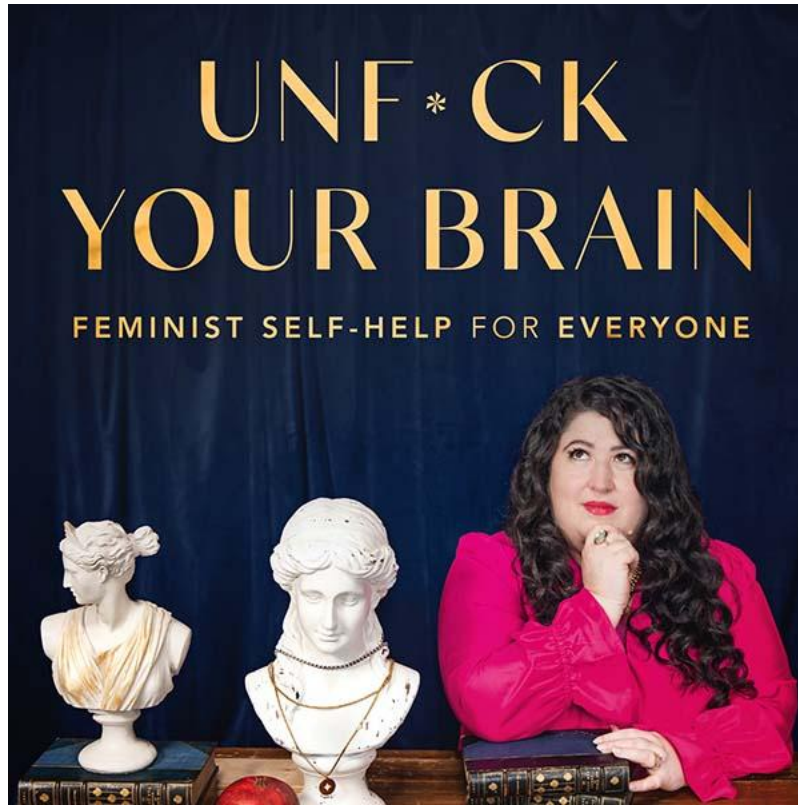


UFYB 532: Anti-Aging Is Not a Thing



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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UFYB 532: Anti-Aging Is Not a Thing

My friends, today is one of those episodes that happen when I just can't suppress my need to yell about something any longer. We've been talking a lot on the podcast about speaking up, asking for what you want, telling the truth about how you feel. And while the topic of aging may not seem related, I think it is. Because fighting the inevitable march of time is one of the ways that society keeps women focused on self-policing, self-maintaining, and self-objectifying, which means we aren't focused on things like asking for a raise, asking for more equal household labor, or asking for our feelings and desires to be considered in relationships.

So today I want to talk about the entire idea of anything being anti-aging and why being anti-aging is anti-feminist and really anti-life. That's not to shame anyone who has anti-aging products in her medicine cabinet. I have a skincare routine, albeit one that every influencer on Instagram would tell me is insufficient, I'm sure, but I think we need to talk honestly about what focusing on anti-aging endeavors means and what it's costing us.

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.

I want you to indulge me in a mind experiment. I was reading a New Yorker article the other day and it talked about a kid living in a remote part of Africa who had never seen what they looked like because their village had no glass or reflective metals. So I want you to really stop and think about what your life would be like if you never saw your reflection. If you did not know what you looked like and you could not spend all of your time trying to improve what you saw. It would be an entirely different existence.

A couple of months ago, I took all social media off my phone, which means I now very rarely use it because the anesthetizing feed just isn't the same

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

UFYB 532: Anti-Aging Is Not a Thing

on a laptop. And when I'm on my laptop, I'm usually trying to get stuff done so I can get off my laptop. So I think I've gotten a little more comfortable just being a human and not constantly comparing myself to everyone in the world, heaven forfend. Not as comfortable as I might be if I'd never seen my reflection, but better than I felt when I spent an hour a day on social media.

But the other day, the designer we're working with on renovating our ramshackle farmhouse upstate sent me a link to something on Instagram. So I got on my laptop to look at it. And I swear to God, within three minutes, I had been served probably five ads for anti-aging products, facial massage, courses, even plastic surgeries. Here's the thing, y'all, there's no such thing as anti-aging. You cannot not age. It's not an option if you want to stay alive. No technology will stop you aging or turn back the process of aging.

I know it may sound like I'm being semantic or pedantic or picky, but I think it's actually important to slow down and think about what we're saying when we use this term so commonly and we all accept it as a legitimate and worthy goal. We're literally telling women, especially, to focus on an impossible goal that they can never reach. Because if you are trying to not age and to look younger than you are, there's no natural stopping point. There's no moment at which you know you're done. Even a goal weight, as problematic as that is, has a stopping point if you reach it.

