those are the things on your phone that really get to you. It's just not that fun.

Yeah. So good. So where can people find you? I know they can find your, tell us your radio show, your Substack. Where can people find more?

Zerlina: So every single morning, I host Mornings with Zerlina on SiriusXM Channel 127. We are live weekdays, 7 to 9 a.m. Eastern time. You can also listen anytime on demand if you're a subscriber to SiriusXM because we have an app. So you can listen anytime, even if it's not 7:00 in the morning. But I am a part of a lot of people's morning routines, at least that's what they tell me, which I like. I also write weekly on Substack, The Inner Work Dispatch is my newsletter. And it was inspired by my mom. I'm going to be perfectly honest. I think this journey was inspired by her in a lot of different ways, and I'm writing about that in real time.

It's basically like part live journal, part guide for people because I've been on a journey. I've been in coaching for about two years now, learning so many things about how to change my inner dialogue, actually dream. I feel like when I was asked in my first session, like, what's your dream? I was like, huh? Like I don't understand what you mean. Like I've never actually thought about that before. What is my dream? What does it actually look like? What are the details? So for me, I think the Inner Work Dispatch, my newsletter is a place where I'm teaching some of the things that I've learned through my coaching because I'm training up to be able to teach all of the Handel Method and also it's a live journal. It's about me.

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The only thing I don't talk about yet is dating, but that might be one of the new things that comes down the road. But I think it's a community that I'm building for people that want the courage to change something when they're unhappy internally, even if everything looks great on the outside. Even if they have all of the like accolades and achievements and the degrees and the certifications and the corporate job and they're like, something's still missing. I'm not happy. I've been through that and I'm taking people along on my journey recovering from burnout.

Kara: Love it. All right, thank you so much for coming on and sharing your story.

Zerlina: Thank you.