

## UFYB 65: Listener Q & A Vol. 11



### 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. Time for another listener Q&A installment. You guys just keep sending such good questions that I have to keep answering them. Alright, we're just going to dive in today. I get versions of this question a lot of different ways and I just figured it's time to answer it. So I'm just going to answer this short version of it.

So here's the question. The question says, "As you don't provide life coaching services in a vacuum, you're likely in contact with those who take medications to uphold their mental health. What is your official position on antidepressants and thought work? Are we not working on our minds enough if we feel like we still need the medication? A lot of the women I've spoken to are just as confounded as I am on how these two life solutions can coexist."

Okay, so the first thing I want to say is that I don't have an official position on antidepressants and thought work other than it's a personal, individual choice that each person needs to make and consultation with their doctors and their medical professionals. Certainly not my business. I don't even tell my clients what to think. I certainly wouldn't tell them whether or not to take medication.

And I think the answer is really going to depend on the people. I think there are people who have a lot of anxiety and who go to a doctor and the doctor doesn't really have time or know what to do about anxiety and so just gives them a prescription and then - like a prescription for a sedative or an anti-anxiety pill and then maybe they discover thought work and they work on their thoughts and they find they can reduce their usage if they're just taking it intermittently and they don't need it. Sometimes they find they don't need it anymore. That's great.

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And then there are people who are going to be on antidepressants for their whole life and they need them to be mentally stable and have enough energy to even do thought work and that's great too. It's really truly none of my business and I don't have any opinion on what kind of medication anyone should take.

It's so interesting that I get this question all the time because it just to me is almost an indication of how my followers tend to be perfectionists who think in black and white and think that there has to be either it's all thought work or it's all medication. And of course, that's not the case at all. There are people for whom antidepressants or anti-psychotics or whatever other kind of psychiatric medication is lifesaving and that's a decision for that person to make with their doctor. It's really none of my business.

So this question says, "Are we not working on our minds enough if we feel like we still need the medication?" So it's not a feeling, it's a thought, "I still need the medication," but I don't think that that means you're not working on your mind enough at all. It may be completely true that the medication still is helpful for you and serves you or you need it or want it or whatever, especially when you're dealing with depression, one of the things that happens with clinical depression is that you have no emotional energy and it takes so much effort just to do anything.

And so I think there are people for whom medication helps them get to the point that they can do some thought work. So I certainly think thought work helps everyone and I have worked with people with intrusive thoughts or even people who had psychotic episodes or people who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia who are also of course taking medications and seeing a psychiatrist, but thought work is also helpful.

Again, it's like and, not or. So I think for some people, for sure antidepressants and medication can help them get to a place where they can even do some thought work, have the mental energy and the desire to do that work. So I wanted to answer this because I get this question a lot

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and I think it's just not an or, it's an and. I don't think thought work doesn't hurt anyone, and I think it helps everyone and some people may find that by working on their minds, they want to or can lessen or eliminate certain medications and some people may not find that or not even want to try that, and that's fine too.

So that's my answer to that. And I think that there's this temptation - I was completely like this because I was a lawyer so there's this temptation to want to be presented with thought work concepts and then to want to take them to the far extreme and get stuck in debating whether or not the far extreme version of something is true or what the answer is.

And that's just kind of a distraction because the truth is whether or not you know the ultimate answer to what comes first, the thought or the biochemistry actually doesn't matter for the question of would changing my thoughts about that meeting that I'm dreading help me today. You don't actually need to know whether we can deduce one holistic statement that covers everything to be able to get benefit from the work.

So that's what I'd say about that. The other thing I would say is that often, I find thought work is actually really effective for people who are suffering from mental illness even if whatever the diagnosis is, like let's just say okay, you have a diagnosis of depression and there's a chemical problem going on in your brain that you need medication to solve.