But anti-aging is an infinite loop. You could always try to look younger. So it's the perfect thing to occupy women. Since women are socialized that their value comes from beauty and that beauty requires looking youthful, it's a pain point that women will spare no expense or effort to address, and it can be addressed infinitely, forever with no end. We're indoctrinated into this worldview so steadily from a young age that we don't even question it. And with the relentless march of capitalism and the need to find new audiences to constantly sell more and more, younger and younger women

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

UFYB 532: Anti-Aging Is Not a Thing

are participating in anti-aging procedures, like women in their 20s getting Botox preventatively. Because it's of the utmost importance to prevent wrinkles, obviously, because wrinkles mean you're old and no one wants to be old.

But listen to me, you're going to get old. If you are lucky, you will get old. And there is actually nothing wrong with looking the age you are. For most of human history, the idea of a person who didn't age was actually a sign of something sinister and evil. Vampires didn't age, witches didn't age, because not aging, not changing with the natural cycles of life was a sign of something supernatural and usually evil. What's really insidious is that society convinces us that we're doing this for ourselves.

So as long as our thought isn't, I'm going to get Botox so men think I'm hot, we believe or we pretend we believe that our choices to try to prevent any signs of the normal process of aging are actually self-care or empowerment. But we have to look at where the impulse to do these things comes from. Why does conforming to societal conditioning feel like self-care? First because we're literally just programmed to believe it is. Women are taught to invest an enormous amount of time and money in their physical and aesthetic modification and we're literally told that it's self-care. Manicures, pedicures, hairstyling, facials, skin care, body care, body treatments, injectables, plastic surgery, all of these things are categorized as self-care when really they're the opposite. They're patriarchy care, their self-rejection.

I think we also feel like it's self-care because women are taught to be constantly monitoring ourselves and feeling guilty for any ways in which we are not complying with that conditioning and achieving those social ideals. And we base our self-esteem on how closely we can meet those ideals. So anytime we are doing something to try to better conform with them, we feel the relief of compliance. We're trying, we're doing what we're supposed to

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

UFYB 532: Anti-Aging Is Not a Thing

be doing, at least for a moment. And we have the fantasy that maybe this thing, whatever we've done, will do the trick.

Plus, given that women do a disproportionate share of housework and childcare, these kinds of appointments are things they can do away from their children and out of the house alone, and are putatively something that is for them. So it can seem like self-care if you've never experienced what actually caring for yourself in a way that it's not about improving yourself, feels like.

Okay, so I've said a lot of fighting words here. I know there are objections we need to deal with. For instance, the rest of the world thinks this way, so there are repercussions when you don't comply. Plus, if we're brushing our hair and using moisturizer, how is that really any different? I'm going to answer those questions, plus give you a new thought to practice after this quick break.

All right, so if participating in anti-aging culture is so damaging, what am I saying? Am I telling you that to be a good feminist, you need to completely opt out? What about dying your hair? What about washing your face? What about the fact that even though it's because of social programming, you do genuinely feel better right now when you look a certain way? And what about the consequences for women who opt out of these social norms? These are all good questions and I want to talk about all of them.

So first, let's address the slippery slope argument. It's absolutely true that there's no binary here. Everything we do to improve our appearance or conform with social standards is on a spectrum, and homo sapiens have a long history of body modification. Although I would argue in hunter-gatherer societies where it originated, it's more linked to social rituals and tribe cohesion. But I still think there are a few ways we can help make sense of where to put the guideposts, if we want to have them.

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

UFYB 532: Anti-Aging Is Not a Thing

I firmly believe none of us are pure, and purity is not the goal. We live in this society and we're programmed this way and we're never going to get back to a blank slate. But I think there's a big difference between telling yourself that burning your skin off with lasers is self-care that is just for you and understanding that your brain has been programmed to believe that and that you have the power to teach it to think differently.

Now this only matters if your values align with what I've been teaching about here. If you're listening to this podcast, they probably do, but I'm not making a claim to universal truth about what anyone else should do. But for me, it matters that the way I've been taught I should look is based on patriarchy and ageism and sexism and racism and fatphobia. It matters that I'm being socialized to willingly spend time and money and endure painful procedures in order to try to make myself more appealing to the male gaze and that I've been socialized to think that the male gaze is the only gaze there is.

That's not the way I want to go through life. I don't want to spend my life trying to look younger than I am and constantly failing and then letting that make me believe that I'm not attractive or not sexual or not worthy of being seen and heard. I don't want to spend thousands of dollars every year on anti-aging treatments while my male peers are investing that money in the stock market. So I do try to think through these distinctions rather than just believing that since we are all somewhat complicit with these norms, there's no point in making any effort to distinguish between them. I believe there are distinctions to be made. Because while it's all on a spectrum, it's also clearly the case that showering so you don't smell is not the same level of intervention as having your skin taken off your face and stapled higher on your skull to look younger.

One consideration for me is whether a norm is applied regardless of gender. So in our society, for instance, we have a norm around showering and body odor. And a person could absolutely argue that's not natural

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

UFYB 532: Anti-Aging Is Not a Thing

either and it's damaging our microbiome and they may be right. But at least it applies to everyone, not just one gender. It's not harming one gender for the pleasure of the other. Another is the level of risk, pain, suffering, time, or money involved. A third is when a norm is gendered or is only applied to a group with a different characteristic like body size or race, and it involves higher levels of those things.

