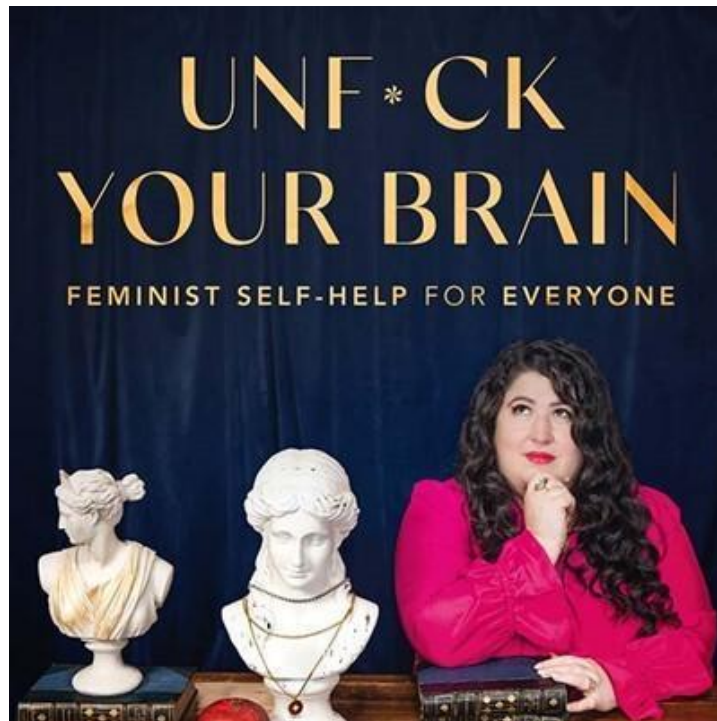


UFYB 538: When Do You Choose to be Angry?



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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The other day, I was coaching a client about a fight she'd had with her husband. He had promised to do the grocery shopping for the week, but then he forgot and asked her to do it instead because he had a busy day ahead of him. She refused because she was angry about the unequal division of labor in their relationship. For her, this was just one example of a pattern that happens all the time, where he doesn't follow through on what he said he would do and expects her to pick up the slack. To him, this was no big deal and just a small favor, the kind married people trade off all the time. He didn't understand the size of her reaction. And he suggested that she look into therapy for her anger problem.

This man, meanwhile, had refused to go to individual therapy for the entire 15 years of their relationship thus far. She told me that before we started working together, she would have felt ashamed and believed that this was her problem, that she should work on getting over. But because she's learned how to coach herself and have her own back, she had a different reaction.

On today's episode, I want to share with you how she responded and what all of us can learn from it about speaking up.

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.

Before we get to my client's response to her husband, we need to talk about anger in general. Anger is a normal human emotion. It's one of the five or six basic emotions that are consistent across all societies and from what we can tell, across time. What makes us angry can vary based on social construction, but the essential anger response is a normal human response to certain stimuli. Now, just because something is normal and human doesn't mean it's always appropriate, healthy, or useful. But it is important to normalize anger as just an emotion that happens in your body

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like any other emotion. Because the socialization we get around anger in our society is so gendered.

Anger may be the only emotion where the socialization seems to be completely opposite depending on your gender. For men, anger is considered unavoidable, primal, often portrayed as a sign of healthy masculinity, depending on the reason for the anger. It's manly to be angry. Anger is romanticized. A man who punches another man for hitting on his wife is a hothead but not out of the norm, and a man who punches another man for harassing a woman or a child is a hero.

For men, anger and violence are closely linked and in some cases celebrated. A man who never gets angry is not seen as a good man, he's seen as a pushover. A good man gets angry and violent even, only in the right context and for the right reasons. But there's a lot of wiggle room and grace given for men's anger, even outside those contexts.

This is partly because men's anger is not even socially construed as an emotion per se. It's disguised as being just rational, logical, reasonable, sometimes heroic, but always somehow objectively correct. The social disapproval of men who take their anger too far, violently abusive men for instance, performatively rejects unjustified anger, which by comparison justifies regular male anger.

For women on the other hand, anger is the emotion we are least allowed to have. It's unladylike, it's shrill, it's hysterical, it's defensive, it makes you a bitch. Nothing anyone does to a woman is ever bad enough to justify her anger, and we're taught that no one likes an angry woman. This is patriarchy through and through. Who benefits from women being socialized to repress anger at all costs? The systems of power that exploit women, of course. If you're not angry about being oppressed, it's easier to keep oppressing you.

