UFYB 38: How to Choose New Thoughts

FEMINISM + COACHING = A KICK-ASS LIFE

UNF*CK YOUR BRAIN

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Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *Unf*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard law school grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello my chickens. So I just got done reviewing designs for a project that I am super excited about. I'm going to tell you guys all about it next week, but I was thinking like, how can I help my flock remember what they want to be doing, remember to manage their minds when they're not listening to the podcast? They can't listen to the podcast all the time.

So it's going to be like a little free way that you can carry a little bit of *Unf*ck Your Brain* with you wherever you go. So definitely listen to the podcast next week, keep an eye out for that because I'm going to announce how you can get it and what it is. But we got to wait until the team has the backend all set up. So more on that next week.

So today I was hanging out with my mom and she asked me how come I hadn't like, run out of podcast episodes. I mean, she wasn't saying why haven't you, but she was just saying like, wow, you've done 60 podcast episodes, like, do you have to repeat yourself? Do you run out of stuff to talk about? Which was kind of funny to me just because I never get tired of talking about how our minds work, and how we can learn to achieve and grow and evolve in our lives.

Like, often when people ask me why I switched from being a lawyer - I was on the track to being a law professor, I was an academic, to a life coach, one of - which, people have that question a lot. As you might imagine. It's not a normal career trajectory. It's not that easy to get on that law professor track, you got to do a lot of work to get there, so most people aren't like, I'm just at the point where I'm about to get that job I've been working towards for five years, let me quit and become a life coach. Not five years, like, 10 years.

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Anyway, what I often tell people is that obviously I cared about the issues I worked on in my career, I was a women's rights and reproductive rights lawyers, so both when I was litigating and as an academic, I obviously really care about those issues, but I often tell people there are two reasons actually. One was - especially when I was a litigator, that I didn't feel like I was contributing something unique to the movement, to the fight. I felt like, you know, there are definitely - I'm sure that I was a good lawyer and probably better than lots of lawyers maybe, but even if I were the best, for me I didn't feel like I was having like, unique ideas about this kind of law that were going to change the field.

I felt like as long as you got somebody with a decently comparable set of skills to me, they could do this job just as well as I could. And that was why I went into academia was I sort of felt like okay, well, you know, in academia it's probably going to be a little more like I'm going to have to come up with ideas that are unique to me and they're not going to be something that somebody else could replicate, you know, could do just as well as I can.

And that was like, somewhat true. I do think that I probably had - in academia it's less like what you do is well as I did, it's just different, right? Your brain, as we know, is so complicated, so personal, so idiosyncratic that lots of people can be writing on the same legal question but each one is going to come up with their own little unique perspective that other people wouldn't have just because their brain has developed a particular way.

So when I was an academic and I was doing fellowships, I was running a think tank, I did feel a little bit more like, okay, well, no one else is going to write this argument exactly the way I would write it or come up with it in exactly the same way. It's a little more unique. But you know, I would look around and I would see that I had colleagues who like, woke up super

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excited about their law review pieces and like, wanted to work on those ideas all the time. Like, the intellect has a libido like anything else.

And I do teach that we can learn to love anything. You know, I started - I found this work when I was an academic, and I went from like, being so stressed out and anxious about my academic career to feeling really great about it, and I totally could have enjoyed being a law professor. Obviously I love teaching, you know, I do that now, I would have done that there. I love helping people like, blow their minds and helping them think in new ways and see the ways that society has taught us to think in ways that aren't serving us. Totally can do all that in law school.

Like, I would have actually gotten to do a lot of the same teaching, just in a different vehicle. So I 100% taught myself to love it by changing my thoughts and I could have loved it, and I could have loved it even more, like I would have kept working on that.

But, it's at a point, we're going somewhere with this. I have always felt like the thing that I would never get bored talking about was the human mind. like, the internal experience, what does it mean to be a human, how do we experience the world, that kind of old Greek philosophy question of like, what is the good life. And the good life doesn't mean like, which neighborhood should you live in and what kind of car should you drive. It means like, what are the principles that should animate our lives, how do we know if we're living a good life, what's our vision of the good life, right? And good can mean a lot of different things obviously.