You then also have a whole bunch of thoughts about that, which absolutely are helped by thought work. And the same thing, I've worked with people who had intrusive thoughts or who heard voices, and of course who are getting proper psychiatric care as well, but whatever's going on that's causing those symptoms, which may be whatever causes is, whatever the neurochemical imbalances are that cause that, and medication maybe resolving that, but then the person has all these thoughts of course, about what it means that they have these thoughts or voices.

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What does it mean? What's wrong with them? How do they want to think about them? What does it mean about their life going forward, right? So thought work is still so helpful for all of that. So to me, it's really just like there are certain medical conditions you can have in non-brain parts of your body and the way you think about them is going to really determine your experience of them.

Like your thoughts are connected to your pain levels and your thoughts are connected to how you move or what kind of movements you feel you can do. The mind and body are so connected and I don't know that we even have all the answers. But I don't think that it's ever black and white, it has to be this or it has to be that situation. I think thought work helps everyone, thought work helps you think about your own diagnoses or conditions, whether they're mental or physical and it's up to a person and their provider to decide whether or not they need medication and that's really none of my business or the business of the people who write and ask me about it unless it's about them and their relationship with their doctor, in which case, that is your business.

So I hope that that clarifies for people because I get this question a lot and I just think thought work helps everyone. It's never going to hurt you to do some thought work, and it's up to every individual person to decide how they want to deal with the psychiatric diagnosis and the availability or the recommendation for medication.

Let's move on to a lighter topic like Trump supporters. That's the next question. So the next question says, "Hi Kara, I was recently introduced to your podcast, I seriously can't get enough of it. One thing I've been struggling with is my feelings towards Trump supporters. I really loathe them. I have a lot of them in my family and I avoid going to see them because they support this man. I really don't know why I have such strong feelings about this. Maybe the fact that this man does things that make me feel unsafe and they're supporting that. I would really like to be able to

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engage with Trump supporters without getting incredibly angry and frustrated. Do you have any tips?"

Okay, so the problem here is the sentence, "Maybe the fact that this man does things that make me feel unsafe and they are supporting that." So that's not a fact. He doesn't do things that make you feel unsafe because your feeling of safety or un-safety comes from your thoughts.

So your problem is that you're blaming Trump for your feelings and then if somebody supports him, then you're blaming those people. So by extension, you're blaming your family members for your feeling unsafe. But you feel unsafe because of your thoughts.

So I actually went in depth in a recent listener Q&A, I think it might have been the last one that I did about the thought work I did around Trump and the holocaust when he got elected. So I'm going to recommend that you go back and listen to that because I think it'll be helpful for you.

But the bottom line is if you don't want to be angry and frustrated, you have to stop blaming Trump, much less your family members for your feelings because they don't cause them, your thoughts do. But as long as you believe that they do cause them, you're going to be angry.

Okay, so this next question's a little bit involved but I really love it because it shows that this person is really thinking through my work and has been listening to the podcast, I can tell they take notes. They broke out their question beautifully. I would not be surprised if they were an academic or a lawyer.

So it's a little bit long but I'm going to treat it here because I think it'll be helpful, probably a lot of you have similar questions whether you've explicitly articulated them or not. Okay, so here's what she says.

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She says, "Dear Kara, I've been working with your content and making a lot of progress, but I'm getting a little stuck trying to put together the teachings from a few different podcasts to apply to a difficult relationship with my parents. For example," - she's got topic headings. "Boundaries. The boundary podcast focuses on responding to an isolated incident, e.g. if this person starts screaming at me, I will leave the conversation. But it doesn't really cover how to handle the relationship as a whole when it's a repeating pattern of boundary violations. I.e. every time there's a difference of opinion, this person starts screaming at me. How does setting boundaries apply to chronic pervasive issues?"

Okay, so I'm actually going to - a lot of these have questions embedded so I'm going to answer each one and then I'll talk about them all together. So there's absolutely no difference between one boundary incident and a relationship where the person keeps taking the action. You just keep enforcing the boundary.