Repressing anger has high costs for women though. Not only does it distort our internal emotional lives and erode our sense of boundaries and

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integrity, but it has physical impacts on our health as well. Women get 80% of autoimmune conditions, and some researchers believe this is because of chronic stress and repressed anger. Because like I said at the top of the episode, anger is a normal human emotion. We can absolutely coach ourselves to reduce our anger if that feels aligned to us, but even then we cannot get rid of it entirely, nor should we. If you are not allowed to express a normal human emotion for your whole life, those emotions cannot be processed and completed and finished. Instead, they linger in your system as chronic stress, which produces inflammation, and contributes to autoimmune diseases and other chronic conditions.

So repressing our anger is not the solution. But most of us don't want to be controlled by our anger either. After all, just because it's a normal bodily function, doesn't mean we don't want to shape and manage it. Peeing is also a normal human bodily function, but we don't just pee wherever we are whenever the urge arises. And anger can feel particularly destructive as an emotion. And that's not always wrong. It's often accompanied by the kind of nervous system activation that makes it hard for us to think clearly and easy for us to act impulsively and even aggressively. So how do we balance these things?

That's what I want to share after the break with the end of the story of my client's response to her husband and what we can learn from her. So we'll be right back.

So we've talked about the ways in which women are socialized to avoid and repress anger and why that's not great for us, emotionally, socially, or physically. Anger is a natural response to certain thoughts that your brain has. But it's also true that anger can be destructive. When our nervous system is activated into fight mode, we're not thinking rationally or constructively. We can lash out and hurt people we love, emotionally or even physically. We can make bad situations worse. We can say things we don't really mean and later regret as our brain just scrambles to try to overcome the threat it thinks it is encountering.

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So I also don't sign on to the whole women's anger is holy or women's anger is sacred or always good kind of messaging that we sometimes see online from purportedly feminist thinkers or influencers. Women are humans, and human anger isn't always a source of good or always a source of bad. I don't think any emotion is always one thing or another. It's always just a feeling in our body created by our thoughts.

So I want to propose two key ways of thinking about anger that I think can help guide our relationship to it. The first is to differentiate between the emotion and the action you take when you feel that emotion. We can be angry without acting in ways that are out of integrity with who we want to be. We can allow the emotion of anger in our body and still act respectfully and responsibly to those around us. You can allow an emotion without acting out because of it.

One of the reasons people often are resistant to allowing anger is that when they have felt angry in the past, they've acted on it in ways they later regret. They yell at their kids, they cold shoulder their spouse, they even throw something at the wall. Regret is an emotion created by our thoughts like any other emotion, and we can manage it by managing our mind. But the real reason I think people regret angry outbursts is that their anger in that moment was not aligned with their values. Being angry because your ego is hurt, because someone has unintentionally hit on an insecurity, or because you are not able to regulate yourself and have lost your temper, never feels truly aligned with our values.

That brings me to the second factor that I recommend you consider when choosing if you want to be angry. Is this anger aligned with your values? And this is where I think my client's story is so powerful. Because when her husband asked her if she was interested in going to therapy to deal with her anger about him not sharing the household labor equally, she told him unequivocally that she was not interested in that because she did not think there was anything wrong with her anger about this. She had expressed her anger appropriately to her husband. She had not screamed, she hadn't thrown anything, she hadn't acted in a way that was out of alignment with

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her relational values. She had expressed her anger very clearly to him without being cruel or destructive.

Their kids had heard them fight about this and she had sat down with her kids and her husband to reassure the kids that she and her husband loved each other, that adults sometimes fight about things even when they love each other very much, and that everyone was safe and okay. So she had attended to everyone's emotions, and now she was attending to her own. And her anger was aligned anger for her. She had values around equality, around fairness, and around feminism, specifically partners of both genders participating in caring for the household. So her anger was aligned with those values.

Now, her values may not be your values. This circumstance may not be one you'd have angry thoughts about. But what I want you to consider is that anger is not an all-or-nothing emotion, any more than happiness or sadness is an all-or-nothing emotion. Allowing anger doesn't make you an angry person as if that's an eternal identity. Your choices aren't suppress anger all the time or be angry all the time. You can learn to let anger come and go like any emotion and to manage your mind about it.

Sometimes you may want to coach yourself when you know that your anger is coming from taking something personally or an uncharitable interpretation of someone you love, or dysregulation from other sources of stress that you're not dealing with. And sometimes you may want to feel angry, especially when it's aligned anger. It's still created by your thoughts, but you may not want to change them. Like any other emotion, anger will flow through you more quickly when you allow it, without acting out because of it.

If you can normalize anger as a human emotion and remember that feeling any emotion doesn't mean you are powerless to decide how to think about it and how to act on it, you'll have a much better relationship with all of your anger.