

UFYB 66: Listener Q & A Vol. 12



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. Today we are answering some more chicken questions. You guys are asking such thought-provoking, interesting, great questions that I just can't stop answering them.

Alright, let's just dive in. So here's a question which I get in a lot of different ways, but I'm just going to read this one in particular, but a lot of you have this question so I think it'll be useful.

"Dear Kara, I love your podcast, I've been sharing it widely." Thank you. "One question that I'm grappling is how do you reconcile individual responsibility for one's own happiness with systemic oppression? Things like unequal access to healthcare, mass incarceration, the child separation policy, income inequality? While it's true in some sense that everyone is responsible for their own mindset, aren't there things outside an individual's control that influence our wellbeing? And don't we have a collective responsibility to address those things instead of just focusing on ourselves? I feel like I am missing something important."

This is a great question and I do think you're missing something important, which is a good sign. It's a good thing. So number one, if you haven't, go listen to the episode called *What About Sexism*, so some of these questions that I get I can tell the person hasn't actually listened to the podcast episodes that would be relevant, which is fine, there's a lot of them, but I'm not going to repeat that whole episode.

But here's what I'm going to say about this. So number one you ask, "Aren't there things outside an individual's control that influence our wellbeing?" Now, that depends on how you define wellbeing. Yes, things outside our

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individual control may influence things like our physical health or our living surroundings or whatever else they are.

Our thoughts create our feelings, so I don't believe that there are things outside our control that create our feelings. That's what I'm teaching. So I've never said nothing outside of you influences your wellbeing, and the reason I don't say that is who the fuck knows what wellbeing means? That's a totally subjective term and people have a lot of different definitions of it.

So what I teach is your thoughts create your feelings. Nothing outside of you creates your feelings. So that's a really important difference. You get to decide how to define wellbeing, and how you define it will then determine how much of it, if any, comes from outside of you.

And then the second question is, "Don't we have a collective responsibility to address those things instead of just focusing on ourselves?" There's really two parts to this sentence that are interesting. The first one is, "Don't we have a collective responsibility to address those things?" That's a thought. That's an optional thought that you can choose to think or not. It's not a true law of the world, obviously, because a lot of people don't believe that you do.

So it's not objective. We have people who believe both things. Now, you get to decide. I've made my decision about what I want to believe about that, and you have to make your decision about what you want to believe about that. So there is no such thing as an objective collective responsibility. That's not like encoded in the matter of the universe. That is an optional thought. It's a value, which is just a thought that's important to you. It's an optional thought.

And it might be a great thought for you. You just always want to choose it on purpose. And then here's the third missed apprehension that is

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confusing this listener, "Don't we have to address those things instead of focusing on ourselves?" So what this implies is focusing on our own mental and emotional health and or wellbeing, our own emotions and thought work and mental and emotional health means we are taking focus away from systemic oppression, away from collective wellbeing, away from what's good for the world.

That's the assumption baked into this question, and I really disagree with that assumption. And not in like a woo-woo way of like, well, just healing you heals humanity. I was a reproductive rights litigator and then an academic, but I was in the reproductive rights movement for a decade or more and what I saw is that an unmanaged mind leads to burnout, and it leads to exhaustion and that leads to worse work.

It's a known problem that people leave social justice work, they leave helping professions, teaches, non-profit litigators, nurses, doctors, people get burnt out in the helping professions because they don't have managed minds. Now, they think they're burnt out because it's so stressful, but of course we know, listeners of this podcast, that stress is created by your thoughts.

So not managing your mind, your own mental mind makes you less able to contribute to the greater good. That's what I believe, and that's what I've seen in my own life. When I wasn't managing my mind, I was being a lawyer and doing work that I think was helping people, but that really anyone could do. Anyone with a similar set of skills and education could do as well as I could, and I was burnt out and frustrated, exhausted and wanted to quit.

When I learned to manage my mind, I ended up choosing a different career in which I help way more people, I think, doing something that no one else is doing. But even if I had stayed in my legal career, I mean, I have lots of clients who are burnt out in their professional careers, but they don't want

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to leave them, they want to be able to love them and be of more service. And when they learn to manage their mind, they can be.

So I really reject this idea that focusing on your own mental and emotional health is somehow at odds with the collective wellbeing and your ability to contribute to it. And I think I'm a perfect example of that. So that's my answer to that question. It's a great question and the way it was phrased by this particular writer was kind of a perfect exposition of what the three mistakes are in the way that that question is phrased and the way that we're thinking about it.

So hopefully that clears it up. Those are the three things that you're missing that were important. Number one, that it's optional to believe that we have a collective responsibility, but you totally can if you want to. Number two, that I don't teach that things outside of our control can't influence our wellbeing. I teach that they don't cause our emotions, which I think are the primary aspects of our wellbeing but not the only one. And number three, the idea that focusing on our own mental and emotional health makes us less of a contribution to the collective good or other people's liberation. I think it's exactly the opposite.