So it applies exactly the same way. It's not just a one-time thing. In fact, the whole point of a boundary is that the person will probably keep doing the behavior and so it's not about getting them to stop, it's about you deciding how you want to handle it. If you're going to be in that relationship, how do you want to handle when they scream? So it applies exactly the same way, there's no difference.

Her next section is toxic people and want versus need. "In the toxic people podcast, you explained that so called toxic people are really just people that are aren't managing our minds around and that rather than cut them out of our lives, we should actually continue spending time with them because we can learn a lot. But then in the want versus need, you raise the question of why we would stick around with someone who wasn't available to have the type of relationship we want to have. I'm having trouble reconciling these two teachings in terms of how to practically handle relationships in which we're not being treated the way we want."

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Okay, so you always get to decide in general whether you want to have the kind of relationship. So part of what's going on here is you're thinking about - this woman says, "I see how it makes sense to not choose friends or romantic partners who aren't available to have the type of relationship we want but how does this apply to relationships we don't choose such as the one with our parents?"

So you still get to decide, and I think the big difference is when you're looking for a romantic partner, let's say, there are a multitude of people who you could choose to be your romantic partner. So you get to decide what kind of relationship you want and then you can look for someone who matches that.

With your parents, you only have - if you want it to be a biological parent or the parent who raised you, you only have a couple of options. Maybe between one and four if you add in stepparents. You don't have that many people to choose from. But you still get to decide what kind of relationship you want to have with that person and how you want to think and feel about them.

And you get to weigh how important it is to you to have a relationship with a parent or not. Part of the reason I think that you're stuck, this question asker, is that you feel that there's a right answer to this and that you should maintain the relationship with your parents. You don't say that explicitly but that's the feeling I'm getting, which is - the letter writer says, "I want to do the right thing when it comes to my parents and have empathy and understanding for them while not letting them walk all over me."

So I think that what's going on here is you actually are still in emotional childhood about them, you think they can walk all over you and you think there's a right thing to do, and you're like, complexifying it with trying to apply these different lessons when those aren't really the issue for you.



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Your problem is you think there's a right thing to do, like you think there's a right answer and if you just put the different lessons together you would have the right answer as to what you're supposed to do with your parents, but there is no right answer. You actually get to decide whether you want to have a relationship with your parents or not.

You just want to know what your reasons are and if you like them. And right now, you probably don't like your reasons because you feel although you can articulate it, you sense that it's not coming from emotional adulthood because you still think that they can walk all over you and your husband. You think that's a fact. You think that's a behavior they have, but it's not. That's just your thought.

So you think they're toxic, you think they can walk all over you, but then you want to do the right things. You have all these competing assumptions, all of which are optional thoughts. And then you're getting kind of lost in the details of it and trying to make it like an intellectual question of fitting together the different lessons I teach so you can get the right answer.

But that's not really the problem here. So I want you, letter writer, to worry a lot less about how do I do this math equation with these three lessons to get the right answer. There isn't one. You have to decide; do you want to have a relationship with your parents? So unlike a partner that you can just pick one, unlike friends, these are the only two parents you have, so you have to decide, is it important to you to have a relationship with your parents?

And there's no right or wrong about that. I don't think it's better to or better not to. You have to decide. And if that is important to you, then you have to decide, what are the terms of that relationship for you. On what terms are you willing to have that relationship?

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The truth is we have that for - everyone has that for their parents. Like if my mother killed my cat for fun, that would probably violate the terms of our relationship. It's unwritten and unspoken, I didn't know I needed to have a boundary about it, but if she did that, I would probably no longer have a relationship with her.

We all have some point at which we're not willing to have a relationship, even with people that we are related to by blood or that we didn't choose originally. So you have to decide what those terms are for you. But while you're believing there's a right answer and you're believing that they can hurt you, that they can walk all over you, that they're toxic - you used another phrase that was kind of telling about this.