So that is something I've just always been fascinated by and never, never could imagine being bored with. When it came to law, I ultimately started feeling like, you know, that most of our arguments were driven by our normative beliefs. My friend Rachel's going to laugh at me for using that word. She told me I use the word heuristic on a podcast recently. Meaning like, we had a - you know, even academics have their own political

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opinions, the things they care about, like, if you care in your personal life about reproductive rights then you're probably not going to surprisingly see legal arguments for preserving them and vice versa.

So I just sort of eventually started to feel in the legal academic world that, you know, nobody was changing anybody else's mind and that we were just kind of moving these chess pieces around a little bit within our own, like, game where we all knew the rules.

But with coaching, this has been a tangent but now you guys know how I think and whoever that person was who wrote me that doesn't like the fluff parts can fast forward. Now that person is in my brain. I don't even remember her name, now she's in my brain every time I tell you guys anything that's not directly related to a lesson. I'm like, what's her name is not going to like this. So much fluff.

But the reason I do it is because I think that a lot of you identify with my story and so I think sometimes it's helpful for you to understand what my thought process was. So the point is, I never get tired of talking about this stuff because to me it's always an exploration. I always feel like I'm wanting to learn something new that is going to have a direct impact on my life or on my client's lives, or just on your lives. Some of you I'm never going to meet or talk to, but this podcast is going to impact what your life is like, which I just think is wild.

So anyway, you know, I can see to someone on the outside this might seem like a well that could run dry, but to me, what the fuck goes on in our brains is the most interesting thing in the world because it determines everything else, and we know so little about it from a scientific standpoint relatively speaking.

So anyway, as we were having this conversation and we were talking about kind of - there's a very loud truck going by, sorry y'all. I started thinking that

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one of the things I love about having done the podcast for over a year now and having built up this amazing flock we have is that we can kind of start to take some of the work deeper, right? I always know that in any given episode, someone might be listening for the first time. So I'm never going to teach something that if this was your first podcast you'd be like, what the hell is going on.

I always want new people to understand what's happening. But I also want to really enjoy the opportunity to cover some of these topics at a second level, kind of dig a little deeper. So today I want to dig deeper into this question of how you know what to think. Because the first thing you have to do is decide on the criteria you will use to choose your thoughts.

So I talked about part of this briefly on my IG TV show last week, and actually I should pause again. It's going to take 10 minutes to get to the point of this podcast, you guys. And say, if you aren't following me on Instagram, you definitely should be because I've started doing this new thing where every Sunday I'm releasing a little Sunday sermon.

So these are like, five-minute videos or less, they're really short, of teachings that I think are super important, but they're kind of not long enough to have their own podcast, or I just, at that moment, feel like this is something I need to teach right now. Sometimes I just get that vibe like someone needs to hear it.

So if you follow me on Instagram, you'll get notified when I do those. So it's like a little bonus podcast almost that's going to come out on Sunday but it's not going to come out here in your podcast app. You got to go watch it on Instagram. If you don't have Instagram, I do also post them on my business Facebook page so you can also like my Facebook page. Either of those are easy to find because there's only like, nine Loewentheil in the whole world and they're all my immediate family.

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So any Loewentheil you find is related to me and anyone named Kara Loewentheil is me. There's not another Kara Loewentheil in the whole globe. So you could just go follow me, find me on Facebook, find me on Instagram. Find my business page on Facebook, not my personal page. Even though I love you guys all I cannot Facebook friend you all. Or my Instagram account. Follow me and you'll be able to watch and learn and get this little bonus boost on Sundays. They're super fun.

Okay, so one of the things I mentioned on the Instagram TV show, the first week - I've done two so far. The first one was about how to support someone else while managing your mind, which I think is such a crucial topic, and then last week's was kind of the biggest misconception we all have about our own thoughts. So you should obviously check that out.

So one of the things that I talked about was this idea that we tend to believe that our thoughts are true. When we haven't examined them, we're like, yeah, well why would I think it if it weren't true. People will say that. "I wouldn't think it if it wasn't true." Pro tip: that's incorrect.

