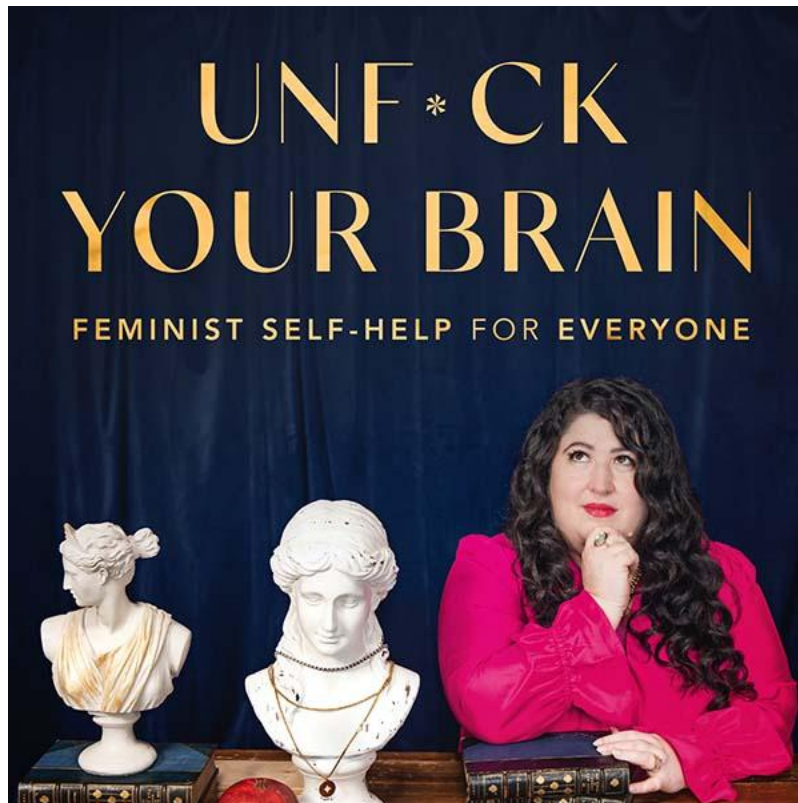


UFYB 512: Most Habit Change Advice is Wrong - Inconsistency Is the Key to Success (Greatest Hits)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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We've all heard that you can't hope to accomplish something unless you show up consistently. Hell, I've told you that myself. And it's true that you can't take action once and then be mad about the results you didn't get. But when it comes to habit change in particular, I think that inconsistency is actually the key to success. Sounds like a paradox, but thinking about it this way will make habit change so much more doable and so much easier for you. So that's what I'm gonna unlock in this episode. Let's get into it.

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 we've all heard those rules about how long you have to do new habits for before they become effortless, right? 30 days, 60 days, 12 days, 90 days, exactly 27.3 days and not a moment before. A generation of people who are into self-development and brain hacking I think have been kind of brainwashed into thinking that in order to change a habit, you have to do it perfectly for some initial stretch of time, even though we're constantly being told different amounts of time.

But what we all assume, regardless of the amount of time, is that the most important time period for habit change is the very beginning. We think that we need to establish good habits up front, and then eventually, once it's more ingrained, that's when we can afford to be a little flexible and miss a day here and there, and that won't be a big deal.

So if we're trying to take more walks, we need to take a certain number of walks a week or a walk every day, and it has to be the exact amount of time we decided. And if we don't live up to that, then we failed. Or if we're

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trying to stop snapping at our spouse, we think that if we do snap, then our count starts back at zero and it's not working.

It's like an airplane at takeoff. We think we need the most power at the beginning to get us off the ground, and then later maybe we can afford to coast a little. If we take our walks perfectly for a year, then we can afford to be flexible and skip one. If we manage not to snap at our partners for a whole month, then if we slip up, we can get back on track. But here's the problem.

This is a very black and white and perfectionistic way of thinking about habits. It seems to acknowledge that imperfection is okay, but that imperfection can't happen anytime soon. And I think it leads to us abandoning a lot of habit change work that could have succeeded if we had a more flexible approach.

Because what happens when we're in this mindset is that if we skip a day or we lose momentum, we abandon the habit. So because we're in this mindset of like, I'm gonna start over on Monday, I'll start again on February 1st, I'm gonna start over next new year, right? We're in this mindset where the habit only counts if we do it consistently and in a row.

So if we don't go to the gym or we skip a day of writing or we skip a week of writing or we use our phone too much a couple of days in a row, then we feel like it's all ruined. And we vow to start over and maybe we do a few times, but eventually we give up. And our story about the habit and ourselves continues to focus on what we did not do or were unable to do.

So sometimes we have a story about the habit itself. It's too hard. It's unrealistic. It takes too much time. I'm too busy to be able to do it. Or we have a story about ourselves. I don't have enough willpower. I don't have

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enough discipline. I have bad time management. I have a bad memory, etc. And that story of course makes it even more difficult to build the habit.