A relationship that is a repeating pattern of boundary violations like, I think you still have a lot of work to do on your thoughts and feelings about that and not giving them emotional power over you. When you take back your emotional power and you really understand that they can't walk all over you and they don't cause your feelings and they aren't toxic, when you really understand that, you will find it so much easier to decide whether you want a relationship with them and what the terms are of it.

But right now you can't get there and you're trying to get into an intellectual puzzle when it really isn't. The whole reason that you don't understand how to apply want versus need is that you still think that the way they're treating you is wrong. You don't see it as just like a preference, like well, I really want to hang out with someone who likes going to museums more than camping because I prefer museums, which is mostly - that's more the kind of thing that I'm talking about when I'm talking about preferences.

But I think you really think that they can hurt you and that they're toxic and that they're walking all over you, and until you do that thought work, you are not going to make a decision about the relationship.

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Okay, let's do one more. So this letter writer says, "Thank you Kara, for giving me the tools to change my life. If you had told me a few months ago that I could be nice to and supportive of myself, I would have laugh cried in your face. But thanks to you, I'm learning to be that way and I'm doing it more and more. So totally amazing." It is amazing. Honestly you guys, this is the best job.

Alright, so she says, "My question has to do with how to decide which issue to manage your mind about, specifically when people-pleasing is in the mix. For example, I don't want to go to a family event because it is uncomfortable. I know I can manage my mind, so my options are deciding not to go or managing my mind about not pleasing other people who want me to go, or deciding to go and managing my mind about the reasons I'm uncomfortable going. Do you have any tips about thinking about how to make that decision? Or maybe it's not really the right one to be trying to make?"

So it's totally up to you. I know you all want the answer of how you're supposed to do thought work, but thought work is not like an equation for figuring out what you're supposed to do. It's a set of tools. It's like if I gave you a hammer and some wood and I was like, build a house. There's some basic principles probably like the floor should go on the bottom, but should it look like a one-story ranch or should it look like a Victorian?

It doesn't matter. There's no right or wrong about that. So yes, you're right that your options are change your thought so that it's not uncomfortable, or just be willing to be uncomfortable and be curious and willing to observe that and experience it. Or decide not to go and manage your mind about your thoughts about yourself for not going.

Here's what I always want you all to be asking yourselves. Do I know my reason for making this decision and do I like my reason? And this letter writer actually says, "In this case I made the decision not to go. I asked

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myself what I thought you would say and I guessed you would say make a decision, know your reasons, ask how you feel about them."

Yes, totally correct, that's what I would say. And then she says, "I knew my reasons, I was mostly okay with them. The mostly is there because my brain kept trying to question the validity of the reasons, especially since I was putting them above what other people wanted. I mean, if I can manage my mind either way, why wouldn't I choose the way that would be preferred by others?"

So I think that's a great question and you have to answer it for yourself. Because I think it's fascinating that that's your default, right? You could just as well ask, if I can manage my mind either way, why wouldn't I choose the way I would prefer? I think that what's going on here is you still think that you cause other people's feelings.

So you're like, well if I can manage my mind either way, then I'll do it the way that'll make people happy. That's like the trick assumption you have going here. But your decisions don't create other people's feelings. You going doesn't make them happy. Their thoughts do. So you're right. If you take the assumption that you can create other people's feelings, then you're going to be trying to manage your mind to be okay with doing what you think will create other people's feelings.

But that's not really what I'm teaching. What I'm teaching is that you can decide whether you want to feel great about going or feel great about staying home, but you don't cause other people's feelings, just like the event doesn't cause your feelings.

So you've got a little more people-pleasing work to clean up before you'll be able to make a decision kind of clearly because you're still believing that if you went, that would cause their feelings of happiness and so that's why

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you're biased towards well, if I can feel okay about it, I might as well make them happy. But you don't make them happy.

And you just have to decide how much thought work you're willing to do about things in order to try to control other people's brains. I don't recommend spending a lot of thought work on that because it doesn't really work. That's my two cents.

Alright my dears, I will talk to you next week.

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](http://www.karaloewentheil.com/podcastconfidence).