So if you've been listening to the podcast, you probably already accept the idea that at least some of your thoughts aren't true. And if this is your first episode then welcome, I just blew your mind, it's the secret to life. But for the rest of you, so you believe some of your thoughts aren't true, but then the next question I often get is so what should I believe, right? Which I think is so interesting.

Because no one else can tell you what to believe. I can't make you believe something and I don't really know what you should believe. You know, I can know in general that loving yourself is better than hating yourself, but even when I work with clients, what I'm really helping them do is learn how to tell for themselves what they want to believe. There's no sort of blanket set of beliefs from the outside for any set of circumstances, so it's not like I

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have a list of like, approved thoughts and then you're supposed to think them all.

I can't make you believe something. Only you can tell if you believe something, and only you can practice believing something on purpose. But here's how I suggest that you evaluate whether you want to believe a thought. Don't ask yourself if it's true, ask yourself if it's useful. So let me break down why that's so important.

I have taught you before that your thoughts create your feelings. So the way you feel determines how you will act. I know this makes common sense but we don't really think about it this way. We think that we just like, act for principled reasons. No. You act the way you're feeling drives you to act. When you feel insecure, you act differently than when you feel self-confident. You show up differently.

When you feel angry, you act differently than when you feel calm. When you feel sorry for yourself, you act differently than when you take responsibility for yourself. Our feelings determine our actions. And our actions create the results that we have in our lives. So what does that mean? What do I mean by results?

Let's say you have the thought, "I'm not advancing at work. Everyone else is advancing and I'm not." That thought makes you feel insecure. Probably you feel anxious when you think it. If you feel insecure and anxious, you're not going to put yourself forward for opportunities at work because you already decided you're not good enough, everybody else has something you don't have, and you don't want to get confirmation of that by actually trying.

So you don't try, and now you'll soon really fall behind your peers who do try. And so your result is that you prove yourself right that you aren't advancing. You think, "I'm just observing this," but actually, you're creating

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that result because you have the thought that you're not advancing and it makes you feel insecure, and then you hide and then you don't give yourself an opportunity to advance.

Let's say you have the thought that your romantic partner doesn't really love you and you feel sad when you think that, or maybe you feel angry. Depends on the person, right? Either way, most likely, you shut down. You don't reach out, you don't act lovingly towards them because you've already decided they don't love you, so then you feel alone. And you give yourself all this proof that you're unloved because you're like, "God, see, I feel so alone, it must be because they don't love me." No. It's because you had the thought they don't love you, and then you felt sad and shut down and reduced even further opportunities to connect.

So what I want you to notice in each of these examples, "I'm not advancing," "My partner doesn't love me," is that the truth actually doesn't matter. You might not be behind at work when you started having this thought, but over time, it proves itself true. Or your partner might absolutely love you, but when you have that thought and that feeling, it doesn't matter. You don't feel love.

And that's the thing. Most of our thoughts are completely unverifiable. There's no way to know if they're true or not because they're just optional interpretations. Maybe you have the thought that you're not advancing, but your colleague next to you thinks you are advancing and thinks that they're the one who's not advancing. Who's right?

There's actually no way to know who's right. And maybe neither of you are right. Because it's not an objective thing. It's not like the rock exists on the table. It's a totally subjective interpretation. Like, what does advancing mean? How do you know if you're advancing? Advancing according to who?

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It's a totally subjective interpretation of a situation and you're just trying to describe like, some mix of thoughts and feelings in the people around you that are thinking about you and your career. That's what you're thinking about when you think you're advancing or not.

Plus, often if you decide you believe something, it doesn't even matter if it's not true. You believe it anyway. And studies show - I've talked about this on the podcast before when we talk about confirmation bias. Studies show that when presented with conflicting evidence, most people just double the fuck down on their incorrect belief. This is like, if humans destroy the world this will be why because they don't know how to manage their minds.