So some of us have habits we've been resolving to implement or change every new year for decades, literally. But because we can't do it perfectly right out of the gate, we don't stick with it. And we don't shift our story about ourselves in a way that supports success.

So maybe your story is that you've tried to quit smoking so many times, but you just can't. Or you've tried to exercise regularly for so many years, but you always fall off the wagon. We identify with the failure to do it perfectly, and we ignore any of the progress we ever made towards changing the behavior, because we're just focused on any times we didn't do it.

In our greatest hits episode last week, we talked about making sure that the why behind your resolution is about the actual thing, not about proving your worth or value to yourself. Let's say your resolution is you wanna go to dance class every week. If the goal of that is to prove that you're a good disciplined person, then yeah, if you don't go every week, the resolution isn't worth doing because the whole purpose of the resolution is simply the symbolic value of the consistency.

But if you want to go to dance class because it feels good and you enjoy it, it actually doesn't matter if you truly go every single week. But the problem is you've been taught that adherence to a new habit or routine is inherently moral in and of itself and that leads to this fetishization of consistency. And that ruins a lot of changes that would be good for you that you just aren't going to always be able to do consistently, but that would still do you lots of good if you just did them inconsistently.

So there's a better way to think about habit change and all it requires is completely flipping this paradigm on its head. Instead of going for

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consistency, we are gonna go for inconsistency. And I'm gonna teach you how to do this and why it works right after this break.

Okay, so we've established the problem with fetishizing consistency and making it the key to habit change. If that works for you, then great, but I truly believe so many people are missing out on improving their lives because they've been told that if they can't do it consistently at first for some pure, perfect first stretch amount of time, then the habit won't stick. And that leads to them abandoning so many efforts that would still improve their lives over time and would eventually build into consistent habits.

So what is the alternative? The alternative is to embrace inconsistency. An inconsistent habit done over a long period of time will still bring you big benefits and can still become habitual. If you go to dance class once a week for a month and then you fall off the wagon, you went to dance class four times and then you don't go anymore.

If you fail to go three quarters of the time, right, the vast majority, if you are only doing the habit 25% of the time, but you are okay with that and you keep doing it for 12 months, now you went to dance class 12 times, now it is habitual to go to dance class once a month when you started the year it wasn't habitual to go at all. You had a dozen experiences of moving your body, experiencing joy, doing an activity that is scientifically proven to help with mood and even depression, and you made each month a bit better for yourself. And now once a month is your default floor. So if you want to increase the habit even more, now you're starting from having a habit of going once a month instead of zero.

When you embrace inconsistency, you don't have all this pressure to do it perfectly right up front. And that makes the stakes so much lower and so much more realistic. It also has the advantage of aligning with how humans actually learn to form habits.

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Let's think about this. When do we learn most of our habits? As children. How do children learn things? Do we explain it to them and then they do it perfectly for six months and then loosen up? Do children learning new habits have 100% adherence immediately and then get more flexible as time goes on? These are leading questions because obviously No, it's the opposite.

A child learning to walk or tie their shoes or brush their teeth or eat with utensils or clear their plate or say please and thank you or wash their hands after they pee every time or literally anything you ever learned to do habitually as a child, you built from inconsistency to consistency. Children do not do the thing when they are learning it consistently all the time. And their parents don't enforce the thing consistently all the time either. No parent can consistently enforce something all the time.

Neither of those things is required for the child to eventually learn the habit. Because a child is allowed to move from inconsistency to and towards consistency. And good parenting, effective parenting, rewards any action toward that goal with positive feedback. But then we take the opposite approach with ourselves, demanding perfect consistency immediately and not even giving ourselves positive feedback when we do it, but yelling at ourselves when we don't.

What I'm describing, getting to consistency by being tolerant of inconsistency at first is actually how your brain works. When you're trying to make a habit habitual, you're trying to move it from the part of your brain where you have to consciously talk yourself through doing it and use a lot of mental energy and be really present to do it, to the part of your brain where you can do it unconsciously, right?

I've used driving as an example of this before. When you first learn to drive, you really have to focus on it all the time. As you get better and better at it,

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it becomes a kind of skill or a practice that you can do unconsciously. That's why you can have a conversation, listen to a podcast, whatever, and still get where you're going safely.

When you are making a habit unconsciously habitual in this way, your brain is learning to make that thing, that sequence of actions, energy efficient by doing it enough times that it can become an automatic process that your unconscious brain can take over. So that is a learning process that will inherently move from inconsistent compliance, repetition, performance with errors, with flaws, with missing some, with skipping to more consistent as time goes on because each time it becomes less novel, more efficient and more able to be formed unconsciously.

Okay, so now I can imagine all your type a brains who I love, I have a type a brain to raising your hand to say, "Okay, but like how consistent can I be? Is it okay to skip once a month, once a week, once a year?" I want to tell you that I don't think that's a useful question to ask. I wanna challenge you to decide that any amount of inconsistency is okay. Any amount, any amount of minimal effort counts and any amount of inconsistency is okay.