Okay, next question. "Hi Kara, I listened to your podcast on social anxiety and it was great, but what do you do when the insecurities you have are actually what people think? Like on a date you feel awkward and your date confirms that it was awkward, or at work you feel you stumbled over your words during an interaction with a customer and your coworker confirms that yes, it was an awkward encounter."

Okay so number one I think that you think, dear letter writer, that awkward is an objective thing, it's a circumstance. So you're like, well the date confirmed it was awkward, the coworker confirmed it was awkward. But the truth is that awkward is a thought, so it's not like they confirmed gravity was working, they confirmed that there was a door on the building. Whether something is awkward is a thought, it's an optional interpretation.

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So whether or not two people agree and have the same thought about something doesn't make it therefore a true thing. It's still a subjective interpretation. So that's number one. Number two; it still doesn't matter unless you think it's bad. So what if everybody has the same subjective thought that your date was awkward?

It's only a problem when you make it mean something about you, that you're awkward, that you won't be able to find a partner, that you're not cool, that you can't make friends. So what if it's awkward with a customer? It only is a problem if you believe that that means something bad about you, that you're bad at your job, that you should be different, that you're not going to make any sales, everybody can tell you're bad at what you do.

So there are a lot of things that even are facts, it's still not useful to think. But let's take something that is true and still isn't helpful to think about all the time. So let's say you have some physical characteristic that you know other people have thoughts about. So let's say you're a fat person and you know that other people have judgments about you being fat.

It's true - well, even fat is a thought, it's still subjective, but let's just pretend it is a true circumstance that you are fat. Thinking constantly, "Other people think I'm fat," even if it were true that they do is not going to serve you. It's not going to be helpful. And it's only a problem if you think that that's bad because you don't think it's bad if you're like, "Other people think I'm gorgeous, other people think I have beautiful hair."

It's only a problem when you think the thing is bad. Your problem, letter writer, is not that you are awkward and other people can see it, it's been confirmed. Your problem is that you think awkward is a problem, even if it were true. You think that it's a problem that you're awkward and it means something bad about you. So that's your work to do. What if you are awkward? What if that is something other people think about you? So what? That's the work to do.

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Okay, here's the next question, which I think is a great one and I get this in different versions quite a bit. "Hi Kara, I found your podcast last week and I've listened to pretty much all, except for one of them." I appreciate your honesty, podcast listener, that you've got one left, but you've probably listened to it by now.

"I'm working on coaching myself to manage my thoughts, especially my relationship with my fiancé. But then you said meet your own needs. What does that look like? I don't get it. Example, I want my fiancé to stay the night at my place once a week because I would like to go to bed with him there, cuddle, and wake up with him there instead of going to bed by myself, waking up by myself. How do I meet my own need for that? Also, my love language is quality time. Is your opinion that the five love languages is rubbish and I should do thought work to not have a love language, hence eliminating my needs/wants in that area?"

Okay, so what I think is fascinating about this example is that you actually use the right word in the beginning where you say, "I want my fiancé to stay the night." That's a want, it's a desire, it's a preference, it's something you'd like to experience. But then you say, "How do I meet my own need for that?" And the whole point is that that's not a need. It's a want.

You don't need your fiancé to stay the night at your place once a week. That is not a basic survival needs, it's not even a basic emotional one that you can meet yourself. It's not a need. It's a want. It's a preference. When you tell yourself it's a need, what you're telling yourself is I can't feel the way I want unless my fiancé does what I want.

And listen, you can totally choose to believe that, but I have found that it's pretty counterproductive because it makes me feel completely disempowered and then it makes me try to control my partner instead of love them, and then that feels terrible and they don't really like it either usually.

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So you actually have the answer to your question embedded, which is that this is a want. It's a desire. It's not a need. So you're right, you can't meet your own want or desire for that, but a want or a desire doesn't have to be met. And it's not a need. So that question is kind of embedded there.

Now listen, you can totally decide, I don't want to be engaged to someone who won't stay here once a week. That's how much I want this. It's the whole point of being engaged to me is that I get to sleep with the person, and so if I'm not, then I don't want to be in this relationship, and that would be totally fine. You get to decide.

But if your fiancé doesn't want to stay the night with you, your options are to tell yourself that's a need and then disempower yourself and tell yourself you can't feel okay without it, or you accept that this is the person you're engaged to and that he doesn't want to do that, and you can ask him to do it. You can tell him that you would like it, it's a desire, would he fill it, but if you tell yourself it's a need you're going to feel disempowered you're going to try to control him, and you're not going to be getting what you want in the first place, which is connection.