So people don't believe in global warming, you show them evidence of global warming and they're like, "Now I believe in global warming even more." And if you're curious about that, go listen to the podcast on confirmation bias. But the point here is just that trying to figure out whether something is true or not is often just a waste of time. It may be true, it may not be true. There's often no way to know.

And even if you could know, what really matters is whether your thought is helpful. Just stay with me, I know those of you who are lawyers and doctors and engineers are freaking out about the idea that we should just ignore the truth. Just hold your horses. When you think a thought, how does it feel? Does it produce a feeling that you want to have? And what kind of action does it make you take? Do you like the results that you get in your life?

These are the questions you want to ask yourself when you're trying to decide what kind of thoughts to think. We are all predisposed to think that what matters if whether our thoughts are true. That's just what we think matters, but it's not. Truth is just a pretend framework mostly that our brains use to feel secure about our thoughts. Our brains do not want to keep questioning and thinking about things over and over again, right?

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Remember, lizard brain is lazy. It wants to save all its energy in case you need to get eaten by a bear. It would be exhausting to every time you leave the cave be like, wait, are bears friendly or not? I don't know, let me approach one. You might die.

So but now we're not dealing with bears. We're dealing with a lot of complicated subjective like, interpretational hypothetical ineffable things, lots of ideas about the world that are way more subjective and interpretative than bears are dangerous, right? But our brains want to feel secure about our thoughts. We're dealing with brains that evolve when all we had to worry about was bears, and our brains don't want to keep questioning and thinking about things over and over again, so they just decide what they think is true and they stick with it.

But truth is really an illusion a lot of the time. And really think about it. What's accepted as truth by one person isn't accepted as truth by the person next to him? Like, wherever you are on the political spectrum, you have a different belief about The Truth, than someone on the other side of that spectrum. There are a lot of things that you believe are true facts that they do not, and vice versa.

Now, you think, well I'm right and they're wrong. Okay, maybe you are. But there's no way for us to know, right? Humans are the ones who have to analyze the "facts and data" and decide if they're true. It all has to go through a human brain. And so when you really break it down on like a deep, philosophical level, there's no way to know.

Different societies and religions believe different things are true. And even science changes over time, right? Science now says that things that scientists believed to be true facts not just 100 years ago, like 20 years ago were not true. The only way we really know if something is true is we decide to believe it is.

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Your brain thinks this is a terrible, overwhelming idea. So it wants to believe that it does know what's true, because the brain thinks the alternative is, well I'd have to spend all my time reevaluating constantly what was true and wondering about it. But your brain is wrong because here's a much better alternative. The alternative is using a whole different framework to evaluate thoughts. Not are they true but are they helpful.

Do I like what I get when I think this thought? Do I like how I feel? Do I like how it makes me act? Do I like the results I create in my life by acting that way? Do I like how I show up in the world? Do I like the kind of world that I create when I think, feel, and act this way?

In fact, this is the best standard even when you can know that a thought is true. So like, imagine someone who gets a cancer diagnosis and the doctors tell her this cancer's fatal 95% of the time within two years, and we're just going to assume for the purpose of this that like, that's definitely true, science will never change its mind about that, everyone would agree.

Now, if she thinks there's a 95% chance I'm going to die of this cancer in the next two years, how is she going to feel? She's likely going to feel despondent, despairing, hopeless, depressed, and how is she going to act? Is she going to take amazing care of herself? Do everything she can to beat it? Probably not.

So even though it's true that the cancer has a 95% fatality rate, it doesn't serve our hypothetical patient at all to think that. It's true, but it's not helpful because it's not producing the results that she wants. So in this situation, our hypothetical person could choose an equally true thought to think like, some people beat this cancer. Now, that's true also. But even more powerful would be a thought that she can't even know is true yet like, some people beat this and I'm going to be one of them. Or I can make a big difference in my outcome based on how I think and feel and act.

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Now, can we prove that to be 100% true? I have no idea. Probably not. But is she going to make that come true for herself and be more active and engaged, not just in her medical care but in her life with that thought? I believe so, yes, absolutely.