And I know that your brain says that means that you just won't do it at all. But we're talking about habits that you won't do at all anyway if you don't try this approach, right? Your brain wants to think that one of the options is to just do it perfectly like you should in your brain. That's an illusion. That's not really one of the options. If you are having success with perfect consistency when you set a goal or start a habit, you don't need to be listening to this podcast.

If you're listening, it's because you have not been able to carry out resolutions or habits or goals perfectly. Instead, you have done it some and then given up. So I want to suggest you adopt the belief that when you are

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changing a habit or trying to create a new one, any amount of inconsistency is okay because you will always come back to it.

That's where this identity shift comes in. Remember when I talked about how if we have the identity of I can never stick to it, then that's what we make come true. When we build an identity of I do it inconsistently, but I always come back, that's what will happen.

I don't even like the phrase start again because that kind of implies like a new start where now we are gonna do it perfectly and go on that way. It's not stop and start. It's not fail and then start again and now do it perfectly. I'm talking about making the goal being to take this new action inconsistently.

Rather than tell yourself I need to do this perfectly, your thought is I'm going to do this until either I hit the goal, if it's a specific goal target, or forever, if it's a habit you want to adopt for the rest of your life. I'm going to make an offer on social media inconsistently until I hit my revenue goal. Or I'm going to be taking walks inconsistently for the rest of my life.

When you embrace inconsistency, there is no pressure. There's no way to fail as long as you don't decide to abandon it forever. So this is a subtle kind of mindset element, but we know here mindset makes all the difference.

When we're fetishizing consistency, we're wanting our actions to give us permission to think a certain thought. If I go to dance class every week, then I can think of myself as someone who dances regularly. But it's a vicious cycle where we keep the thought that we're not consistent at it, and that makes us show up inconsistently, and then we give up.

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If you change your thought to, I'm someone who goes to dance class, going inconsistency, going inconsistently is not a conflict with that thought. It's true. Even if you go inconsistently, you are someone who goes to dance class. You have a thought that supports you going without requiring you to do it perfectly.

And that gives you flexibility to come back to it whenever you've stopped or dropped off or missed some. You can also try a latter thought like, I'm becoming someone who goes to dance class, I'm practicing being someone who goes to dance class. Those thoughts also make room for inconsistency and don't demand perfection.

The big mindset shift here is that you are focusing on being someone who does a thing, either until the goal is achieved or in a non-time-limited way for a habit. It's not about doing it consistently, doing it a certain amount, doing it a certain amount of time. Traditional habit change approaches associate the value with the consistency. But this approach is about the journey and the actual value the activity adds to your life.

So when you stop or fall off and you notice that, you just say to yourself, that's okay, I'm gonna do it again. That's it. Not I'm gonna get it right this time, I'm gonna do it perfectly this time, I'm starting over. None of that, I'm just gonna do it again.

I've made some habit changes for health reasons over the past few months using this approach and it has been a game changer. So for instance, because I'm 43 and life is exciting at this age, I've been trying to eat more fiber. And it was easy to make the perfect plans to do this, right, I could plan out what a perfect fiberful day would look like, but in reality, it took trial and error.

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I had to figure out which foods with fiber I actually liked and could find and would prepare. I had to figure out when in the day it was easiest for me to eat it and how I felt when I distributed it in different ways across the day. I had to do it all enough times so that it became more automatic when I'm thinking about what to eat.

And maybe some people would have used like a spreadsheet and data collection and analysis for this, but that's just not how I roll. I just kept making an effort. And often at the beginning I didn't hit my goal. And in the beginning I also forgot to even think about it for days on end several times. But when I remembered or when the busy weekend was over, at the next meal, the next day, the next week, whatever, I just did it again. I didn't make a big deal out of it.

I didn't vow to do better, right? I didn't tell myself I'd screwed up. I didn't make a new perfect plan. I just was like, Oh, whoops, I forgot to think about this for six days. Gonna think about it tomorrow though. What can I do tomorrow?

I did not start out strong and then loosen up. I started out extremely inconsistently. And now several months later, it's pretty automatic. But I started out uber flexible. I started out not doing it way more often than I did it. And now it's become natural to do it almost all the time.

I want you to achieve your goals and impress yourself with who you can become in 2025. But I want you to do it not by pretending that suddenly January 1st you will have the skills and discipline to do a new thing perfectly, which really makes no sense when you think about it. I want you to do it by embracing inconsistency. Be willing to build up to consistency rather than pretending it's reasonable to expect it of yourself right off the bat.

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This is hard because of all the programming we've gotten about what is wrong with us if we can't do things perfectly right away, which infects the way we think about goals and resolutions. The perfectionism twists this process into something to use to prove our worth or beat ourselves up.

So it's absolutely imperative that when you adopt this inconsistent approach, you are also doing that thought work to change your thinking. So you can make those two crucial mental shifts.

Number 1, knowing why you're making a resolution or a goal, checking that the purpose of it aligns with your values like we talked about last week, and 2, getting comfortable with imperfection and inconsistency so you can actually build a sustainable habit that lasts.