So for instance, immobilizing your face with a neurotoxin that inhibits your ability to express your own micro-emotions and actually to understand other people's emotions because the brain circuits that read other people's emotions depend on mirroring that happens in your own facial muscles, is an expensive, painful, and time-consuming pursuit with both physical and emotional and relational risks, and it's disproportionately employed by one gender because the pressure on men around anti-aging is not nearly as intense, although it's getting more intense, which is a good example of the relentless logic of capitalism and sexism now that the market for women's anti-aging spending is so thoroughly exploited, men are being targeted as well.

So those are the kinds of considerations that I take into account. It's not an equation that I can tell you to use, but these are the things I think about when I decide if I'm willing to participate in a norm. The other big objection I hear is that since these are the social norms, there are consequences to not complying with them. Pretty privilege is real, in other words, and so it's a good investment, or at least a necessary one, to conform with these norms in order to get ahead, to get a partner, to get whatever it is society has told women they can only have if they look a certain way.

I'm not going to pretend that isn't true in some cases. It's possible, for instance, that if I was somehow able to, despite the vast majority of statistical evidence, lose and keep off a significant amount of weight, my career might improve because of the rampant fatphobia in the world. But it's also true that many women have told me that they came to work with

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

UFYB 532: Anti-Aging Is Not a Thing

me because I seem so confident in a non-normative body that it caught their interest.

There are institutions that are captured by patriarchy and ageism where there are repercussions for aging. But one of the ways patriarchy imprisons us is by making us think that everywhere is hostile to our natural selves. Some places are, but not every place. And here's why I think it's worth finding a way of being at a place of working and a relationship that can accommodate you being a human that ages. Because it's going to happen eventually anyway. You cannot outrun ageism by not aging. You're a human and humans age. You may be able to make interventions that make it appear to be happening slower, but you can't delay it forever.

And if you've spent your life investing your time, energy and money in trying to outrun this inevitable natural process. When you finally have to stop that fight, what do you have left? There's so much money, time, and mental and emotional energy that goes into trying to look younger than we are. What if all of that were invested in being comfortable with who we are, becoming comfortable with who we are, and finding career options and relationships that allowed us to be human? Long-term, I think that's a much better investment.

So if you're still with me, you may want to know what this might look like in practice. For me, it's two levels. I try to limit my own complicity and participation both in action and in thought. So in action, I don't take actions that have the sole goal of making me look younger. Some of the things I do, like wear moisturizer SPF may have a marginal impact in that way, since hydrated skin that's protected from the sun is less likely to wrinkle, for instance, but that's not the reason I do them. I wear those things because I have really dry skin that gets painful if it's not moisturized and I wear SPF because I don't want skin cancer.

UFYB 532: Anti-Aging Is Not a Thing

I also absolutely do less interventionist things that change my appearance in ways that conform with beauty norms, even if they're not anti-aging. For instance, I style my hair. This is not my natural hair. I mean, it is my natural hair, but it's not what my hair naturally looks like. I use curly hair products or I get it blown out. But my belief that those things make my hair look better is part of socialization and can't be fully disconnected from beauty culture. I totally admit that.

But here's a crucial distinction. I know that when I feel better or feel more attractive or feel more professional or feel more confident with my hair done, none of those are feelings. And it's not because what I did magically is changing my feelings. It's because of the way I'm thinking about myself. That's why one culture can think a person is most beautiful with face tattoos, while another culture thinks face tattoos means someone has lost their mind. Neither is objectively correct, it's that the standards of beauty are socially constructed.

I don't tell myself I shouldn't have these thoughts or that I have to opt out of all grooming to be a good feminist or be in line with my values. But I take responsibility for my thinking and feeling. And just doing that makes a difference. Every time I remind myself that the entire reason I'm feeling a certain way about myself or my appearance is how I'm thinking about it, I reclaim a little bit of authority in my own brain. And over time, that impacts how I relate to these practices, even without me actively changing the rest of my thoughts about them.

So that's what I wanna suggest you start with. Every time you notice yourself wanting to change how you look or engaging in a practice that changes how you look, in order to make yourself look better or younger, I want you to just compassionately remind yourself: this thing I'm doing is not going to actually change how I feel. My thoughts are what create how I feel. And if I decide I care enough about this, I can work on changing my thoughts instead of trying to change how I look.

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

UFYB 532: Anti-Aging Is Not a Thing

Since I'm me, I also actively practice thoughts about accepting aging, looking forward to elements of being older and reminding myself that life is always 50-50, whether you're 25 or 55 or 85. One of the benefits of doing thought work is that at least at every year and stage of my life so far, I have felt more aware and more in touch with who I really am, which means I'm never interested in going back to any previous stage of my life. If you start working on your thoughts about aging, I promise you that you can eventually feel the same.