So it doesn't really matter if a thought is true. It matters if it's helpful. Let's take a less dramatic example. Imagine you didn't get a promotion at work. Like, you tried to get it, you didn't. So it's true, you did not get it. If you are constantly thinking the thought, I didn't get that promotion, you're going to feel discouraged and that's going to spur a whole bunch of thoughts about why you didn't, what's wrong with your boss, he doesn't recognize your value, this place is so misogynist, whatever. Or about - with most of my people it's really thoughts about you, right?

I'm not good enough, I didn't do well enough, I'm never going to succeed, they hate me, right? How is that serving you? It's not. So you can choose to think something else like, I'm going to do everything I can to get that promotion next time, or not being promoted doesn't mean anything about whether I'm a valuable employee.

Or let's make it extreme. Like, just for the sake of argument. Let's say you decide to think, I wasn't promoted because my boss thinks I remind him of his third grade teacher who he hates. We have no ideas if that's true, we just made it the fuck up. But I'm going to tell you, it's still more helpful to think that than to think it was because you're not good enough.

Because if you think it's about his third grade teacher, you won't take it personally, you'll keep showing up, you'll be looking for ways you can improve and do better at your job to like, overcome that, and if it eventually became clear you needed a different job, you would go into that job search with more confidence. Whereas if you think it's that you're bad and not good enough, that does not actually motivate you to improve, right? We've talked about that a lot in this podcast. That just makes you hide.

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So one of the places I love this example is when I work with clients on dating because my clients can spend, I mean, not just - I used to do this. I totally understand - can spend days or weeks or honest to god, months agonizing over why someone stopped texting them back or stopped dating them or whatever. And they think if they knew the true reason, then it would set them free and they could understand.

So they're constantly evaluating different possibilities and trying to figure out which reason is true. But there's no way to know. Changing the question to which thought is helpful is a game changer. Trying to figure out, was it because of something I said, was it because of something I did, is it like, his problem, like, going on and on about that trying to figure out what's true just keeps you trapped forever. And even if they told you what was true, it still wouldn't help you because you'd have a whole bunch of thoughts about that.

Just deciding, you can think whatever you want. You're allowed to think for anyone who doesn't want to date you, wow, that person's really confused about how awesome I am. Now, we have no idea if that's true. Maybe it's true, maybe it's not. But it feels so much better and it enables you to get the results you want, which is to stop thinking about this person who obviously doesn't want to date you and move forward and find someone else.

So when I was doing dating work really intensively on myself, I decided that my thought whenever somebody didn't want to see me again or stopped responding to texts or whatever was just like, oh, they just were intimidated by how awesome I am and they weren't really ready for a real relationship. I have no fucking idea if that was true. Maybe sometimes. Maybe some of them just didn't like the way I laugh, maybe some of them got hit by a bus, I don't know.

But it doesn't matter. Knowing the truth of that would not have served me, right? Believing this thought that they weren't ready for me totally set me

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free so that I could keep looking and stop focusing on people who were showing me by not showing up that they didn't want to be with me.

So all of a sudden, when you do that, when you let go of this idea that you need to know the truth of what happened, then all you need to think is some version of - I like to make them funny, but some version of like, if this person doesn't want to date me, he just isn't my person. It doesn't really matter why, and you can move on.

So I really want you to stop wondering whether your thoughts are true, and I really want you to stop believing that if something is true, you have to think it. You actually don't have to think anything. No one can make you. It's crazy. You can think anything you want and no one can stop you. Whether it's true or not, you can literally think whatever you want and no one can stop you from doing it. So stop thinking about whether your thoughts are true. Think about whether they are helpful. Helpful matters more than true every time.

Alright my chickens, if this blew your mind and broke your brain and you think you need some help to put it back together, you know what to do. Jump on over to www.unfckyourbrain.com/application and fill out an application because I really want to show you how you can change your own life and blow your own mind when you really start thinking in terms of utility instead of truth.

Alright, I will talk to some of you on Sunday on Instagram TV, and I will talk to the rest of you next week. Bye.

Thanks for tuning in. If you want to start building your confidence right away, you can download a free confidence cheat sheet at www.karaloewentheil.com/podcastconfidence.

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