That's why it's so counterproductive. As to your second question, I don't believe that the five love languages is "rubbish." I mean, I don't have a strong opinion about it. If you find them useful, sure, all kind of frameworks or ways of thinking about the world are useful to some people, not to others.

The way that I sometimes use the five love languages with my clients is that often what is happening is that my client, if they're in a relationship, is looking for evidence that the other person is doing the love language that my client would do. Like, what I think is useful about the love languages and actually kind of constant with thought work is it helps you see that looking for someone else to act the way you act to show when you love someone is not necessarily useful because they may show their love a different way.

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So that's what I find useful about them, and sometimes that's useful for my clients where they're like, well, I get sweet cards for my partner all the time and I always ask her on fancy dates, and she never does that for me so she doesn't love me. But meanwhile, that's the client's love language is to go on romantic dates and write sweet cards, and the partner's love language is to cuddle in the morning and cook their favorite dinner and take out the trash and have a homey night together, and they can't see that the partner is expressing love in that way because they're only looking for the way they would express love.

So I actually find love languages helpful in that way. Now, I don't think they're needs so I don't recommend using the love languages to tell other people how they need to act. I think one of the things that gets missed here is that I am not teaching that you should never ask your partner to do things you'd like them to do, or ask your boss to give you a raise, or ask a person on the street out, or ask your parents not to talk to you about your weight or whatever it is you want to do.

Go ahead and ask, of course, if it's easy to change the circumstance, fine, change it. You can ask, of course. The issue is not making your emotional state depend on the resolution of it, not making your emotional state depend on whether the person is willing to do what you want, because when you do that, you are blocking the whole thing you want.

You want to feel loved and connected, and you are blocking your own ability to feel love and connection by trying to control how someone else acts. It just doesn't work. So the point is not never ask someone to do something. The point is don't rest your emotional state on whether or not they do it and don't let your unmanaged mind make it mean this huge thing.

If somebody doesn't want to go to the romantic night at the opera with you because they just actually don't like opera and don't think it would be romantic, you don't have to make that mean that they don't love you, or that

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they won't compromise or whatever else negative thing you make it mean about them.

You can ask like, "I'd like to do this, I think it'll be fun, would you like to do it with me," but what I think is more loving is accepting someone for who they are. And so if they say no, not making that mean anything about them or the relationship. Loving them as the person who does not want to go to the opera.

Alright, let's do one more. "Hi Kara, I've recently been trying this thought work and I'm wondering if it could be applied to athletes. I do Ironman distance triathlons, that should give you an idea of my mental state in itself. Our coach had us doing 'test work' and it was very hard and painful. At one point I caught myself saying, 'It's only your thoughts and physical sensations, you are not going to die.' I literally recognized lizard brain during a workout, so I'm wondering if you have any advice on how to apply thought work to physical pain and how can it help the mental aspect of an athlete's performance."

Yeah, 100%. I think that absolutely thought work applies to physical pain whether it's athletic, or I have a lot of chronic pain issues. I have hypermobile joints and my ligaments are too loose so my bones are always kind of clicking around, and I use thought work all the time to deal with pain.

And I do exactly similar things as this letter writer described, like, I describe the same way I process an emotion. I describe physical pain as a physical sensation, like what does it actually feel like, as opposed to thinking, "Oh this hurts, it's so painful," which just makes it feel worse.

And in terms of the mental aspect of an athlete's performance, I think you can use it in this way, these are physical sensations, I'm not going to die, I'm okay. I also think - I mean, there's so many ways. People's whole

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coaching businesses based on this. You can of course use it to think about how you want to show up in the sport.

I mean, I think athletes sometimes get really fixated on getting a certain kind of performance out of the occasion, and sometimes that's something they can control and sometimes it's something they can't control. You can't control if you win the race, there might be somebody else with the faster time. So how you want to think about it, how you want to show up and why you're there and what you're doing.

Deciding ahead of time like, what to think about yourself no matter what the outcome of the event is is a good way to use thought work. And I also find that athletes have a lot of perfectionism often about their performance, so using thought work to deal with that, using thought work to deal with the anxiety, if you're in a sport where - golfing or something where you have a lot of lead up to a few moments, there's often a lot of anxiety and being in your own head in the lead up and about thinking - and your thoughts to yourself as the game goes along of like, I'm not shooting well or that was a bad one, or I'm behind, so knowing how to manage your mind about that, choosing the thoughts you're going to think on purpose as you're going through the game or the performance or the race or whatever, managing your mind around that can also be really powerful.

So yeah, I think it's a great question and you just have to play around with it and see how it can impact your training and your work. But I think you're totally on the right track.

Alright my dears, great questions. I hope those were helpful and I will talk to you all 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.